

the metaphorical use of the concept to champion their own liberty. Like elites in most slave societies, whites in colonial America, especially in the plantation South, lived in constant fear of slave revolts. [53](#) The prospect of people who lived in close and peaceful proximity to white colonists suddenly rising up one night to slaughter their masters in their beds is a recurring theme of slave and colonial societies, and a dreadful one to contemplate. While such fears were usually exaggerated, they did not lack a basis in fact. On Sunday, September 9, 1739, a group of slaves in South Carolina took to the roads and killed more than forty white men, women, and children before being overcome and mostly slaughtered by armed whites. Stono's Rebellion, the largest slave revolt in colonial America, triggered both new repressive measures against slaves and some calls for ending slavery as a menace to the white [population.](#)[54](#) Similarly, on December 7, 1774, a group of slaves in St. Andrew Parish, Georgia, attacked and killed or wounded several white slave owners and their families. [55](#) When white colonial subjects during the revolutionary era imagined that British rule undermined slavery as an institution, they considered this as a threat not just to their property but ultimately to their very lives.

In 1769 the Virginia merchant Charles Stewart moved to London with

his household, including a slave named James Somerset. Two years later, with the help of British abolitionists like Granville Sharp, Somerset fled the Stewart household and petitioned the courts to grant him his freedom, based on the Freedom Principle, the idea that Britain was a free land and that therefore he could not be held in slavery there. On June 22, 1772, judge Lord Mansfield ruled in Somerset's favor, in the process striking a mortal blow against slavery in Britain. In making his judgment Mansfield tried to limit its implications to the issue of slaves brought to Britain itself, and it did nothing to limit the empire's extensive involvement in the slave trade or the expansion of colonial slavery. Nonetheless, for many in the North American colonies the Somerset decision posed a major potential threat to their interests and even called into question their continued loyalty to the empire. For Virginia and the other southern colonies in particular, Somerset, coming a few years after the Stamp Act, suggested a new level of British interference with their property rights and thus their freedom. It implied that if Americans wanted to preserve slavery, they would have to seek their own liberation from Britain. [56](#)

Although up until the mid-1770s the British had shown no real intention of interfering with American colonial slavery, the outbreak of hostilities in 1775 changed that dramatically. The spring of that year had brought the

battles of Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts, followed by the British siege of Boston and the Battle of Bunker Hill in June. By the fall London had declared the American colonies to be in open revolt, and both sides began mobilizing their armies for what had become the American Revolutionary war. Slavery immediately emerged as a key issue in the conflict. Many white southerners assumed that the British would use the slaves to fight the rebellion; as Simon Schama has noted, “By the summer and early autumn of 1775 a full-scale panic about the imminence of a Black rising, armed and sustained by the British, was under way from tidewater Virginia to Georgia.”⁵⁷ In July authorities in Wilmington, Delaware, broke up a conspiracy by slaves to stage an uprising and slaughter the local population.⁵⁸

This wave of fear about slave revolts culminated in November 1775, thanks to actions by the British. During the fall of 1775 the British position in Virginia steadily worsened as the revolt in the colony gathered steam. By the beginning of November their position was untenable, and the royal authorities prepared to flee Virginia. In doing so, however, on November 7 Lord Dunmore, the royal governor of Virginia, issued a fateful proclamation that not only called upon colonists to reaffirm their loyalty to their king but also promised to free the slaves of the colonial rebels and called upon the

slaves to join British forces in fighting against the rebellion. [59](#)

Virginia alone accounted for forty percent of all Black slaves in America, and Dunmore's proclamation resounded there like a thunderclap. He had hoped that it would intimidate local slave owners into resisting the lure of revolution, but it had the opposite effect. Like Mansfield, Dunmore had tried to limit the impact of his decision but soon found that events spiraled out of his control. For the slave-owning colonists of Virginia and the South in general, his proclamation represented a full-fledged call not only for emancipation but for a slave revolt, calling on Black slaves to rise up against their masters. Far from being intimidated they reacted with a fury, increasingly deciding to cast their lot with the rebellious colonists of New England. If the British intended to abolish slavery and promote slave revolts, then colonists had no option but independence. A phrase from the Declaration of Independence—"He has incited domestic insurrections against us"—refers directly to this fear and illustrates its importance for the patriot cause. The American war for liberty thus became equally a war for slavery.

As this chapter has shown, there were many reasons why America's rebel colonists would fight a war for two diametrically opposed concepts. The paradox was certainly not lost on them, as the case of Thomas Jefferson

makes clear, and in many cases it proved untenable. Many Northern states moved to abolish slavery once independence had been achieved, for example. But the fact remains that the American Revolution was a war fought for the right to enslave others in the name of liberty. Such a position was tenable only to the extent that slavery was identified with race, and the broader issue of race with white superiority and Black inferiority. Many different systems of bondage had helped populate the American colonies, and not all had been identified with race. By the late eighteenth century, however, the practice of white indentured servitude had declined sharply, while at the same time the number of Black slaves had increased. Given that at the same time there were very few free Blacks in the American colonies, less than ten thousand total, Americans could justifiably assume that to be free meant to be white and vice versa. [60](#)

Above all, however, white views of Blacks as inferior meant they could not be free men because in a sense they were not men at all. Jefferson's critique of slavery in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* criticizes slavery for its impact on whites as well as on Blacks, and while regretting the oppression of Blacks, it is clear he considered them intellectually deficient and incapable of freedom. Not only slavery but also liberty was identified with race, so that a revolution for white freedom was firmly grounded in the

social realities of colonial [America](#).⁶¹

A crucial part of the story, and of the history of the American Revolution in general, is the impact Lord Dunmore's proclamation had upon African American slaves. As the news of the war and the royal offer to free the slaves spread, many simply took matters in their own hands and deserted their masters in an attempt to gain freedom by reaching the British lines. They did so in massive numbers: nearly 100,000 slaves, including a quarter of those in South Carolina and a third of those in Georgia, fled their plantations in their own personal quest for emancipation. [62](#) George Washington alone lost seventeen people, leading him to observe that all his slaves would escape if they got the chance, and other signatories of the Declaration of Independence suffered similar [losses](#).⁶³ Some did succeed in reaching British lines, but many others simply disappeared into the countryside, some establishing maroon settlements in places like the swamps of South Carolina and the Savannah River in Georgia. Others chose to fight for freedom. The beginnings of hostilities with the British in the spring of 1775 brought a wave of rumors about possible slave insurrections throughout the South, as many white southerners feared that the patriot call to fight for liberty would be taken all too literally by the slaves, and that the British would encourage them to do so. In North

Carolina in early July authorities intercepted and suppressed a planned slave revolt: the organizers had called upon all slaves “to fall on and destroy the family where they lived, then to proceed from House to House [burning as they went] until they arrived in the Back Country where they were to be ... settled in a free government of their own.” [64](#) Shortly after Dunmore proclaimed his intention to free the slaves of the patriot rebels, several hundred Black slaves joined his forces as soldiers, forming what became known as the Ethiopian Regiment and took part in the Battle of Kemp’s Landing, Virginia, against the Americans. The Ethiopians marched into battle with the words *Liberty to Slaves* embroidered on their uniforms. Dunmore had in fact hoped to raise a massive army of rebel slaves to crush the rebellion in the South, but he lost the Battle of Kemp’s Landing and with it control over Virginia. Some of the Ethiopians went on to serve in other parts of the war, notably the occupation of New York City in 1776. [65](#)

At times it seemed that in response to the patriots’ rebellion the British might unleash exactly the slave insurrection the colonists had long feared. The combination of massive slave flight and slave participation in British armies made the American Revolution, second only to the Civil War, the nation’s greatest slave revolt.

Black slaves fought for the British in other theaters of the war as well,

sometimes doing battle with Blacks fighting for the rebels in a kind of African American civil war.⁶⁶ However, Dunmore's vision of a mass slave insurrection in favor of British rule never materialized, in part because, as soon became clear, Britain had no real interest in freeing the slaves en masse, so that Blacks might be risking their lives simply to exchange one form of slavery for another. Also, for slaves who fled their masters the dangers of recapture and punishment were very real, leading many to stay put. Finally, after much hesitation the American patriots did decide to enlist Black soldiers, both slave and free, and some five thousand fought for the revolution.⁶⁷ Both the service of Black soldiers, and abolitionist pressure on

the paradox of a war for freedom and slavery, led to the decline of the "peculiar institution" in the North after the war. Several Northern states moved to emancipate their slave populations, and the number of free Blacks in the United States increased from 10,000 in 1776 to 200,000 by 1810.⁶⁸

For a time, it seemed white freedom and Black freedom might converge. Yet Black slavery remained the law of the land in the new United States, and even though it declined in what had been the thirteen colonies, it expanded enormously in the new territories to the west of Georgia and the Carolinas. The Americans had succeeded in creating a republic that in many ways exemplified the principles of the Enlightenment, but it was a slave

republic, and would remain so until a new revolution, the Civil War, shook the pillars of the established order. Until then slavery remained, and it remained based on race: Black freedom was the exception rather than the rule. In time Americans would come to venerate the memory of Crispus Attucks and other Blacks who fought for the Revolution.⁶⁹ In contrast, the story of Thomas Peters, a slave who served with the British army in New York before eventually like many other former American slaves being resettled in Nova Scotia, remains essentially unknown.⁷⁰ Both men fought for liberty, but since Peters's struggle did not fit comfortably into the narrative of white freedom that lay at the heart of the American Revolution, it has to this day remained obscure. The United States was born as a land of free white men, up to that point the greatest embodiment of the principle of white freedom the world had ever seen.

White Revolution, Black Revolution

Upheavals in France and Saint-Domingue

Possibly the most studied single event in world history, the French Revolution lies at the heart not only of the liberal revolution of the late eighteenth century but of the history of freedom in the modern world. Several of the key themes of modern freedom, including popular sovereignty, restrictions on religious authority, individual rights, and

electoral democracy achieved prominence during the revolution, and became a template for ideas of liberty throughout the world.⁷¹ During the nineteenth century symbols of the French Revolution, most notably “La Marseillaise,” came to represent the struggle for freedom far beyond France’s borders. In grounding the struggle for political freedom in Enlightenment ideas of the universal rights of man, the revolution embraced universalism as a key dimension of both its own national heritage and of world history. The message emanated from revolutionary Paris that all men had the right to be free.⁷²

Well, maybe not all. In recent years historians of the French Revolution have taken an increasingly global approach to the subject, and in particular that has meant coming to terms with the impact and significance of the revolution in Saint-Domingue.⁷³ What was the relationship between the overthrow of royal absolutism in metropolitan France and the insurrection against slavery in the nation’s greatest Caribbean colony? Ever since C.L.R. James, historians have considered the impact of the French Revolution on that in Haiti, and more recently they have begun to look at the reverse phenomenon, how events in Saint-Domingue influenced the revolutionary process in Paris. This has meant rejecting the idea of the two revolutions as separate phenomena, instead reconceptualizing them as different parts of a

whole. [74](#) As historians of colonialism have emphasized, metropole and colony constitute a unified field and must be studied as such. [75](#)

This section of the chapter will follow that perspective by considering how the French and Haitian revolutions dealt with the issues of freedom and slavery. By 1789 the American Revolution had established the precedent of a war for liberty and slavery at the same time, creating a slave republic. Many of the same dynamics that caused this were present in revolutionary France as well, so that at least for the first few years the leaders of the revolution dealt with the question of slavery hesitantly, if at all. The big difference between America and France, of course, was the massive slave insurrection that broke out in Saint-Domingue in 1791. The slave revolt in the French Caribbean prompted, or forced, the revolutionary government in Paris to abolish slavery, thus placing both France and the French Empire including Saint-Domingue in the forefront of the global struggle for freedom. It also created a powerful link between antislavery and radical republicanism reinforced both by Napoleon's restoration of slavery in the empire and by its final abolition at the hands of the French Second Republic in 1848. During the revolutions in Haiti and France the old metaphor of absolutism as slavery became to an important extent a reality.

This section will introduce a theme I will explore in greater detail in the next chapter, the challenge to white freedom that at times came from radical and progressive forces, often those with a working-class social base. As we have seen so far, despite their denunciations of slavery liberal intellectual and political movements usually failed to challenge it effectively and take a frontal stand for freedom for all. This failure in large part arose from a resistance to challenging property rights, and slaves constituted one of the most valuable types of private property during the era of liberal revolution. Social and political movements that challenged the right to private property were in contrast more likely to embrace the idea of freedom for all. This was certainly not always true, but as the example of the French and Haitian Revolutions demonstrates, the impulse for universal freedom usually came [from the Left.](#)⁷⁶

Perhaps the greatest slave revolt in world history, the Haitian Revolution frontally challenged the idea of white freedom, using the language of liberty to demand the abolition of the greatest obstacle to it and claiming that Black slaves had as much right to freedom as anyone else. It represented the culmination of the struggle against slavery in the Atlantic world and, as some scholars have recently noted, the high point of the age of democratic revolution. [77](#) At the same time, however, the intensely hostile reaction to the

revolution and the new Black republic it produced illustrated the ways in which the general idea of freedom continued to be racially circumscribed. Overall, the French and Haitian revolutions reinforced the idea that liberty in the modern world was and would continue to be white.

Slavery in France and the French Empire

One important peculiarity of the Atlantic world in the eighteenth century was the rise of political units divided into nations and empires, half free and half slave. In part this arose from the greater need of colonial plantations for slave labor, but it also had important legal, political, and ultimately racial dimensions. Britain's Somerset case showcased the increasing contrast between the decline of slavery in the metropole and its continued vibrancy in the colonies, and the triumph of the American Revolution brought an increased demarcation between a free North and a slave South. Even before 1789 this contrast had reached its greatest extent in France, and the French Revolution would bring it to the breaking point.

What would become known as the Freedom Principle has a long history in France, antedating the rise of Black colonial slavery in the early modern era. [78](#) In 1315 King Louis X proclaimed that France was a land of free men, and that any slave setting foot on French soil should be freed. Over the following centuries French authorities at times intervened to put this

principle into practice. Historian Sue Peabody has documented several cases of Caribbean slaves brought to France in the eighteenth century by their masters successfully suing in the royal courts for their freedom, based on the argument that France constituted free soil. In 1571, for example, a merchant from Normandy was arrested for selling African slaves in France, and his slaves were freed. [79](#)

The paradox, of course, is that French authorities continued to maintain the principle of France as a land of freedom while French merchants were not only heavily engaged in the slave trade but also building the most profitable slave economy the world had ever seen. The colony of Saint-Domingue was the center of both the French Empire in the New World and of Atlantic slavery in general. Spain had been the first European nation to rule the island of Hispaniola and immediately resorted to slave labor, first using Native Americans and then African slaves. France took over the western part of the island in 1697, naming it Saint-Domingue, and massively expanded its new colony's slave economy. By 1789 Saint-Domingue had roughly 500,000 Black slaves, more than all the British Caribbean colonies combined and nearly half of all those in the New World. It was the wealthiest colony in the French Empire, indeed in the world, producing forty percent of all the sugar used in Europe. These immense

riches came as a result of extreme brutality against the slaves: frequent punishments included all manner of tortures, including being fed to dogs and burned alive. As a result, slaves in Saint-Domingue had extremely high death rates, which necessitated them being constantly replaced by new captives from [Africa.80](#)

France in the late eighteenth century was thus a nation divided between a society of free men in Europe and an extremely rapacious (and profitable) slave society in the colonies. The same country whose intellectuals and merchants clamored for freedom sustained itself to an important extent with the profits from the slave trade. For the most part, the French were determined to keep this dichotomy in place. French courts did at times respond to the claims of Caribbean slaves in France by offering them emancipation based on the Freedom Principle, but at the same time tried to restrict the number of slaves brought to the metropole at all. Increasingly, the principle that there should be no slaves in France merged with the idea that there should be no Blacks in France. If the kingdom was to remain a [land of free men, it would have to be a land of white men.81](#)

The outbreak of the French Revolution brought this contradiction to a head. At least initially, the revolutionaries who gathered in Paris to form the new National Assembly showed little interest in Caribbean slavery and even

less in emancipating the slaves. As historian Hugh Thomas has noted, “a delegation from the newly founded and revolutionary Armée Patriotique of Bordeaux reached Paris and told both the Jacobin Club and the Assembly that five million Frenchmen depended on the colonial commerce for their livelihood, and that both the slave trade and West Indian slavery were essential for the prosperity of France.”⁸² The National Assembly followed this logic, refusing to act against slavery because of the possible consequences for the economy.

Some revolutionaries took a different view. In 1788 a group of French intellectuals and activists had formed the Society for the Friends of the Blacks to fight against slavery and the slave trade. Led in the National Assembly by Count Mirabeau, in February 1790 they submitted a motion to the government to abolish, if not slavery, at least French participation in the slave trade. The motion is notable for its timidity: in a land clamoring for freedom as a universal right of mankind, it only asked ultimately for better treatment of French slaves:

We are not asking you to restore to French Blacks those political rights which alone, nevertheless, attest to and maintain the dignity of man; we are not even asking for their liberty. No; slander, bought no doubt with the greed of the shipowners, ascribes that scheme to us and spreads it

everywhere; they want to stir up everyone against us, provoke the planters and their numerous creditors, who take alarm even at gradual emancipation. They want to alarm all the French, to whom they depict the prosperity of the colonies as inseparable from the slave trade and the perpetuity of slavery.

The immediate emancipation of the Blacks would not only be a fatal operation for the colonies; it would even be a deadly gift for the Blacks, in the state of abjection and incompetence to which cupidity has reduced them. It would be to abandon to themselves and without assistance children in the cradle or mutilated and impotent beings.

It is therefore not yet time to demand that liberty; we ask only that one cease butchering thousands of Blacks regularly every year in order to take hundreds of captives; we ask that henceforth cease the prostitution, the profaning of the French name, used to authorize these thefts, these atrocious murders; we demand in a word the abolition of the slave trade. [83](#)

Strongly opposed by colonial lobbies like the Committee on the Colonies and the Massaic Club, the Society for the Friends of Blacks had no success in moving the French Revolution to embrace a vision of universal freedom that included Black slaves. [84](#)

Revolutionary Saint-Domingue

The debates over slavery in Paris were soon overtaken by events in Saint-Domingue. As in the metropole, the calling of the Estates General in the summer of 1789 led to debates and political organizing in the colony. In Saint-Domingue, however, only whites had political rights and the recognized ability to take part in the revolutionary process. This was a small population, some thirty thousand compared to the nearly half a million Black slaves on the island, so that the beginnings of the French Revolution

in the colony were completely circumscribed by race. This racialized character, however, soon meant that the revolution would take a very different path than in the metropole. [85](#) Saint-Domingue also had the largest population of free people of color of any French colony, and this community soon insisted on making its desires heard. Almost as large as the white population, Saint-Domingue's free people of color were largely mixed-race descendants of white settlers. They were often affluent and many owned slaves themselves, yet unlike whites they suffered from many different types of discrimination and had no political [rights.](#)[86](#) Their intervention in the revolutionary process as it unfolded in 1789 and 1790 proved crucial to the subsequent course of events in Saint-Domingue.

It soon became clear the two groups had very different ideas about freedom at the start of the revolution. For the whites, liberty meant above all the right to keep their slaves. Fearful of the antislavery currents surfacing in Parisian political debates, they strongly supported the colonial lobby and threatened to imitate their North American neighbors and seek independence if their wishes weren't granted. The free people of color certainly did not oppose slavery, but their vision of freedom entailed civil and political equality with the white population, something the latter adamantly refused to grant. As a result, both groups sent delegations to

Paris to claim membership in the new National Assembly, but only the white delegation was seated. The increasingly bitter confrontation between whites and free people of color led the latter to stage a major revolt in the fall of 1790. Vincent Ogé, a leader of the community, returned from Paris in October to demand that the local government implement a decree passed by the National Assembly granting full civil rights to people of color. When the colonial governor refused, Ogé organized an armed uprising, fighting colonial troops for a month before being forced to surrender and eventually executed. The defeat of Ogé's revolt made it clear that, at least for the time being, in Saint-Domingue the French Revolution would be for whites only. [87](#)

Meanwhile, however, the Black slaves of Saint-Domingue had their own ideas about freedom, and these ideas were nourished by the revolutionary turmoil overtaking the colony in 1789 and 1790. In August 1789 rumors that the French king had abolished slavery inspired a brief slave revolt in the smaller Caribbean colony of Martinique. [88](#) Vincent Ogé's uprising in 1790, even though it did not challenge slavery, also exemplified resistance to the white plantocracy that controlled Saint-Domingue. The massive slave uprising that erupted in August 1791 and soon engulfed France's richest colony did not just draw inspiration from these precedents but

fundamentally redefined the nature of the revolution for liberty. Far more than the Enlightenment or American Revolution, it insisted that freedom meant the abolition of slavery and the freeing of the slaves, and that all men had the right to be free. As one rebel soldier argued in 1793, “There are no more slaves in Saint-Domingue; all men of all colors are free and equal in their rights … all Frenchmen shudder at the word *king*, who you must know were never happy unless they were surrounded by slaves, and that since the twenty-first of January our motherland no longer has one and enjoys perfect [happiness.”](#)⁸⁹ It thus constituted a fundamental challenge to the ideology of white freedom.

The slave revolt in Saint-Domingue preceded and in some ways foreshadowed the most radical phase of the revolution in metropolitan France. French revolutionaries continued to use the slave metaphor as had opponents of the regime during the Enlightenment before them, but as the Revolution intensified many on the left tended to portray not just royal despots but also aristocrats as the equivalent of slave masters, and peasants and workers as the metropolitan version of slaves. [90](#) The radical Jacobins played a key role in pushing for the abolition of slavery. On April 4, 1792, the National Assembly dominated by the Girondin faction of the Jacobins enacted full equality for all free men of color, and their leader Jacques-

Pierre Brissot became one of the most prominent abolitionist [voices](#).⁹¹ The execution of the king and the shift to the revolutionary Terror led by the followers of Maximilien Robespierre brought about the full abolition of slavery in February 1794. Unlike the new United States, France would not be a slave republic, and the ideology of freedom would not, at least for a time, be for whites only. ⁹²

Napoleon's restoration of slavery in the French Empire, and his failed attempt to suppress the revolt in Saint-Domingue, reinforces this point. Just as the establishment of the republic in 1792 soon led to slave emancipation, the reestablishment of slavery in 1802 foreshadowed the overthrow of the republic in 1804. ⁹³ Not for nothing did people call the oppressive regime that followed the fall of Robespierre the White Terror. ⁹⁴ There are other parallels between the radical Jacobin republic in France and the regime of emancipated slaves in the Caribbean. Both sparked major counterrevolutionary emigrations, and both had to contend with overwhelming and bitter opposition from abroad. Both triumphed, at least for a time, through sheer popular determination and mass mobilization. As I will explore more fully in the next chapter, the ideal of universal freedom that transcended race and included those not considered white often came not just from peoples of color but from the radical left as well. At the same

time, populist and lower-class movements for freedom and social justice were frequently racialized as nonwhite, a consequence of the increased racial thinking of the nineteenth century. The intertwined histories of the French and Haitian revolutions illustrate the interaction of ideas about race and class in the construction of modern ideas about liberty.

The reactions to both the radical revolution in France and the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue emphasize this. The classic image of the French *sans-culottes* was that of a bloodthirsty savage mob, motivated not by high principles of liberty but rather by hatred, envy, and a thirst for revenge against their social betters:

Savage. Let us explain this word. When these bristling men, who in the early days of the revolutionary chaos, tattered, howling, wild, with uplifted bludgeon, pike on high, hurled themselves upon ancient Paris in an uproar, what did they want? They wanted an end to oppression, an end to tyranny, an end to the sword, work for men, instruction for the child, social sweetness for the woman, liberty, equality, fraternity, bread for all, the idea for all, the Edenizing of the world. Progress; and that holy, sweet, and good thing, progress, they claimed in terrible wise, driven to extremities as they were, half naked, club in fist, a roar in their mouths. They were savages, yes; but the savages of civilization.⁹⁵

Even in Victor Hugo's sympathetic reading, the radical desire for freedom constituted a reversion to primitive and racialized savagery.[96](#)

The slave revolt in Saint-Domingue and the establishment of the independent Black nation of Haiti encountered fierce opposition from much of the Atlantic world. Under Napoleon, France tried to reconquer the insurgent nation not once but twice, its inability to do so constituting the greatest military failure of the emperor's reign until the disastrous Russian campaign. Shortly after the Haitians proclaimed their independence on January 1, 1804, the new government proceeded to massacre much of the remaining white population of the island, an act of revenge against the former slaveholders and of defiance against the world that had supported them. The main Atlantic powers reacted to this, and more generally to the prospect of an independent Black nation in the Americas, by refusing to recognize the new state. The French government withheld recognition until 1825, only finally agreeing to normalize relations after the Haitian government agreed to pay a massive indemnity to Paris in compensation for the 1804 massacres. [97](#) Much of the rest of Europe followed France's lead, largely isolating Haiti after independence.[98](#)

Far from regarding the Haitian Revolution as a fraternal revolt against European colonialism, most white Americans considered it a dangerous

slave revolt and, especially after the massacres of 1804, worried it might set an example for their own slaves. In 1804 President Thomas Jefferson imposed an embargo on Haiti, one that lasted until 1862, a year before America freed its own slaves. While many African Americans cheered the overthrow of slavery, whites viewed it as an example of anarchic violence and mob rule, not a struggle for freedom. Lurid tales about the “horrors of Santo Domingo” circulated widely in the early nineteenth century, convincing many white southerners in particular of the impossibility of freeing their own slaves without risking a bloodbath and the collapse of civilization. Freedom for Blacks meant annihilation for whites.⁹⁹

The greatest slave revolt in modern history, and the most radical revolution of the Age of Revolutions, thus came to symbolize the racial parameters of freedom. Liberty for whites meant independence, order, and prosperity; for Blacks it meant massacre and lawlessness. To the extent that European revolutions, such as the Terror in revolutionary France, departed from this script, they risked being racialized in their own turn. In his magisterial *Silencing the Past*, Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot has addressed the ways in which historians and the historical record have at times downplayed the importance of his country’s revolution. Arguing that the Haitian Revolution constituted an “unthinkable history”

because the idea that African slaves could conceive of, let alone fight for, freedom lay outside the norms of world history, he argued that “What happened in Haiti between 1791 and 1804 contradicted much of what happened elsewhere in the world before and since.” [100](#) I would simply add to this that the struggle of Black slaves for emancipation was unthinkable at the time and for a long time since because it lay outside the bounds of *white* freedom, and therefore exposed the racialization of freedom as a concept already in place in the eighteenth century. The subsequent history of Haiti as the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere was both created by and reaffirmed the idea that liberty and national independence without whites equaled poverty, misery, and dictatorship; that Black freedom consequently constituted a political and conceptual impossibility.

The revolutions that swept France and especially Haiti at the end of the eighteenth century pushed the concept of liberty to its most extreme extent, yet in the end they reinforced the idea of freedom as essentially white freedom. The radical republic in France upheld the principle of liberty for all men, but Napoleon destroyed it after a tumultuous decade and it would not reappear for generations. Haiti did achieve a level of freedom that included former slaves, but at the severe price of international ostracism, poverty, and exploitation for much of its history as an independent state. [101](#)

Moreover, the radical regimes in both France and Haiti came to symbolize violence, anarchy, and lawlessness rather than liberal ideas of freedom. Far from representing its logical extension, universal liberty was redefined as Black freedom, and therefore the enemy of the dominant ideology of white freedom.

Conclusion

As the example of *The Magic Flute* reveals, ideas of liberty during the Age of Revolution often contained a significant racial component. The emphasis on freedom felt so powerfully in both intellectual and political life developed alongside the unprecedented expansion of African slavery in the New World, an expansion that provided tremendous economic benefits to Europe and to an important extent made the affluent society of the Enlightenment possible. Few Enlightenment texts dealt with it directly, however, preferring to view slavery as a metaphor for oppression of all kinds rather than a condition afflicting millions of human beings. Even those most opposed to African slavery, like Condorcet, hesitated to advocate complete freedom for Black men and women.

The revolutions that broke out in Europe, America, and the Caribbean illustrated the racialized character of freedom. That great Enlightenment document, the American Declaration of Independence, demanded freedom

but only referred obliquely to slaves as a threat to free men, not people deserving liberty, and in general the American Revolution combined a determination to win freedom for whites with an equal determination to preserve slavery for [Blacks.](#)¹⁰² The independent United States thus became what should have been a complete contradiction, a slave republic. In its most radical phase the French Revolution did abolish slavery, but less than a decade later Napoleon Bonaparte reversed that decision, shortly thereafter destroying the republic that had made it. The Age of Revolution did bring about the greatest slave revolt in world history, but independent Haiti was not only reduced to poverty and international isolation but also made an example of the dangers of too much freedom, i.e., freedom for Black slaves. The freedom of the late eighteenth century was thus freedom for white men. [103](#)

This was not entirely true, of course. Haiti may have been poor but it had still abolished slavery, and the number of free Blacks in the United States grew significantly, although they remained a distinct minority among the African American population. In 1807 both Britain and the United States banned the slave trade, the beginnings of a new phase in the history of slave emancipation. Moreover, the Age of Revolution in general must be considered a work in progress, by no means triumphant by the early

nineteenth century. By 1815 France had restored the monarchy overthrown by the revolution, and the Concert of Europe directed by Austria's Metternich directed a new wave of conservatism across Europe. Liberty remained to a large extent an insurgent idea, and the progress of that idea and the fight against slavery frequently went together. [104](#)

Nonetheless, the Age of Revolution had established an important principle and template, that ideals of universal liberty could be and would be circumscribed by racial difference. In the next chapter I will explore the ways in which new political forms, in particular liberal democracy and overseas empire, gave a new twist to the idea of white freedom. The expansion of the association between liberalism and liberty, which the era of enlightenment and revolution had pioneered, would give its own racial cast to the struggle for freedom in the age of mass democracy.

CHAPTER 4

Empire, Racial Citizenship, and

Liberal Democracy

Was Heathcliff Black?

Emily Brontë's classic gothic novel *Wuthering Heights* (1847) has remained popular ever since its publication nearly two centuries ago, offering the reader a witches' brew of love, passion, revenge, wealth and

poverty, and the supernatural. As a number of commentators have noted in recent years, the question of race also looms large in the novel, mostly centered around the identity of its central, Satanic hero, Heathcliff, the ultimate literary bad boy. The reader first encounters him as a foundling of mysterious origin on the streets of Liverpool, which at the start of the nineteenth century was the most prominent slave trading port in Europe.¹ The novel constantly refers to his darkness of aspect, exotic background, and semi-savage nature, at one point describing him as “a regular Black” and his eyes as “Black fiends, so deeply buried, who never open their windows boldly, but lurk glinting under them, like devil’s spies.”² Yet this was not just literary license. Not only did proximity to Liverpool suggest a certain Black influence in early-nineteenth-century Yorkshire, but historians have documented the presence of slaves there as well. The prominent Sills family of Yorkshire, a family acquainted with the Brontës, employed enslaved Africans on its estate during these years. The idea of a Black man, or at least one of ambiguous racial identity, living in Yorkshire is thus not so fanciful as once assumed.³



FIGURE 19. Publicity still of Laurence Olivier for *Wuthering Heights* (1939). Samuel Goldwyn

Pictures.

If the theme of race plays a role in *Wuthering Heights*, so does that of freedom, in complex [ways.⁴](#) If Heathcliff symbolizes blackness in certain ways, he also at times represents the slave owner. His departure from Yorkshire as a poor youth and return several years later as a wealthy man strongly suggests a fortune earned in the slave trade, the source of so much nontraditional wealth in Georgian England. [5](#) Burning with a thirst for revenge against the two genteel white families, the Earnshaws and Lintons, who had denied him his soul mate Catherine, Heathcliff time and time again uses his wealth to take members of the two families prisoner, in effect enslaving them. He describes his first meeting with his thirteen-year-old son, Linton Heathcliff, in the following terms: “I feared I should have to come down and fetch my property myself. You’ve brought it, have you? Let’s see what we can make of [it.”⁶](#) For the mature Heathcliff freedom is power, power to exercise his will over those who have denied him. It is a dark, if you will *Black* freedom, a revenge against white oppression. [7](#) But this is not the only kind of freedom in the novel. As a youth, Heathcliff suffers abuse and scorn at the hands of the Earnshaw family, masters of the Wuthering Heights manor, but he also enjoys a measure of

freedom that shapes his growing love of Catherine Earnshaw. Freedom in particular resides in the landscape of the Yorkshire moors, a countryside that is wild and beautiful, symbolizing a dark physical representation of liberty. The moors represent an escape from the civilized world, the world of adulthood and propriety. As the narrator observes of Heathcliff and Catherine early in *Wuthering Heights*, “They both promised fair to grow up as rude as savages, the young master being entirely negligent how they behaved … it was one of their chief amusements to run away to the moors in the morning and remain there all day, and the after punishment grew a mere thing to laugh at.”⁸

For Heathcliff, therefore, freedom is a matter of childhood and nature; like that of the pirates and children discussed in [chapter 2](#), it cannot survive the onset of civilization. On the contrary, the mature Heathcliff’s vision of freedom is monstrous and brutal, not liberating. Ultimately the racial Other cannot bring liberty, which could survive only as part of white racial domination; Black freedom is no freedom at all. The beautiful Yorkshire moors will give way to the redbrick factory towns growing like weeds in the Britain of the Industrial Revolution. In the emerging liberal Britain of the nineteenth century neither the slave trade nor blackness has a place, and Heathcliff represents both. *Wuthering Heights* ends with Heathcliff’s death,

his demise the only way he could achieve his desire for his great love Catherine, and the reaffirmation of white control over the manor he had dominated so brutally. His successors, freed from his racially ambiguous legacy, can henceforth pursue their own white vision of liberty.

Emily Brontë published *Wuthering Heights* in 1847, during a period of social and political turmoil both in Britain and abroad. The Enlightenment and the Age of Revolution had made freedom the burning political issue of the modern world, and in Europe and America peoples and nations devoted much of the nineteenth century to working out how they could best achieve this goal. By the end of the century the traditional model of monarchical and aristocratic authority that had dominated Europe after the fall of Napoleon was clearly on the defensive, and new social and political arrangements jostled for pride of place. The rise of powerful nation-states made national citizenship the essence of not only political authority but also freedom. Monarchies remained, such as in Britain, Scandinavia, and the Low Countries, but they became increasingly constitutional, vesting ultimate state authority in the free consent of the governed. In addition, mass-based socialist movements campaigned for the rights of workers as key to the liberation of mankind. [9](#)

Central to these new visions of political freedom was the rise of liberal

democracy as a form of government. Over the course of the nineteenth century the Enlightenment ideal of freedom, emphasizing civil liberties, religious tolerance, and property rights gradually merged with the principles of popular sovereignty and democratic rule to constitute a basic template for the governance of modern states. Liberal democracy could take different forms, such as republics in France and the United States or constitutional monarchies in Britain, the Netherlands, and to a certain extent Germany.

But in general, liberal democracies combined an orderly electoral procedure for channeling the popular will into choosing political leaders with protections for individual liberties. The ability of citizens to vote for their own leaders became a key symbol of political freedom, so that campaigns for electoral democracy exemplified the struggle for liberty in the modern world. Closely tied to this was the ability of peoples to form their own independent nations, free from control by other nations or empires. The United States and Haiti had blazed this trail during the Age of Revolution, and national liberation became a central dimension of modern freedom. [10](#)

Here again we confront a paradox that, upon closer examination, turns out not to be a paradox at all. A standard trope of the history of the modern world is the gradual decline of multinational empires and their replacement by independent nation-states. In Europe, the nineteenth century witnessed

the increased importance of regimes grounded in the principles of liberal democracy and the decline of traditional empires like Russia and Austria-Hungary.¹¹ This process was even more dramatic in Latin America, where the collapse of the Spanish Empire produced a range of new nation-states. ¹² At the same time, however, the nineteenth century gave rise to the greatest period of colonial expansion in world history. Moreover, two of the world's most advanced liberal democracies, France and Britain, also carved out the world's biggest empires. Far from being opposed to each other, liberal democracy and empire during the age of high imperialism were often strange bedfellows.¹³

The solution to this contradiction lay in the racialization of liberal democracy in the century after the French Revolution. Building upon the legacy from the Enlightenment and the Age of Revolution, liberal democracy in the nineteenth century developed as a political system for whites only. The great European empires created in Asia and Africa imposed authoritarian rule upon masses of brown and Black subjects, so that while aristocratic imperial politics were declining in Europe they enjoyed a new lease on life overseas. In the United States, the end of Reconstruction after the Civil War as well as the expansion of American imperial rule throughout the West and overseas gave the politics of white

supremacy a new lease on life. During the late nineteenth century in particular, the racial science inherited from the Enlightenment both fed upon and justified the politics of racial democracy on a global scale. Liberal democracy thus became enmeshed with racial citizenship, so that even within the political boundaries of a single state the color of one's skin defined one's membership within a nation and the rights one derived from that membership. In the modern era the expansion of liberty went hand in hand with the racialization of liberty, so by the dawn of the twentieth century freedom was whiter than ever.

The Rise of Liberal Democracy

I think that democratic communities have a natural taste for freedom: left to themselves, they

will seek it.... But for equality, their passion is ardent ... they call for equality in freedom; and

if they cannot obtain that, they still call for equality in slavery.

—ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE¹⁴

In the modern world we are so used to thinking of liberal democracy as a unified entity, as a *thing*, that we frequently forget it consists of two different and to an important extent opposed principles, liberalism and democracy. The essence of liberalism, as developed by Enlightenment philosophers like Montesquieu and John Locke, emphasized the importance

and rights of the individual. Liberals stressed the ability of individuals to speak and write freely without fear of censorship, to worship (or not) as they chose, and to possess private property. If liberalism focused on the individual, democracy stressed the prerogatives of the collectivity.

Democracy meant above all the right of “the people,” or at least a majority of them, to choose its own rulers and its political destiny. One protected the rights of the individual against society, the other championed the

imperatives of society against the individual.¹⁵

Given this rather fundamental opposition, it is something of a political miracle that liberal democracy ever came into existence, much less became so widespread by the beginnings of the twentieth century. In the aftermath of the Age of Revolution many liberals were horrified at the prospect of democracy, equating it with terror, anarchy, and mob rule.¹⁶ The specter of the Terror in the French Revolution, where liberal politicians were sent to the guillotine by crowds of “savage” *sans-culottes*, was a case study in the dangers of democracy, of vesting political power in the hands of the people. A number of leading intellectuals and politicians, including John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Edmund Burke, and John Stuart Mill, inveighed against “the tyranny of the majority”; as Mill put it, “ ‘the tyranny of the majority’ is now generally included among the evils against which society

requires to be on its guard.” [17](#) Even if, especially if, the state reflected the desires and belief of the majority of the population, it could still threaten the right of the individual to her own ideas, much as the Church had done to heretics and nonbelievers. The concept of the tyranny of the majority has often been used to protect minority rights and communities, but it had its origins in fears of “excesses” of democracy. [18](#)

Perhaps most important, liberals feared that democracy could threaten one of the most cherished individual prerogatives, the right to private property. Since most people in early-nineteenth-century Europe and America had little or no property, majority rule meant giving power to the poor. If one did so, what then was to stop them from using their control of the state to expropriate the property of the wealthy? This was the essence of the idea of social revolution, of course, and the rise of industrial society in western Europe and America in the early nineteenth century, with its juxtaposition of extreme wealth and poverty, tended to conflate fears of democracy and social insurrection. As Britain’s Lord Macaulay said in response to working-class demands for democracy in 1848:

My firm conviction is that, in our country, universal suffrage is incompatible, not with this or that form of government, but with all forms of government, and with everything for the sake of which forms of

government exist; that it is incompatible with property, and that it is consequently incompatible with civilisation. If it be admitted that on the institution of property the well-being of society depends, it follows surely that it would be madness to give supreme power in the state to a class which would not be likely to respect that institution. [19](#)

If possession of private property was the ultimate individual and liberal [right, democracy could exist only if it did not endanger that right.](#)[20](#)

This, then, was the key challenge for liberal democracy: to construct a state and society based upon the principle and practice of popular sovereignty that nonetheless did not endanger private property or other individual rights. As I noted in the previous chapter, the issue of property was central to the emergence of white freedom, so the fact that protecting individual property rights became a major issue for the construction of liberal democracy in the nineteenth century underscored its centrality to modern ideas of liberty. In order to stop freedom from turning into license and disorder, the people had to be prevented from succumbing to their own worst impulses: as James Madison, one of the framers of the Constitution of the United States put it, the role of government was “first to protect the people against their rulers [and] secondly to protect the people against the [transient impressions into which they themselves might be led.”](#)[21](#)

Over the course of the nineteenth century politicians and state makers in Europe and America came up with several solutions to the problem of combining popular sovereignty and individual rights. One approach was to create bicameral legislatures, with the upper house dominated by the aristocracy and acting as a brake upon the democratic aspirations of the lower. The prototype for this was the British House of Lords, whose members came exclusively from the nobility and were not chosen by popular vote. As elections to the House of Commons became more democratic during the nineteenth century, the House of Lords loomed ever larger as a bulwark of aristocratic privilege. In 1910 a crisis erupted after the Lords defeated a proposal in the Commons to increase taxes on the aristocracy. Thanks to the support of King George V, the Commons was able to pass the Parliament Act of 1911, stripping the Lords of much of its power. [22](#) The American Senate, which was not elected by popular vote until 1913, constitutes another example of the ways in which bicameralism could restrain the popular will in liberal democracies. [23](#)

Another was to expand the franchise over time, starting with propertied elites and gradually allowing broader and broader classes of society to vote. Britain provides perhaps the most dramatic and extensive example of this. The history of elections for public office in England goes back to the

thirteenth century, but only a tiny percentage of the adult population could vote. In the nineteenth century, however, a series of reform acts gradually extended the franchise to adult men, based upon property qualifications. In the aftermath of World War I, 1918's Representation of the People Act granted the vote to all adult men. It also, for the first time, extended the franchise to women, although this came with age and property restrictions. Not until 1928 could all adult Britons vote. France and the United States implemented universal manhood suffrage earlier, in 1848 and 1856 respectively, but there as well this was preceded by a period of limiting the franchise based upon property qualifications. Only in the era of World War I did universal suffrage for men and women become a reality in large parts of the world. The conflict between liberalism and democracy, so evident during the French Revolution, took more than a century to resolve in the

Western world.²⁴

The strategy of creating liberal democracy by gradually expanding the franchise over time depended heavily upon the idea of uplift, both political and moral, to train the population to be good and reliable citizens. The nineteenth century was in large consequence a golden era of mass education, which started with the struggle to teach men and women how to read and write. Literacy made significant strides during the century in

Europe and America, due largely to the creation of free public schools.²⁵ A central concern of France's Third Republic after 1870 was developing a nationwide network of secular free public schools and making primary education compulsory for all French boys and girls. Public education would be above all for citizenship in the nation, enabling the people as a whole to engage in political life and justify the faith of the elites in liberal democracy.²⁶

Throughout this period race played an important role in the development of liberal democracy, in several different respects. As I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, universal manhood suffrage did not necessarily mean the vote for all men; like property, belonging to the right race was often an important qualification. Although Canada achieved near-universal suffrage by the end of World War I, some provinces, notably British Columbia, prevented people of Chinese, Japanese, or Native American descent from voting for another generation.²⁷ In the United States before the Civil War, most free Blacks were denied the right to vote; ironically, as America gradually increased the franchise for white men, it placed increasing limitations on the political rights of Black men.²⁸ As I will discuss later in this chapter, even the abolition of slavery during the nineteenth century did not necessarily give the new freedmen the right to

vote.

At the same time, the class distinctions that posed such a challenge to the idea of liberal democracy were frequently racialized during the nineteenth century. Especially in Britain, the rise of vast new working-class populations in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution led many social commentators to believe that the poor were not just unfortunate individuals but constituted a separate species. Languages of class and of race thus tended to overlap. [29](#) As Susan Thorne has shown, British missionaries in the

early nineteenth century often compared local workers with foreign natives: she quotes the Reverend George Greatbatch, speaking of the working-class population in Lancashire: “I had little thought there was a station for me at home which so much resembled the ideas I had formed of an uncivilised heathen land.” [30](#) Similarly in France, observers often portrayed the vast working-class suburbs outside Paris as the habitat of savages, barbarians [lurking at the gates of civilization.](#)[31](#)

The development of racial science highlighted the idea of both social and racial difference as key to modern life. Whereas during the Enlightenment commentators on race had tended to portray differences between populations as mutable, in the nineteenth century European scholars increasingly saw racial distinctions as fixed and [unchanging.](#)[32](#) This squared

with a more pessimistic perspective on class, and indeed on the whole classic liberal project. As European laborers became increasingly de-skilled and distinct from the middle classes after the mid-nineteenth century, the working classes seemed more than ever a separate stratum of society, in fact a separate [race](#).³³ The growing importance of nation-states and national cultures in nineteenth-century Europe also fed upon and contributed to increasing social polarization, for which race became the ultimate metaphor.³⁴ The view of nations as (antagonistic) races, a perspective that culminated in World War I, also testified to the salience of race thinking in the making of modern Europe.³⁵ H. G. Wells's 1895 science fiction novel *The Time Machine*, portraying future society as racially divided between the elite Eloi and the proletarian Morlocks, was a futurist projection of contemporary British anxieties about class and race.³⁶

Moreover, much of the new racial science had deep roots in discourses about social class. In Britain, the “social Darwinism” of Herbert Spencer and others represented liberalism at its most muscular. Based on the presumption that the dominance of the strong was essential to progress and the rule of civilization, social Darwinism quickly acquired a racial component. European triumphs over natives in Africa and Asia clearly showed the superiority of the former over the latter, and justified colonial

rule as a means of improving the human condition in general. At the same time, social Darwinism argued that British workers had only themselves to blame for their misery, portraying class stratification as the consequence of innate inequalities of ability.³⁷ In France, Count Arthur de Gobineau's *An Essay on the Origins of Inequality* was a pioneering text of the new scientific racism of the nineteenth century. Gobineau's fears of racial degeneracy and miscegenation reflected anxieties about the revolutionary Parisian mob and its proletarian heirs, thus racializing concerns about modern society in general and class conflict in particular. ³⁸

The development of increasingly class-stratified societies in Europe during the nineteenth century, societies that often expressed and conceived of this class stratification in racialized terms, posed a fundamental hurdle to the rise of liberal democracy. How could liberal society possibly survive when based in the sovereignty of populations so fundamentally Other? By the early twentieth century, however, liberal democracy had largely overcome this hurdle, after World War I becoming the dominant political form of the modern age. In spite of the threat posed by Marxism and organized labor, most European societies (Russia being of course the great exception after 1917) succeeded in integrating the working class into capitalist forms of liberal democracy that provided for popular

representation through universal suffrage while at the same time preserving [property rights.](#)³⁹

Part of this success has to do with the history of the Great War itself, to which I will turn in the next chapter. But a key factor was the rise of the “new imperialism” in the late nineteenth century, the European conquest and colonization of large parts of Asia and Africa. The campaign for empire fundamentally changed life not just in the colonized territories but in the colonizer nations as well. Especially in Britain and France, it created new types of racial divisions, between metropole and empire, that facilitated the rise of European liberal democracy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As the next section of this chapter will argue, the rise of liberal democracy was deeply rooted in a racialized vision of the modern colonial encounter.

From Abolition to Empire

Despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end be their improvement.

—JOHN STUART MILL, *ON LIBERTY*

The struggle to abolish Atlantic slavery in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was one of the great freedom sagas of the modern world. As noted in the previous chapter, African slavery constituted the ultimate denial of

the world of liberal freedom and human rights envisaged by the activists and thinkers of the Enlightenment and Age of Revolution. During this era the struggles for freedom and against slavery had diverged to a significant degree, as in both America and Europe the idea of liberty developed an important racial character. In the half century after the fall of Napoleon, however, abolitionism became a much more powerful and determined movement, especially in Britain and the United States, and pushed for the complete overthrow of human bondage. Starting with the ban on the international slave trade in 1808, followed by the outlawing of slavery in the British Empire in 1832, and culminating with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 and the Union victory in the American Civil War, international abolitionism campaigned successfully for the principle that no man should be the slave of another.⁴⁰

The universal struggle against slavery did not, however, bring universal freedom. During the nineteenth century the idea of freedom gradually shifted from not being a slave to having rights as a citizen of a liberal democratic and independent nation, and the two were by no means the same. ⁴¹ In particular the creation of massive overseas empires by the leading European states in the aftermath of the campaigns against colonial slavery illustrated the failure of the abolitionist movement to realize the

liberal dream of freedom in the modern world. Why did the turbulent transition to the modern era bring about new forms of colonial control rather than making people free? How, more specifically, did ideas of freedom and empire coincide and how did they together contribute to the rise of liberal democracy? [42](#) The fact that this transition occurred primarily during the first half of the nineteenth century, and that the new imperial forms it involved adopted much of the ideology of democracy, suggests an important connection. In short, the centrality of liberalism to modern empire arose to a significant extent out of the cauldron of democratic revolution.

The abolitionist movement played a crucial role in the history of European liberalism in the early nineteenth century, especially in Britain. British liberalism defined itself in the struggle against human bondage. [43](#) During the wars against Napoleon, for example, the British Navy not only fought to ensure the safety of national shipping but to suppress the Atlantic slave trade. [44](#) The triumphs of liberalism at home went hand in hand with the struggles against slavery in colonies: as Emilia Viotti da Costa has shown in her history of Guyana's Demerara slave revolt of 1823, rebel slaves were both inspired by and in turn inspired the abolitionist faith of nonconformist missionaries. [45](#) The abolition of slavery in Britain's colonies

ten years later inspired liberal organizations like the Anti-Corn Law League, whose battle against mercantilism would triumph during the next decade.⁴⁶

In France as well, the movement against slavery and for a liberal society went closely together. Napoleon's overthrow of the revolutionary regime in France restored slavery in what remained of the French Caribbean, and it took another French revolution to abolish it once and for all. The combination of antislavery agitation in the metropole and the threat of slave insurrections in Martinique and Guadeloupe meant that once the revolution triumphed in 1848, the new provisional government speedily put an end to bondage in the colonies. In the same brief period, France abolished forever both the monarchy and slavery; universal suffrage and citizenship came both to the people of the metropole and to those of the “old colonies.”⁴⁷

Because the struggle against slavery was so central to nineteenth-century liberalism, it also played an important role in the rise of the new liberal imperialism. At the heart of the liberal imperial project, particularly in Britain and France, lay a concern with uplift and modernization, what the French would come to call *la mission civilisatrice* and Rudyard Kipling would immortalize as “the white man’s burden.”⁴⁸ This concern linked the antislavery of the era of democratic revolution with the aggressive expansionism of the New Imperialism. It was no accident that a major

rationale for British and French conquests in sub-Saharan Africa was initially the effort to stamp out the slave trade by going upriver from the African coasts to root it out at its source in the interior of the continent. [49](#) Just as in Britain and France where liberal democracy required the creation of an educated populace integrated into the acceptance of a liberal worldview, so too in their colonies must the natives be “civilized” to make democracy possible—at least someday. This orientation justified both the subjection of native peoples and the violation of certain basic liberal principles of governance and justice. In both metropoles and colonies, liberal democracy was neither purely liberal nor purely democratic, but a complex mixture of the two ideals. [50](#)

In France the overthrow of slavery and the creation of a new liberal empire overlapped significantly, illustrating the important connections between the two. If the revolution of 1848 spelled the end of old forms of empire, the revolution of 1830 marked the beginning of the new. [51](#) In that year, French troops conquered Algeria, laying the cornerstone of the nation’s new imperial expansion of the late nineteenth century. The Algerian campaign also had an important antimonarchical dimension: undertaken by the regime of Charles X in a futile effort to allay domestic discontent, in actual fact it facilitated the success of the 1830 revolution by

removing large numbers of royal troops from Paris at a crucial time. [52](#) Yet three succeeding French regimes pursued the conquest of Algeria, which was not complete until the late 1850s, reflecting the growing embrace of imperialism by liberals in France.

For Alexis de Tocqueville, the conquest of Algeria was justified by the struggle against despotism: France would free the Arabs from Turkish rule and bring them into the civilized world. As he noted in 1837, “We need in Africa, just as in France, and even more than in France, essential guarantees to the individual living in society; nowhere is it more necessary to establish individual liberty, respect for property, and guarantees of all rights than in a colony.” [53](#) A determined opponent of slavery, Tocqueville’s support of empire in Algeria—in his own mind at least—confirmed rather than contradicted the support of liberty that would eventually lead him to champion the emancipation decree of 1848.

In 1851 Louis Napoleon, the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, overthrew the government of the French Second Republic, a year later appointing himself emperor of the new Second Empire. Fittingly, the new emperor devoted considerable attention to overseas expansion, taking up where his illustrious predecessor had left off. Under the Second Empire the French took colonial control of Tahiti and significantly expanded their presence in

Indochina and sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, however, the regime maintained the principle of universal manhood suffrage adopted by the Second Republic. It was a principle that was often violated in practice, but [the principle nonetheless remained.](#)⁵⁴

Napoleon III's most infamous overseas adventure, his invasion of Mexico, also claimed to bring modernity and freedom to the Mexican people. After conquering the country in 1864 the emperor organized a national plebiscite of very dubious quality to prove that Mexicans had voted to make the Habsburg prince Maximilian their next emperor. Maximilian, another believer in the modernizing force of empire, gladly accepted the crown, proclaiming to his new subjects:

Mexicans: You have desired my presence. Your noble nation, by a voluntary majority, has chosen me to watch henceforth over your destinies. I gladly respond to this call. Painful as it has been for me to bid farewell forever to my own, my native country, I have done so, being convinced that the Almighty has pointed out to me, through you, the mission of devoting all my strength and heart to a people who, tired of war and disastrous contests, sincerely wish for peace and prosperity; to a people who having gloriously obtained their independence, desire to reap the benefit of civilization and true progress. [55](#)

The French imperial venture in Mexico collapsed in 1866, four years before war and revolution overthrew the Second Empire in France itself.

Napoleon III was to be France's last emperor, yet his downfall did not bring to an end the nation's visions of imperial glory. The Third Republic that replaced him and would go on to be the longest-lived regime in modern French history, not only continued his pursuit of overseas empire but expanded it, and so, the regime that did more than any other to make republicanism and liberal democracy the political norm in France also created the greatest empire in the nation's history. By the beginnings of the twentieth century France had completed its conquest of Indochina and North Africa, as well as carving out vast new territorial possessions in west and central Africa. Only Britain could claim a mightier or more expansive empire. France thus became that oddest of political entities, a state that was simultaneously a republic and an empire, an imperial regime without an emperor. [56](#)

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AU MAROC

LA MISSION FRANÇAISE SE RENDANT A FEZ

FIGURE 20. French Mission with Sultan Mulai Abd al-Aziz IV, in Fez, Morocco (1905). Front page of

French newspaper *Le Petit Parisien*, January 29, 1905. Leemage/Universal Images Group/Getty Images.

And, like that of Britain, France's great empire was to be an empire of freedom, rescuing the inferior races from the oppression of savagery and ignorance and bringing them into the light of civilization. The ideal of the civilizing mission, especially in the form of the doctrine of assimilation that guided French imperial policy for most of the nineteenth century, was to turn the natives into French men and woman by teaching them French culture; how to build modern roads, hospitals, schools; and other vectors of civilization. Once integrated into French civilization, they would therefore be prepared for citizenship as equal members of the political community of liberal democratic France. As Alice Conklin and other historians have pointed out, liberal ideas of enlightenment, modernity, and freedom were intrinsic to France's [republican empire](#).⁵⁷

This idea of uplifting the natives and preparing them for freedom has of course obvious parallels with the project of making the working classes in Europe ready for democracy; we shall also see it in attitudes toward the freedmen of the American South after the Civil War. Yet a key part of the

story concerns an essential divergence. Whereas liberal democracy triumphed in imperial France, it did not in her colonies. Ultimately France concluded that her colonial subjects were fundamentally different from her metropolitan citizens, in ways that both recalled and diverged from notions of difference in their own societies. In his classic history *Peasants into Frenchmen*, Eugene Weber not only considered the attempts to integrate French peasants into republican liberal democracy but also mused about why this process of integration did not work for France's overseas colonies.⁵⁸ My concern is less why this did or did not work, but what this reveals about ideas of liberal democracy in France, and of white freedom in general. Ultimately the distinction between colonies and metropoles cuts to the heart of the history of modern liberal democracy.

Part of the story concerns changing beliefs about the possibilities of integrating colonial natives into liberal democracy, and indeed into Western civilization in general. By the end of the nineteenth century, French theorists of colonialism were moving away from the doctrine of assimilation, which emphasized turning the natives into French citizens, to one of association, focusing on the “preservation” of native cultures and multiple routes to civilization. Association had the benefit of validating different ways of life, but in the colonial context it ultimately constituted

the abandonment of the idea that the colonized had a place in the national community of France. In an era of democratic expansion, one might dream of civilizing the white savages of the provinces, but the overseas natives were by and large fated to remain essentially other.⁵⁹

Equally important, however, was the increasing willingness of European nations to accept working people into the framework of liberal democracy, and in doing so, to reassess the image of them as racially different. This is not to say that workers in Britain, France, and elsewhere were fully integrated into bourgeois society. The rise of mass-based working-class socialist parties, at least in theory advocating the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, continued to project a racialized image of [class](#).⁶⁰ At the same time, however, working people were also integrated into popular nationalism through mass education, the rise of the popular press, and increased literacy; as 1914 would demonstrate, national identification to a large extent trumped class identity. Moreover, even socialist and labor union organizations, ostensibly devoted to class struggle, could help standardize working-class protest, rendering it more routine and less threatening. In his classic study of the German Social Democratic Party during the late nineteenth century, Guenther Roth coined the term *negative integration* to describe the ways in which the most powerful socialist party of the age

gradually became a part of the system it protested [against](#).⁶¹ While not completely ceasing to be the racial Other, European workers in the late nineteenth century nonetheless became a part of liberal democratic society [and politics](#).⁶²

More generally, the idea of working men and women as revolutionary savages declined during the course of the century. The history of Irish migration to Britain in the nineteenth century is an excellent example of the interactions between metropolitan ideas of class and colonial ideas of race. In many respects Britain's original colony, Ireland also furnished one of the first major colonial migrations in the history of modern [Europe](#).⁶³ Irish immigrants in early-nineteenth-century Britain—and the Irish in general—were frequently racialized as nonwhite, and caricatures of the times depicted them as sharing the negative qualities commonly ascribed to those of African [descent](#).⁶⁴ Firmly placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy in Victorian London and other British cities, the Irish represented a colonial population adrift in the metropole, utterly foreign and inassimilable despite being the product of centuries of English rule.

At the same time, Irish immigrants, who were almost all working-class and poor, played a significant role in the formation of class consciousness in nineteenth-century Britain. Both directly and indirectly, Irish immigrants

made important contributions to Chartism, often pushing it toward more radical and violent action; [65](#) half a century later, London's Irish figured prominently in the Great Dock Strike of 1889. [66](#) Participation in the strike was to win them new respectability for the social stratum to which they belonged, in effect helping to make them more "English"; thus, whereas during the early nineteenth century Irish working-class agitation was often viewed as analogous to that of uprooted peasants or even rebel slaves, by the century's end one could make out a new vision of the Irish in Britain as increasingly acknowledged members of the British working class.

It is perhaps no accident that the integration of the Irish working class in Britain came at a time of imperial expansion in Africa and Asia. London's East End, the center of the 1889 dock strike and a symbol of both Irish and working-class poverty, was also the great port area that represented links with the overseas colonies. The rise of mass democracy in Britain and new imperial ambitions thus manifested themselves in the same urban setting; while, more broadly, the creation of a new colonial Other facilitated—if only to a certain degree—the increased acceptance of the old. [67](#)

The early history of France's Third Republic provides another example of the passage to working-class respectability in a colonial context. The new regime was born in the crisis of military defeat and revolution, dramatized

above all by the fiery apocalypse of the Paris Commune, which represented the final major manifestation of the insurgent Parisian crowd that had haunted French politics since 1789. The bloody defeat of the Communards definitively exorcised this threat, rendering the creation of a viable liberal democracy possible in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.⁶⁸

Conquest of the Commune by the forces of conservatism in 1871 was a victory for both liberal democracy and empire. The images of savagery that surrounded the Communards, most notably the portrayals of Communard women as incendiary Amazons, strongly suggested the triumph of civilization over barbarity.⁶⁹ It is worth noting that a leading punishment for those insurgents who survived the government's vicious repression was deportation to the colonies: more than four thousand were sent to New Caledonia alone. When in 1878 the indigenous peoples of the island staged a major revolt against the French, the bulk of the Communard exiles sided with the colonial authorities against the insurgents, some even taking up arms and joining the forces of order to suppress the Kanaks. As Alice Bullard has noted, in New Caledonia two visions of savagery, political and racial, confronted each other. A year later, the Communard veterans were allowed to return to France and the French state amnestied them in 1880. By abjuring their own insurgent traditions and taking up the cause of

imperial authority, the former Communards symbolized the alliance of liberal democracy and empire that lay at the heart of the Third Republic.⁷⁰ The rise of liberal democracy also developed new perspectives on the intersections between race and gender, especially in Britain. The nineteenth century brought the rise of the middle-class household with the increased relegation of men and women to separate (and usually unequal) spheres. Social and cultural norms relegated middle-class women to the home, where they were supposed to embrace the cult of domesticity, at the cost of taking them out of the workplace and depriving them of the ability to earn a living on their own. This emphasis on female dependency had important political implications. Those women, property owners and widows, who had been able to vote during the early nineteenth century lost that right in 1835. The inequality and powerlessness intrinsic to the middle-class image of women sparked the rise of the feminist movement in Britain. Beginning with Mary Wollstonecraft, who published *The Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792, by the late nineteenth century British feminism was focused on winning the right to vote for women, a campaign that did not fully succeed until 1928.

Just as new visions of race shaped discourses of social class in Britain, so did racial questions play an important role in discussions of gender. As in

the United States, feminism in nineteenth-century Britain had deep roots in the movement to abolish slavery.⁷¹ Many feminists had first become politically active in the struggle for abolition, and like labor activists they at times used slavery as a metaphor, portraying the oppression of women as a similar kind of bondage. Yet, as Claire Midgley has argued, feminists in the UK generally adopted the slave metaphor less than their activist sisters in the US. Instead, they tended to draw parallels between the abolitionist movement and efforts to improve the condition of native women in the British Empire.⁷² In doing so, they often created and emphasized a dichotomy between free white British women and oppressed brown and Black women, the liberty of the West versus the oppression of the East. It therefore became the duty of British feminists to defend their colonial sisters against the brutality of their own husbands, fathers, and rulers by extending to them the benefits of imperial rule. This kind of “imperial maternalism” affirmed the racial superiority of British women, and the idea that freedom naturally belonged to those with white skin.⁷³

This maternalist approach had classist as well as racial dimensions. For most of its history during the nineteenth century British feminism mobilized primarily middle-class women; the ultimate example of this was the willingness of suffragettes like Emmeline Pankhurst to accept the limitation

of the 1918 law granting female suffrage to women of property.⁷⁴ British feminists often emphasized the uplift of the lower classes at home, notably in the temperance movement, and such perspectives frequently carried over to native women in the empire. For example, a leading British feminist, Josephine Butler, led a campaign in the 1870s and 1880s to repeal the nation's Contagious Diseases Act, which she and other activists attacked for burdening and humiliating prostitutes. After the 1886 triumph of this crusade in Britain, Butler promptly launched a similar campaign in India on behalf of native prostitutes there, challenging India, often in fiery terms, to improve its treatment of native women: "We, as women, desire to protest in the strongest and most solemn manner possible against the wrong done to our sisters and fellow subjects in India. At the same time we venture to warn you of the danger to our Indian rule in thus trifling with the best instincts of the people. We have reason to believe that the seeds of rebellion are being rapidly propagated.... Nothing so surely produces a spirit of rebellion as trampling on the womanhood of a subject race by its conquerors."⁷⁵ As this passage makes clear, British feminists like Butler defended native women while at the same time emphasizing their commitment to empire. Indeed, they viewed colonial rule as an important factor in their efforts to improve the lives of women of color. Their attempts

to civilize both working women at home and native women abroad ultimately highlighted their own prestige and superiority as free white women.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a large portion of the globe was controlled by European nations committed to some form of liberal democracy at home. Their colonial possessions did not have legislatures or other democratic political structures for the most part, and few of their people had the right to vote or any ability to choose their rulers. In contrast, in the metropoles that controlled these colonies the principle of popular sovereignty was gradually becoming the norm, as was the idea that all adult men should have the right to vote. Moreover, nations like France and Britain that had made the most progress in developing liberal democracy at home had also created the largest overseas empires. The fact that metropole and empire were usually legally distinct served to mask the fact that they nonetheless constituted whole political units internally segregated by race. Within them, liberal democracy was largely for whites, while nonwhites were subject to authoritarian imperial rule.

In both the British and French empires, somewhat like in the United States, voting practices varied widely according to local traditions and legal customs. Often, however, whites could vote and “natives” could not, or if

the latter could in some cases vote, their votes would not translate into any meaningful political power or self-rule. Electoral rights varied widely across the British Empire, but in most of its colonies the local privileges around racial distinctions meant that inhabitants could not vote, and frequently within the colonies the British designed electoral privileges around racial distinctions. [76](#) Many colonies, like Britain itself, based suffrage rights upon property, and that fact alone usually prevented most of the indigenous, nonwhite population from voting. In India, for example, only a tiny percentage of adult males could vote until after World War I. [77](#)
In

Jamaica, while Black and colored men could vote in the nineteenth century, property qualifications—especially for those who wanted to run for office—were high enough to keep a white oligarchy firmly in the saddle. As historian Thomas Holt has commented, “If, all things being equal, Black [men should rule the island, then all things could not be equal.](#)”[78](#)

The racialized character of British imperial electoral democracy was most evident in the white settler colonies. Democracy was often much more advanced there than in the mother country; for example, New Zealand was one of the first modern nations to give women the vote. This liberality usually did not extend to indigenous or nonwhite populations. In Canada before 1867, British male subjects could vote, but not Catholics, Jews, or

indigenous peoples. In both Australia and New Zealand, formal as well as informal restrictions kept most members of the indigenous populations away from the polls. Interestingly, South Africa represented one of the few cases where colonial Africans could vote in large numbers, a major factor in prompting white South Africans to seek independence. To an important extent, Britain's white colonies gave their white subjects all the rights of freeborn Englishmen, and in a colonial situation this traditional sense of [rights increasingly translated into the right to vote.](#)⁷⁹

Although the French Empire was in general more centralized than that of the British, it also practiced various approaches to native enfranchisement. When the French abolished slavery in their Caribbean and Indian Ocean colonies in 1848, they made the former slaves citizens of France and gave the men of the “old colonies” the right to vote on an equal footing with French men in the metropole. That at least was the theory; the reality on the ground in Martinique, Guadeloupe, Réunion, and French Guiana was very different. The old colonies remained colonies, even though their inhabitants were citizens, a fact that circumscribed their political autonomy vis-à-vis France. Moreover, the white planters and former slaveholders continued to dominate the local economies, essentially based in the production of sugar. French ex-slaves could in fact vote, but their ability to do so did little to

improve their conditions in the years after the abolition of slavery. [80](#)

Most of the inhabitants of the rest of the French Empire were subjects and therefore had no right to vote. It was possible for natives to become citizens by attaining the status of *évolués*, “evolved individuals,” by giving proof of assimilation into French culture and law. [81](#) Since this meant not only obtaining French education in colonies with few schools but also renouncing other legal traditions, notably Islamic, it was a path open to and taken by only a few individuals. [82](#) In colonial Algeria, for example, the number of “evolved ones” amounted to only a few thousand out of several million people. [83](#) This practice not only benefited few people but also reinforced the idea that freedom was a European idea reserved for white Europeans.[84](#)

The rise of European empires thus reinscribed, on a global scale, the idea of white freedom that abolitionists had hoped would end with slavery. Imperial liberal democracy had a paradoxical cast—citizenship in the metropole, subjecthood in the colonies—and the difference was racial. The liberal idea of gradually educating colonial subjects for democracy and self-rule proved a nonstarter for the most part, in sharp contrast to the integration of the metropolitan working classes. Colonial education was in general woefully underfunded, and where it did exist was highly segregated

racially and did not in general train students for [citizenship.85](#) As the idea of freedom became more closely tied to ideas of popular sovereignty and national independence, it became ever more distant for colonial subjects. Ironically, colonial expansion, which had been to an important extent, especially in Africa, inspired by the desire to eradicate slavery and liberate men from the shackles of superstition and ignorance continued to deny them freedom on the basis of race. The world of imperial liberal democracy was one that boasted of its advancement of human freedom, but where that freedom was essentially reserved for whites.

France and Britain had the largest overseas empires, but by the start of the twentieth century the United States had developed into the world's most powerful liberal democracy. Here also the abolition of African slavery did not bring about universal liberty. Instead, America became an example of how ideas of liberty continued to be racially circumscribed in the modern era. Under the lamp of the Statue of Liberty, America became one of the world's greatest examples of white freedom.

America, the White Light in the West

As the previous chapter showed, the United States was born out of a revolutionary struggle for white freedom. The American Revolution championed the right of white Americans to liberty and national

independence, while at the same time preserving their right to own Black slaves. The flagrant hypocrisy of such a position did help create an alternative vision of universal freedom that would include African Americans, so that during the Revolutionary era the number of free Blacks increased dramatically and many of the new states moved to abolish slavery altogether. Yet this trend would prove temporary: not only would slavery gain a new dynamism in the South during the early nineteenth century, but it would in many ways remain a national institution. Only the Civil War would finally bring chattel slavery to an end in America, in the prophetic words of John Brown purging the sins of the guilty land in blood.

The history of the United States during the nineteenth century is important to this chapter not just because of the nation's character as a slave republic but also because of its importance to the history of liberal democracy. In an important sense America is the world's quintessential liberal democracy, a nation without a monarchy or titled nobility, born of a popular revolt for liberty and independence. Moreover, the founding structures and documents of the United States provided both for individual liberties and popular sovereignty, and have remained the basis of American law and politics ever since. The principle of universal manhood suffrage was widely cherished in the new nation, and by the middle of the century

had essentially become the law of the land. As I will explore in detail below, the reality of the democratization of voting rights was more complicated. The federal structure of the United States meant that enfranchisement varied widely from state to state. Nonetheless, the right to vote gradually became seen during the nineteenth century as a key aspect of what made Americans a free people. [86](#)

Yet the very concept of Americans as a free people was grounded in a racialized definition of what it meant to be both free and American. The fact that most African Americans were slaves until the Civil War meant that liberal democracy had racial limits, but more generally the right to vote and participate in American life as a citizen of the republic had a strong racial character. Even after emancipation, moreover, the failure of Reconstruction and the creation of Jim Crow in the South meant that most Blacks still could not vote and that therefore democracy and freedom were a function of race in America. The disenfranchisement of African Americans was not, as it sometimes has been portrayed, merely an exception to a general narrative of democratic enfranchisement. On the contrary, it fit into a broader pattern of racialized liberal democracy throughout the nineteenth century and beyond that highlighted the central role played by white freedom in the modern history of the United States. [87](#)

One can trace interesting parallels between the American South after 1865 and the overseas empires of France and Britain: both were part of nations that considered themselves liberal democracies based on freedom, and in both, peoples of color could not vote nor had any right to popular sovereignty. [88](#) The other striking parallel between Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century is that between workers in the former and European immigrants in the latter. Like working-class Europeans, American immigrants from Ireland, Italy, eastern Europe, and elsewhere in the Old World had to struggle for acceptance as free and equal citizens in the United States, and yet ultimately the success of their struggle, and as a result of the fight to create mass-based liberal democracy in America, came down to their ability to claim whiteness and white identity. In both Europe and America, freedom by the dawn of the twentieth century would assume the political structure of white liberal democracy.

The Rise of White Democracy and the White to Vote

One key symbol and vector of freedom in American history has been the right to vote, the ability of a sovereign people to select its own leaders and thus govern itself, to choose freely its own destiny. Voting is mentioned more often in the Constitution than any other right of American citizens.

Yet, as Eric Foner once noted, there has frequently been a tension in

American history between “voting as a right and voting as something that only the right people should [do.”⁸⁹](#) Voting has never been a universal privilege in the United States: it has never been granted to legal minors, for example. The ability to elect one’s leaders has been not only a right of free men (and men alone until 1920), but also a responsibility for the stewardship of the nation, one that only those worthy of freedom deserved to exercise. The character of the United States as a liberal democracy was central to the ideal of American freedom, but democracy did not necessarily mean voting rights, or freedom in general, for all. [90](#)

As historians like Alex Keyssar have shown, the popular image of the United States as democratic from birth is not quite accurate. America’s federal political structure meant that individual states often decided their own rules about the franchise, which led to tremendous variations across the country. Not until the 1850s did universal manhood suffrage become the effective law of the land, and women would wait for another seventy years before they too could vote. [91](#) In this section I will consider the ways in which race shaped ideas about and practices of suffrage in nineteenth century America, arguing that to a very important extent whiteness was a key precondition of the right to vote. Racial restrictions on the franchise in America thus were another significant aspect of the interpretation of

freedom as white in the nation that considered itself the cradle of liberty.

In colonial British North America suffrage was generally considered a privilege rather than a right, and the ability of colonists to vote varied widely from one colony to another. For the most part, however, voting was limited to white men of property. The emphasis on property, corresponding to the discussion above about wealth and civic responsibility, accentuated the conviction that only men who had both a stake in society and the independence that ownership granted should be entrusted with the ability to direct the affairs of state. Estimates as to how many British colonists could vote vary widely among historians, but many agree that at least half of adult white men were enfranchised, a proportion far higher than in Britain at the same time. The number of British colonists with suffrage rights was thus a small proportion of the total colonial population, but at the same time it was [large enough to lay the foundations of a mass electoral political culture.](#)⁹²

The American Revolution's focus on white freedom meant challenging the restrictions that limited the franchise to men of property. Whereas conservative colonists still championed the importance of property qualifications, radicals like Thomas Paine argued forcefully that all men should enjoy the freedom to vote as a right. As Paine argued, "The right of voting for representatives is the primary right by which other rights are

protected. To take away this right is to reduce a man to slavery, for slavery consists in being subject to the will of another, and he that has not a vote in the election of representatives is in this case.” [93](#) As political participation spread beyond traditional colonial elites, more and more voices demanded the ability to vote as part of not only that participation but also their right as free men. In particular, the idea of voting as a natural right became more and more prominent, meshing with other natural rights that the revolution fought to guarantee. Notably, the insurgent colonists came to regard suffrage as a key component of the freedom they were fighting for. The result was a dramatic expansion of the franchise by the time the new nation achieved its independence. Pennsylvania took the lead, abolishing the property requirement in favor of taxpaying status. Vermont went furthest, allowing all men to vote regardless of financial status. In general, by the end of the war the majority of white adult men in most of the United States could vote. Seen in global context, this made the new nation the most inclusive democracy of its time. [94](#)

The expansion of voting rights as part of the revolutionary struggle for freedom and national liberation left a defining mark on the new nation. Between the Revolution and the Civil War Americans progressively expanded the franchise, realizing the goal of universal white male suffrage

by the 1850s. This essentially progressed state by state, but the underlying general expansion of the right to vote was undeniable. In particular, the early nineteenth century saw the gradual abandonment of property requirements for voting. Change came in particular from the West: all of the new states admitted to the Union after 1783 permitted men to vote without regard to their wealth or property. The spirit of Jacksonian democracy, its emphasis on a populist vision of the United States, encouraged the idea that all free men, regardless of property qualification, should have the right to vote, or else they were not truly free. As a result, by the end of the 1850s property requirements for voting had essentially disappeared, and only a few states had a taxpaying requirement. The America that entered the Civil War did so as a populist democracy.[95](#)

It also did so as a nation in which democracy was circumscribed by gender and race. During the early nineteenth century gender remained the great determinant of who could or could not vote. After New Jersey abolished the right of women of property to vote in 1807, suffrage remained a masculine privilege until [1920.](#)[96](#) The role played by race in shaping electoralism was less straightforward, but in some ways more interesting. Most African Americans were slaves, so there was no question of extending to them the right to vote. The United States also had a sizable population of

free Blacks in the early nineteenth century; however, it was concentrated in the North, where slavery had largely disappeared as an institution after the War of [Independence](#).⁹⁷ As noted in the previous chapter, the contradiction between a struggle for freedom waged by slaveholding colonies had created a vision of a nonracist ideal of liberty, one that seemed to offer the possibility of greater racial equality in the new United States. Some Americans, both Black and white, argued that slavery would gradually fade away in the free United States.

It was not to be, at least in the short term. Not only did slavery gain a new lease on life in the early nineteenth century, but even those Blacks who were not slaves found that was not the same as being free. The 1790 Naturalization Act that defined citizenship as the privilege of free white men became a template for imposing racial criteria on the idea of American freedom. Frequently states denied African Americans privileges, like equality before the law or the ability to attend public schools, that were routinely extended to whites. In particular, most free Blacks did not possess the right to vote. Moreover, the disenfranchisement of Blacks steadily increased during the early nineteenth century, at the same time as more and more white men obtained the right to vote. Until 1800 free Blacks could vote in all Northern states, but in the next few decades New Jersey,

Maryland, Connecticut, and New York either drastically curtailed or abolished altogether African American suffrage. Of equal significance, with the exception of Maine, every state that entered the Union after 1800 banned free Blacks from voting. By the eve of the Civil War only New England (minus Connecticut) granted voting rights to free Blacks. [98](#)

Most fascinating here is thus not just the denial of voting rights to free Blacks but the fact that it occurred at the same time as the progressive enfranchisement of white men without regard to wealth or property qualifications. What explains such a curious parallel history? The emancipation of slaves in the Northern states was by no means universally popular, and even those opposed to slavery did not necessarily believe in or accept Black equality. As the free Black population grew, the possibility that they could not only vote but play a decisive role in elections became a more threatening prospect. Moreover, property qualifications had traditionally prevented most free Blacks from voting. As those declined, the possibility of a racially egalitarian democracy in America became more real, so that the racial order they had helped to guarantee had to be protected in more explicit ways. Some whites also feared that giving Blacks [the vote would attract a flood of runaway slaves from the South.](#)[99](#)

Above all, by the mid-nineteenth century most white Americans

regarded Blacks as not really Americans, and certainly not citizens. In 1857 the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott* decision wrote this into federal law, defining Blacks as not white and therefore not citizens. [100](#) Opponents of African American suffrage freely and stridently expressed racist attitudes toward Blacks, regarding them as unfit intellectually and morally to participate in political life. In 1860 Theophilus C. Callicot, Democratic assemblyman from Brooklyn, spoke against Black suffrage, contending that "the proposition to put negroes on a footing of political equality with the white men is repugnant to the sense of the American people.... Americans would never consent to share the proud title of 'American Citizen' with an inferior and abject race." [101](#) In spite of frequent protests by Black activists and their white allies, by the time of the Civil War voting, and with it the definition of freedom in America, had become largely a function of race. The right to vote had become the white to vote.

The history of voting rights among other racialized groups in American society both affirms and to a certain extent nuances this perspective. To an important degree, the enfranchisement of Native Americans and Mexican Americans before the Civil War rested upon the extent to which they were defined as white, or could claim white identity. Unlike African Americans, who were always considered the negative referent of whiteness, members of

these groups could sometimes claim white identity in principle, even if that claim was often rejected in practice. Their right (and usually more important, their *ability*) to vote often hinged on the extent to which they could claim whiteness culturally and politically as well as legally. To be, in Laura Gomez's memorable phrase, "off-white," was to push up against the racialized limits of suffrage, and freedom in general, in antebellum America. [102](#)

Like free Blacks, Native Americans had largely been banned from voting in colonial America. After independence their enfranchisement varied from state to state, determined primarily by two factors. The most important rested upon definitions of their racial status. In states that considered them white they could vote; Michigan, for example, decided they were white simply because they were not Black. In contrast, states that considered them nonwhite generally banned them from voting. The other factor was their status as members of tribes, in theory sovereign entities which in effect made them foreigners. The ambiguous national and legal status of Native Americans frequently served as a pretext for disenfranchising them, although some authorities argued those that left their tribes (especially those that surrendered title to tribal lands) and assimilated into American life could become citizens. As a result, few Native Americans could vote before

the Civil War.¹⁰³

The situation of Mexican Americans was similarly ambiguous. The United States waged war against Mexico from 1846 to 1848, and as a result of its victory annexed the northern half of the country, including notably Texas and California. This gave America for the first time in its history a sizable Mexican American population, some 100,000 strong.¹⁰⁴ The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the war, gave this population both American citizenship and legal status as whites. However, as would often be the case in American history, this legal status did not translate into political and social rights, particularly in Texas, home to perhaps the largest Mexican American population. The independent Republic of Texas established before the American war had banned all Mexican Americans from voting or citizenship rights. ¹⁰⁵ Even after annexation by the United States, although they had the legal right to vote few succeeded in exercising it thanks to racist pressure from the white population. The inability to vote in effect helped to racialize a population that sought unsuccessfully to claim the white status guaranteed it by law.

During the early nineteenth century, therefore, the right to vote in the United States was closely entangled with race. Not only was suffrage extended to virtually all white men by the eve of the Civil War, thus

breaking down traditional restrictions based on property and class, it was also and at the same time increasingly denied to those who were not white men. The early years of America as a free and independent nation were thus a period when voting was more and more defined in racial terms. The idea that voting rights were gradually expanded to ever more Americans does not fit the facts of the early nineteenth century, which instead saw the franchise both broadened and restricted, along racial lines, at the same time. The right to vote consequently illustrated how the growth of freedom in America was in reality the growth of white freedom. The political culture of the American republic was grounded in whiteness, a fact that, as we shall see in the next section, even the greatest conflict in American history would not change.

From Jubilee to Jim Crow

The Rise and Fall of Black Freedom

As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.

—JULIA WARD HOWE, *THE BATTLE HYMN OF THE REPUBLIC*, 1862

Slavery is not abolished until the Black man has the ballot.

—FREDERICK DOUGLASS, 1865 [106](#)

More than perhaps any other time in American history, during the Civil War and the Reconstruction that followed it the meaning of freedom specifically

included, even embraced, the nation's Black population. Although that was not its initial goal, ultimately America's bloodiest conflict achieved the destruction of slavery, and three amendments to the Constitution made all men free citizens of the United States with the right to vote in its elections. In the aftermath of the Union's great victory, made possible to an important extent by the determination of African Americans to fight and die in what they called "the freedom war," white freedom seemed as though it might fade into the nation's past in the face of a new vision of racial equality. [107](#)

That did not happen. As African Americans would learn to their bitter disappointment, the nation's commitment to abolishing slavery did not necessarily mean freeing the slaves themselves. The dominance of the Radical Republicans, who embraced a fervent desire not just for the abolition of slavery but also for Black equality and empowerment, proved fleeting, and by the end of the 1870s the Reconstruction dream of racial equality in the former Confederacy had largely faded away. In particular, the enfranchisement of the freedmen was increasingly challenged by the kind of white terror symbolized by the Ku Klux Klan, so that by the end of the century the ability of African Americans to exercise their right to vote in the South, where the overwhelming majority of America's Black population lived, had effectively ceased to exist. In the United States as a whole,

therefore, whiteness continued to define freedom.

The Civil War began not when the states of the South seceded from the Union but when the federal government and the Northern states decided to force them to remain. A desire to liberate the slaves had little to do with this initial decision. Whereas for Blacks and abolitionists the war against the insurgent South was clearly a war for freedom and the overthrow of slavery, most Northerners viewed the conflict as a struggle to preserve the Union, not one to free the slaves. In an 1861 address to Congress President Lincoln stated he had “no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with slavery in the States where it exists.” [108](#) In response both the House and Senate passed resolutions the same month affirming that the struggle to preserve the Union had nothing to do with any desire to free the slaves. In the first year of the war even the abolitionists muted their demands for the overthrow of slavery, feeling correctly that public opinion in the North strongly opposed them.

In fact, not the North but the South saw the conflict as a war for liberty. Southerners often portrayed themselves as the true heirs of 1776, like their forefathers fighting for freedom against tyranny. This freedom included the right to own property, notably slaves. As one Southerner argued, “We are fighting for our liberty against tyrants of the North … who are determined

to destroy slavery.” [109](#) Or, as Jefferson Davis put it, “Will you be slaves or will [you] be independent? … Will you consent to be robbed of your property [or] strike bravely for liberty, property, honor and life?” [110](#) Even for

the majority of whites who owned no slaves, secession was a war for freedom because it alone could preserve white supremacy and prevent Southerners from falling under the domination of “Black Republicans.”

More than ever, during the Civil War the American South defined freedom in racial terms.

Given this, how did the Civil War come to adopt emancipation as its guiding principle and eventually abolish slavery? Much credit, of course, goes to African Americans themselves. North and South, free and enslaved, Blacks in America viewed the war as a crusade for liberty. In the North free Blacks held meetings and organized to pressure politicians to turn the war into a struggle against slavery. In the South slaves clandestinely followed the progress of the Union armies as they approached, and often as soon as the opportunity presented itself fled their plantations to gain the northern lines and freedom. Entire families and communities took to the roads. The idea of moving from one place to another in search of a better life has been a classic theme in American history, but at no time was it more poignant than during the Civil War as the slaves sought to emancipate themselves by

following the northern star.[111](#)

Had the North quickly won the Civil War the institution of slavery might well have survived, but instead the Union armies floundered at first, only very gradually gaining an upper hand in the conflict. As the war dragged on it became increasingly clear that the Confederacy depended on the mobilization of slave labor to sustain its war effort, and depriving it of that labor could weaken and ultimately destroy it. Northern abolitionists pushed this argument with ever greater determination, with the result that by the end of 1861 the Union armies began welcoming escaped slaves as “contrabands,” underscoring the link between freedom and property. [112](#)

There was also the British position to consider. English cotton mills, and thus industrial society in general, depended heavily on Southern cotton, and the Union blockade of the South caused widespread hardship in the country. Yet the cause of antislavery, linked to the powerful social and political forces of liberalism and Methodism, was extremely popular in Britain (*Uncle Tom's Cabin* was one of the best-selling books there in the nineteenth century). Making the war a crusade against slavery, abolitionists argued, would render British intervention on the side of the Confederacy politically impossible.[113](#)

Ultimately the South was caught in an untenable situation: it could not at

the same time suppress over one-third of its population and fight a war against a larger, stronger power. As W.E.B. DuBois put it in *Black Reconstruction in America*:

It was not the Abolitionist alone who freed the slaves. The Abolitionists never had a real majority of the people of the United States back of them. Freedom for the slave was the logical result of a crazy attempt to wage war in the midst of four million Black slaves, and trying the while sublimely to ignore the interests of the slaves in the outcome of the fighting. Yet, these slaves had enormous power in their hands. Simply by stopping work, they could threaten the Confederacy with starvation. By walking into the Federal camps, they showed to doubting Northerners the easy possibility of using them as workers, and as servants, as farmers, and as spies, and finally, as fighting soldiers. And not only using them thus, but by the same gesture, depriving their enemies of their use in just these fields. It was the fugitive slave who made the slaveholders [face the alternative of surrendering to the North, or to the Negroes.](#)¹¹⁴

To an important extent, therefore, the Black slaves of the South used the trauma of civil war to free themselves.



FIGURE 21. “The Emancipation of the Negroes, January 1863—The Past and the Future.” Drawn by

Thomas Nast. From *Harper’s Weekly*, January 24, 1863.

Lincoln resisted the idea of emancipation throughout much of 1862, fearing the presence of free Blacks on American soil, yet events soon overtook his reluctance. In September 1862 Lincoln issued the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, stating that he intended to free the slaves unless the Confederacy surrendered by the end of the year. This was not a politically popular stance, as the sharp losses of Lincoln’s Republican Party in the 1862 elections made clear. Nonetheless, on January 1, 1863, the

federal government officially enacted the Emancipation Proclamation, granting freedom to the over 3 million slaves of the Confederacy. In spite of its limitations (for example, it did not apply to slaves in slaveholding states that, like Maryland, had remained in the Union), its promulgation sparked massive celebrations by Blacks and abolitionists throughout the North. In Boston thousands packed into the city's Tremont Temple on New Year's Day to wait for the official word from Washington. When it came by telegraph the crowd exploded in jubilation, joining Frederick Douglass in singing the spiritual "Blow Ye the Trumpet Blow." As word of the decision spread throughout the South the slaves celebrated and began making plans for their own liberation. A few months later escaping slaves on a riverboat in the Mississippi River sang of the new day:

Oh, praise an' tanks De Lord he come

To set de people free;

An' massa tink it day ob doom,

An' we ob jubilee.

De Lord dat heap de Red Sea waves,

He jes' as strong as den;

He say de word: we las' night slaves,

To-day de Lord's free men. [115](#)

Freedom did not come at once, of course, but the Emancipation Proclamation turned the war of the Union armies into a crusade for liberation. Wherever the soldiers in blue went they freed the slaves, and their progress gradually brought the last throes of the peculiar institution. General Sherman's famous march across Georgia to the sea in 1864, remembered by Southern whites as a scorched earth campaign of brutal destruction, seemed a victory parade to the many former slaves who followed in his train. [116](#) Nearly 200,000 African American men joined the Union armies, a third of them making the ultimate sacrifice for freedom. By June 19, 1865, when federal troops formally occupied Texas and decreed the emancipation of its slaves, the Civil War had ended with the triumph of [Black freedom.](#)[117](#)

But what did such freedom mean, apart from the absence of slavery? This was the central question of the post-Emancipation era, or Reconstruction. [118](#) The former slaves certainly had their own ideas. Freedom meant the ability to reunite with family members, to travel and choose where they wanted to live, to be paid for their labor and have the right to turn down work they did not want, to not be subjected to imprisonment, physical punishment, and abuse. Freedom did not just mean individual rights, however, but also the ability to form free communities, to create

institutions like churches and schools. In effect, freedom meant not having a master, being in control of one's own destiny. [119](#)

For the former slaves, the right to obtain an education was a central aspect of their new freedom. Throughout the former Confederacy Blacks flocked to the new schools. From the many elementary schools that taught both young and old how to read and write, to the nation's first Black universities like Fisk and Howard, the thirst for learning consumed the freedmen and [-women.](#)[120](#) The other great desire was land. In a largely rural society where land ownership lay at the very heart of social and political independence, those who had until recently been property hungered to own property themselves. Many felt that they were entitled to the plantations they had suffered on as slaves: as one group of South Carolina freedmen told their former master, "We ain' gwine nowhar.... We gwine wuk right here on de lan' whar we wuz bo'n an' whar belongs tuh us." [121](#) At the same time, for many, land ownership—the ability to earn one's own living independently—seemed like the only viable alternative to continuing to work for whites on their plantations, which was justifiably considered simply a new version of slavery. The demand for forty acres and a mule was the ultimate concrete statement of the freedmen's desire for liberty, and the decision not to redistribute land to the former slaves a powerful indication

of its limitations. [122](#)

Finally, freedom for the former slaves meant the right to vote.

Immediately after the end of the war Blacks began organizing to demand suffrage for all men regardless of race. For them, voting, like land ownership, was important both as a practical guarantee and as a symbol of their newly free status. This desire for the political franchise was supported by the Radical branch of the Republican party, which for a decade after Appomattox largely controlled the national government. In 1866 the Republicans passed the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which made all former slaves US citizens, and a year later followed it with the Reconstruction Act, requiring Southern states to ratify the amendment and allow Blacks to vote as a condition of their readmission to the Union. The result was a political revolution in the South, as the former slaves streamed to the polls in overwhelming numbers, with their white allies electing a series of progressive state governments across the region. This expansion of the franchise reached its zenith in 1870 when the Fifteenth Amendment, granting the right to vote to men of all races, became the law of the land. [123](#)

Most white Southerners viewed these changes with horror and moved to limit the impact of emancipation as much as possible. In 1865 and 1866 several Southern states passed Black codes that forced freedmen to provide

proof of employment, usually by signing contracts to work on plantations. They became one way of “getting things back as near to slavery as possible.” [124](#) More ominously, Southern whites initiated a campaign of violence and terror against local Republicans, both Black and white. At the end of 1865 Confederate veterans in Tennessee founded the Ku Klux Klan, which over the next few years murdered hundreds of Blacks and their white supporters. The Klan targeted in particular Republican politicians in a violent attempt to disenfranchise the Black population and maintain white supremacy. This reign of terror continued until 1872, when President Grant suppressed it with federal troops. [125](#)

The suppression of the Klan showed that the key to Black freedom lay in the North; only as long as the Radical Republicans held power would they enforce the right of Southern Blacks to vote. By the early 1870s the signs were not encouraging. As we have seen, Black suffrage was not popular in the North before the war, and even after 1865 proposals to enfranchise African Americans were voted down in most Northern states. By the early 1870s many Northern whites were more interested in reconciliation with the South than with protecting Black rights there. The Democratic Party scored a major election victory in 1874, winning control of the House of Representatives, signaling that the reformist approach to the former

Confederacy had lost much of its steam.

White Southerners soon drew their own conclusions from these signals, and in 1875 renewed their violent campaign against Reconstruction. In Mississippi, armed vigilantes murdered Republican politicians and terrorized their supporters from voting, enabling the Democrats to win the state by a landslide. The same happened in South Carolina in 1876, by which time Democrats and their terrorist allies had overthrown all the Reconstruction state governments in the South. Unlike in 1872, the federal government refused to intervene. Instead, in 1877 the new presidential administration of Rutherford B. Hayes agreed, in exchange for Southern support in the disputed election of the previous year, to withdraw all federal troops from the South and recognize the legitimacy of its Democratic state governments. The so-called Bargain or Compromise of 1877 effectively ended the Reconstruction of the South, and with it hopes for Black freedom.¹²⁶

The next two decades witnessed the rebirth of white supremacy in the South. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century Southern states passed a series of laws to keep their Black populations separate and inferior. Collectively known as Jim Crow, these measures rigidly segregated Blacks in all major spheres of life, from hospitals, schools, and public parks down

to telephone booths and drinking fountains. Facilities available for Blacks were invariably inferior in quality, highlighting their exclusion from the mainstream of Southern life. Jim Crow was not just a Southern phenomenon, however; public racial segregation existed throughout the North and West, and the Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision upholding the doctrine of "separate but equal" made it in effect national policy. [127](#)

The main thrust and goal of the post-Reconstruction reaction, however, was the disenfranchisement of the Black population. Starting in earnest in 1890, Southern states began enacting a variety of measures to keep African Americans from voting. These included residency requirements, literacy tests, and poll taxes requiring people to pay a fee for the right to vote. As a result of these and other restrictions and of the racist terror that continued to threaten those Blacks who attempted to exercise their franchise, Black electoral participation dropped precipitously in the South. By 1910 only four percent of all Black men in Georgia had registered to vote, whereas for the South in general less than ten percent of eligible African Americans routinely came out for elections. The right to vote had once again become the white to vote, and the effective elimination of the Black franchise and Black political power illustrated the racialized nature of democracy. Since

the overwhelming majority of African Americans lived in the South, their disenfranchisement essentially limited voting to whites in general. The Civil War and Reconstruction thus ended in a ringing reaffirmation of white supremacy and white freedom. [128](#)

On January 29, 1901, congressman George Henry White of North Carolina gave his final speech in the US House of Representatives. The last of the Black politicians elected during Reconstruction, Representative White had lost his battle for reelection thanks to the disenfranchisement of most of his African American constituents. In the speech that marked the end of Black freedom in America, congressman White declared:

Now, Mr. Chairman, before concluding my remarks I want to submit a brief recipe for the solution of the so-called American negro problem. He asks no special favors, but simply demands that he be given the same chance for existence, for earning a livelihood, for raising himself in the scales of manhood and womanhood that are accorded to kindred nationalities.... This, Mr. Chairman, is perhaps the negroes' temporary farewell to the American Congress; but let me say, Phoenix-like he will rise up some day and come again. These parting words are in behalf of an outraged, heart-broken, bruised, and bleeding, but God-fearing people, faithful, industrious, loyal people—rising people, full of

potential force. [129](#)

The implementation of Jim Crow throughout the South by the dawn of the twentieth century underscored the durability of slavery and the racial nature of liberty in America as a whole. The defeat of the greatest challenge to white freedom in the nation's history would play a key role in shaping the character of American democracy in the modern era.

Immigration and Whiteness in Turn of the Century America

The Jewish emigrant for the first time in his life rejoices.... He is on his way to a country that

greets all new arrivals with a gigantic statue of liberty.... To some extent, the reality *does*

correspond to the symbol. Not because they really are all that serious about liberty in the new

country, but because they have people who are more Jewish than the Jews, which is to say the

Negroes. Of course Jews are still Jews. But here, significantly, they are first and foremost

whites. For the first time a Jew's race is actually to his advantage.

—JOSEPH ROTH, *THE WANDERING JEWS*[130](#)

In the summer of 1863 one of the largest race riots, indeed civil disturbances of any kind, in American history broke out in the city of New York. Afraid that the Emancipation Proclamation would flood the city with Black competitors for jobs and incensed by the new national draft, which

had been decreed in March, thousands of working-class whites went on a rampage against people and property in Manhattan for three bloody days. Largely but not exclusively composed of Irish immigrants, the mobs targeted not only symbols of Republican Party authority but also African American men, women, and children. The rioters burned the Colored Orphanage on Fifth Avenue to the ground and lynched several Black men unlucky enough to fall into their hands. They were not the only victims; as one observer noted, “A child of 3 years of age was thrown from a 4th story window and instantly killed.... Children were torn from their mother’s embrace and their brains blown out.” [131](#) Having for years reserved work on the New York docks for white men, the insurgents fought to apply the same standard to life in the city as a whole. They had some success: hundreds of Blacks fled the city, which by the end of the year had its smallest African [American population since 1820.](#)[132](#)

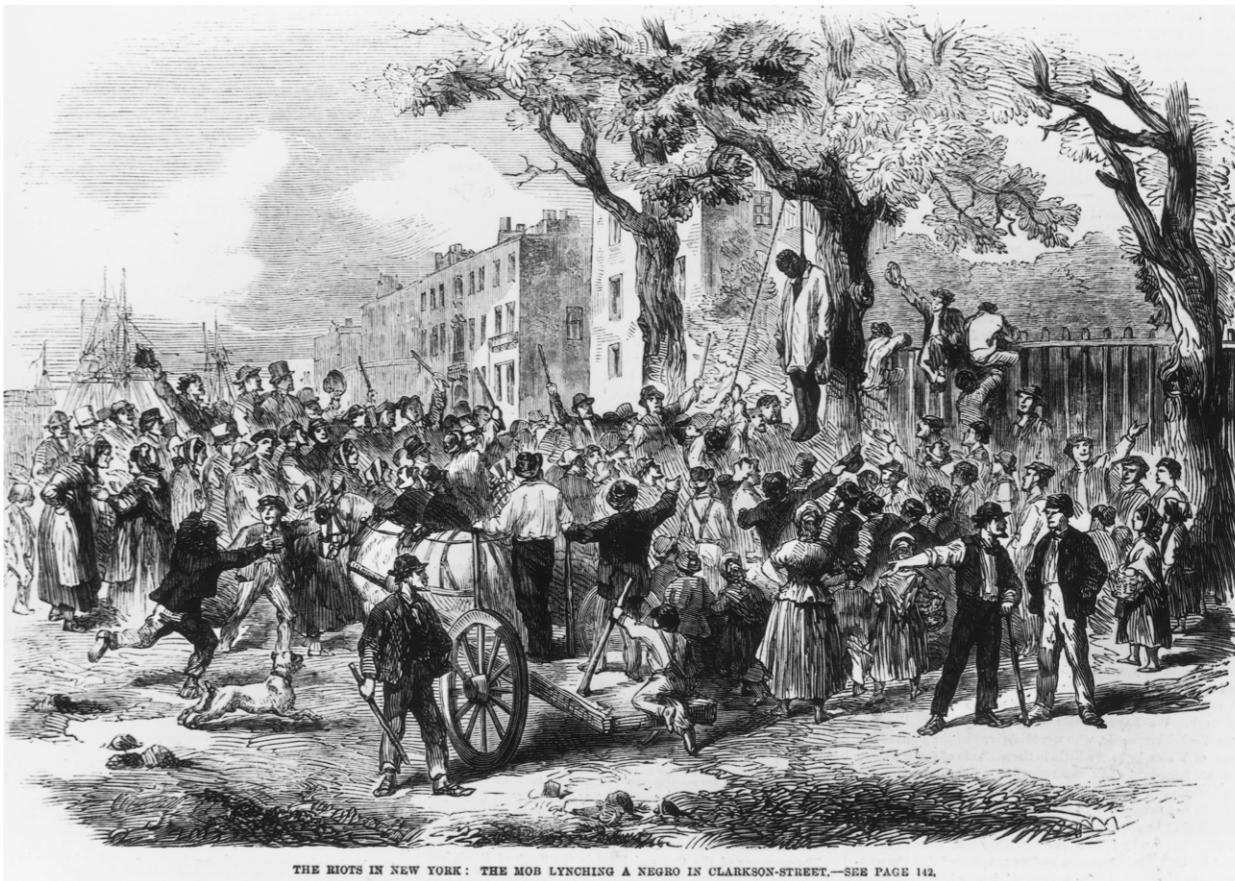


FIGURE 22. “The Riots in New York: The mob lynching a negro in Clarkson Street.” New York Draft

Riots (c. 1863). Fotosearch/Getty Images.

The story of the New York draft riots belongs to the histories of both American racism and American immigration, illustrating some of the complex connections between the two. The half century from the Civil War to World War I witnessed both the rise and fall of Black freedom, as we have seen above, and one of the greatest periods of foreign immigration in American history. For a long time, historians of the United States tended to treat the two as separate phenomena. Whereas immigrants came mostly to

the burgeoning cities of the industrial North and East, African Americans remained largely in the post-Emancipation South. To the extent that they placed the two histories in comparative context, it was often to portray them as similar examples of nativist hostility and racism toward outsiders.

Whiteness studies has offered a radical departure from this perspective.

Created by David Roediger, Matthew Frye Jacobsen, Alexander Saxton, and others, whiteness studies in a nutshell argue that being white is a social and political rather than a biological category, that dominance in racially segmented societies is as much achieved as given. Conceptualizing America in particular as a “white republic,” whiteness scholars have considered the ways in which foreign immigrants were (or were not) integrated and accepted into national life by both embracing and being granted white identity.¹³³ This has brought to the study of immigration a new focus on race

as a vital part of that history. Moreover, because the flip side of being white is not being Black, it has prompted new perspectives on the relationship between immigrants and African Americans. The field of whiteness studies has given rise to new questions about the history of European immigration in particular: What did white identity mean to them, and how did it intersect with desires for Americanization? Did the achievement of whiteness happen gradually in America, as scholars Noel Ignatiev and Karen Brodkin have

argued, or were European immigrants, in the words of Thomas Gugliemo, “white on arrival”? Above all, how does one square the systematic and pervasive discrimination against foreign immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the idea that they nonetheless were able to achieve some version of white privilege? [134](#)

In answering these questions, one must distinguish between different waves of immigration before World War I. Most Americans came from immigrant stock, of course, primarily from Britain, and those easily fit into a predominantly Anglo-Saxon culture. During the early nineteenth century the other major waves of immigration came from two places, Ireland and Germany. The primarily Protestant German population, while often remaining culturally distinct, nonetheless was generally accepted into American life. [135](#) The Irish were another matter. Between 1830 and 1860, especially after the Great Famine of the 1840s devastated their island, nearly 2 million Irish immigrated to the United States. They crowded into big cities and towns in the East and Midwest, usually living in squalid conditions and working in low-wage casual labor. Stigmatized for both their poverty and their Catholicism, Irish immigrants were scorned and discriminated against by the dominant society. In particular, they were seen as so degraded that they were often analogized to Blacks, as “niggers turned

inside out.”¹³⁶

For the most part, the Irish reacted to this victimization by seeking to assimilate into American society and win acceptance as American citizens, and to an important extent this meant embracing racism so as to distinguish themselves from African Americans. The rivalry over labor on the New York docks mentioned above formed part of a broader process of excluding Black competition from the low-wage jobs on which the Irish depended, and doing so by proclaiming the privilege of white labor. At the same time Irish immigrants allied themselves with the Democratic party, and the latter’s opposition to abolition both attracted the Irish and further reinforced their hostility to Blacks. Both Noel Ignatiev and Angela F. Murphy have commented on the visit of Daniel O’Connell, one of Ireland’s great fighters for equality and justice, to the United States in 1841. O’Connell appealed to Irish immigrants to join the cause of antislavery, only to be firmly rebuffed. Prejudice against Blacks, combined with a reluctance to be singled out as immigrants, led the Irish in America to reject the call for abolition, even when it came from a venerated national leader.¹³⁷ As Frederick Douglass observed in 1853, “The Irish, who, at home, readily sympathize with the oppressed everywhere, are instantly taught when they step upon our soil to hate and despise the Negro.” ¹³⁸

Over time, Irish immigrants were able to mobilize and deploy their whiteness to win acceptance in American society. For a useful counterpoint, one can compare their history in the nineteenth century with that of another group of immigrants, the Chinese. The two populations that would meet in 1869 at Promontory Point, Utah, completing the construction of the transnational railroad that would make America a global economic power had very different receptions in their new country. [139](#) The California gold rush first prompted significant numbers of Chinese to immigrate to America, and the overwhelming majority settled on the Pacific coast. By the early 1880s more than 100,000 Chinese nationals lived in the United States. Mostly single men, they worked not only on the railroads but also in agriculture, manufacturing, laundry work, and restaurants. Starting in the 1850s “Chinatowns” became distinctive characteristics of San Francisco and other West Coast cities. [140](#)

Like the Irish, Chinese immigrants encountered hostility and discrimination from their American hosts, but because unlike the Irish they could not take refuge in whiteness, this hostility took a much more dramatic and tragic turn. Although prejudice against Asians was certainly not new in the United States, starting in the 1870s whites began organized campaigns to discriminate against the Chinese and eventually to exclude them from

America altogether. In particular working-class whites in California, many of them immigrants from Ireland and other parts of Europe, took the lead in anti-Chinese agitation. In July 1877, a two-day pogrom against the Chinese in San Francisco spurred the growth of the new Workingmen's Party of the United States, founded by anti-Chinese activists. Soon led by Irish immigrant Denis Kearney, the party would go on to take control of the California state legislature and launch a national campaign against the Chinese. [141](#) It achieved a resounding success when in 1882 the federal government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act banning Chinese nationals from immigrating to the United States. It was not a complete racial ban: it did not expel those Chinese already living in America, and in 1894 a Supreme Court decision ruled that Chinese born in the US were American citizens. But the Chinese Exclusion Act nonetheless proved very popular, and by the early twentieth century was applied to virtually all Asians with the exception of the Japanese. [142](#)

The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was the first American law since the 1790 Alien Naturalization Act to ban immigrants solely on the basis of race or national origin. As historians like Andrew Gyory and especially Najia Aarim-Heriot have pointed out, the timing of Chinese exclusion was no accident, but bore close relationship to the end of Reconstruction and the

reimposition of racial rule in the [South](#).¹⁴³ The gradual decline of Radical Republicanism which led to the end of Reconstruction also facilitated racist legislation against the Chinese. Moreover, the ability of California's anti-Chinese activists to succeed on a national level was due in large part to the support they received from white Southerners. Not only did anti-Chinese sentiments frequently draw upon the language of antiblack racism but, as Andrew Gyory has pointed out, with the decline of Reconstruction Southern elites no longer feared they would need Chinese workers to replace a truculent Black population. [144](#) A year after the Act, in a major decision, the *Civil Rights Cases* of 1883, the Supreme Court significantly weakened legal protections for African Americans against discrimination. [145](#) The two events thus reaffirmed the key importance of whiteness in determining who was an American.

This atmosphere of white privilege and racial exclusion established the context in which massive numbers of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe came to the United States starting in the 1890s. As I noted in [chapter 2](#), these new Americans faced significant hostility that often took on racist overtones. The rise of a powerful nativist movement, culminating in the Immigration Act of 1924, known as the Johnson-Reed Act, that sharply limited foreign immigration, was only the most dramatic indication of the

widespread belief that the new European immigrants constituted an inferior species of humanity. For example, Italians, the largest group of Europeans, were routinely subjected to Jim Crow laws in the South, and eleven perished in an 1891 race riot in New Orleans. In 1912 members of Congress [held a debate about whether Italians were “full-blooded Caucasians.”](#)¹⁴⁶ At the same time, however, Americans generally viewed the new European immigrants as white, if sometimes not quite. The fact that Judah P. Benjamin was a Jew did not prevent him from serving as Secretary of State for the Confederacy, a regime devoted to whiteness if there ever was one. [147](#) Whether they realized it or not, for European immigrants white skin had its privileges. Most notably, unlike the Chinese they were granted free and unrestricted entry into the United States; until 1924 no laws barred them from America’s shores. European immigrants also found it much easier to win American citizenship, since the nation’s courts still looked to the 1790 law as grounding the right to naturalization in whiteness. Time and time again, they ruled that Europeans seeking naturalization were white and thus entitled to it. [148](#) Thanks in part to the battles waged by the Irish against Black labor, the new immigrants could find acceptance in industries and unions largely closed to African Americans and other peoples of color. Moreover, European immigrants experienced nothing comparable to the

systematic campaign of racist terror directed against Blacks in the South. As a letter to the *Chicago Defender* in 1942 pointed out, “The immigrants had all the advantages of coming to the open American white freedom while Negroes had to continue in bondage.” [149](#)

As was the case in the Jim Crow South, the ability to vote provided a key determinant of white privilege. Whatever the challenges they faced, Irish and German immigrants quickly became voters in both local and national elections during the nineteenth century, and American politicians competed for their favor. Until the late nineteenth century resident aliens could vote in many parts of the United States, and even when those privileges were overturned it often remained possible to naturalize the new immigrants quickly so as to grant them electoral rights. One result of immigrant voting was the rise of urban political machines like Tammany Hall in New York, which mobilized immigrants to vote by providing access to employment and social services in exchange. American nativists quickly seized upon “boss rule” as an example of the corruption enabled by immigrant voting, and by the end of the nineteenth century were actively campaigning to impose formal voter registration procedures and literacy tests to restrict the franchise of immigrants and new [Americans.](#)[150](#)

Such efforts had only a limited impact, however, especially as more and

more immigrants (and their native-born children) became American citizens. In electoral rights, as in so many other spheres of American life, whiteness became a key litmus test of citizenship. The widespread enfranchisement of white immigrants combined with the disenfranchisement of virtually all African Americans by the end of the nineteenth century emphasized this crucial distinction. As Alex Keyssar has noted, “In New York and Massachusetts, an illiterate immigrant could gain the franchise by learning to read; for a Black man in Alabama, education was beside the point, whatever the law said.” [151](#) To vote in America, to exercise political power as a member of a democratic polity, one essentially had to be white. As the twentieth century dawned in the United States, the nation remained committed to a racialized vision of citizen, one stressing the fact that the key to freedom in the land of the free was white skin.

Conclusion

At the dawn of the twentieth century three major features characterized the world as a whole. First, more than ever before it was a world as a whole, united not only by economic and commercial networks but to an unprecedented degree by administrative and political ones as well. The rise to global prominence of European empires, above all those of Britain and France, as well as the dynamism of the United States and other nations of European origin, had knit the world together like never before. Second, this global unity had a central racial component, as white European elites ruled over nonwhite masses and natives. Even when those nonwhites had citizenship, as in the United States, a variety of customs and practices prevented them from exercising it. Finally, the world was in many ways more free than it had ever been. Notably, abolitionist activists had pressured liberal governments into effectively eradicating the ancient scourge of chattel slavery. In addition, the most powerful nations had largely adopted liberal democracy as a central approach to governance, an approach that the challenges of the new century would only reinforce.

The combination of these features produced a world dominated by the principles of white freedom as never before. Significantly, as the global political order became more wedded to principles of liberalism and liberal democracy, racial distinctions within that order became more, not less,

salient. The rise of white manhood suffrage along with Black disenfranchisement in the United States exemplified this theme, as did the coterminous expansion of liberal democracy and authoritarian colonial rule in Britain and France. As freedom became increasingly central to white masculine identity in Europe and America, as it increasingly belonged not to elites but to the masses of white people, it seemingly had to be denied to those who were not white.

In 1900 W.E.B. DuBois proclaimed that the color line would be the central issue for the new twentieth century. In the chapters that follow, this study will explore how ideas of whiteness and freedom intersected to shape the contemporary era.

PART 3

CHAPTER 5

Fighting for Whose Liberty?

FREEDOM AND RACE IN THE ERA OF TOTAL WAR

On Sunday, March 26, 1944, several white men abducted the Reverend Isaac Simmons, a sixty-six-year-old African American minister, from his home in Liberty, Mississippi. Rumors had spread that there was oil under Simmons's land, and the men demanded to be shown the property line.

Calling Simmons and his son Eldridge "smart niggers" for having had the

foresight to hire a lawyer, they forced him and his son into their car and drove them a short distance. They beat the son mercilessly while ordering the minister to get out of the car, firing at him with a shotgun as he ran for his life. When Eldridge finally found his father after being released, the man was dead with numerous gunshot wounds in his back, teeth broken, and his tongue cut out. The murderers were never held accountable for the crime, and Eldridge Simmons was forced to flee the area.

A few months later, African Americans confronted another example of the gap between the ideal and the reality of freedom. By the summer of 1944, wartime labor shortages threatened to bring the mass transportation system in Philadelphia to a halt. Feeling they had no choice, the directors of the Philadelphia Transportation Company decided to do the unthinkable: hire eight Black men into positions traditionally reserved for whites. This caused an uproar; more than four thousand white transit workers promptly went on strike, and fights between Blacks and whites broke out throughout the city. These events prompted one Black armory worker, Charles White, to storm into Independence Hall and throw a quartz paperweight at the Liberty Bell. “Liberty Bell? Liberty Bell?” White shouted. “That’s a lot of bunk. There is no justice.”¹

In both situations Black men confronted the conflict between freedom

and race. One spoke to a long tradition of racist attacks, the other to the angry response such racism provoked. One looked to the past, the other to the future. Out in the wider world beyond Mississippi and Philadelphia, American troops besieged German forces at Monte Cassino in Italy, while to the east Soviet armies steadily pushed the Wehrmacht back into Belorussia. Millions were fighting and dying for freedom, but for one Black southern minister and one Black munitions worker, at least, the word *liberty* meant only hypocrisy and ultimately murder. [2](#)

In 1900 the United States and much of Europe enjoyed not just unparalleled prosperity and world dominance but also a belief that such progress and security would continue unabated for the foreseeable future. It was not to be. Instead, the first half of the twentieth century was dominated by two wars of destruction on a scope and level unprecedented in human history. World Wars I and II knit the planet together as never before, shattering the confidence and global dominance of Western Europe while propelling America to the center of world affairs and power. Overthrowing old regimes and giving birth to new ones, destroying entire cities, and above all killing tens of millions of people, the two world wars brutally [transformed the planet and set the tone for life in the contemporary era.](#)[3](#)

Both freedom and race often loom large as themes in military conflicts

generally, and they played a central role in the history of the two world wars. Virtually every war in the modern era has been portrayed as a struggle for liberty; the list of military history books with the word *freedom* in the title seems [endless.⁴](#) This is especially true of the wars of the twentieth century, not just the world wars but also the anticolonial wars and struggles for national liberation after 1945. [5](#) As freedom became nationalized in the modern era, a property of independent nation-states, so did the art of war as practiced by nations increasingly garb itself in the language of liberty. World War I and World War II in particular took the form of struggles for freedom against despotism, above all but not only in the case of the war against fascism. Freedom became mixed up with defense of homeland and nation, and as such the one value for which millions were willing to, and did, give their lives. [6](#)

While representing freedom struggles, the wars of the twentieth century have also been race wars, conflicts in which racial difference loomed large. Such massive struggles of life and death tended to create an image of the enemy as the Other, a brute whose racialized character symbolized not opposed interests but absolute evil. If nation-states truly represented their peoples, then the peoples of enemy nation-states must be not only malevolent but fundamentally different, even nonhuman. In the era of

powerful nation-states, therefore, national wars became, in part at least, wars about [race](#).⁷ The fight against the racialized enemy thus contributed to the idea of national defense as a struggle for white freedom. At the same time the world wars took place in, and contributed powerfully to, a context of unprecedented ethnic and racial diversity. The mobilization for the war effort of peoples of color, such as European colonial subjects and American racial minorities, called into question but also reaffirmed ideas of liberty as racially coded.⁸ Moreover, the rise of racialized totalitarianism, most notably in the case of Nazi Germany, at the same time reinforced and challenged the association between whiteness and freedom.

This chapter will consider the ways in which the great world wars of the early twentieth century shaped, contested, and in some ways reaffirmed ideologies of white freedom. To what extent could racialized ideas of liberty survive in a world where literally tens of millions of people, of many different races and nations, fought for freedom, and if they did survive, what new forms would they take? In answering this seminal question, I will explore how the great wars changed ideas of both race and freedom, and the extent to which new ideas of white freedom arose from these changes.

White freedom certainly survived the era of the great wars and remained a key determinant of social and political power and prestige on a global scale.

At the same time, however, the world wars generated major challenges to that ideology that this study will consider in the next chapter, on the postwar world.

Freedom and Race in an Era of Total War

Writing in Brazilian exile during World War II, shortly before he took his own life, the Viennese Jewish writer Stefan Zweig described the world of his youth before World War I, trying to convey the unimaginable to younger generations who had only known war, suffering, and displacement:

Forty years of peace had strengthened the economic organism of the nations, technical science had given wings to the rhythm of life, and scientific discoveries had made the spirit of that generation proud; there was sudden upsurge which could be felt in almost identical measure in all the countries of Europe.... The streets became broader and more showy, the public buildings more impressive, the shops more luxurious and tasteful. Everything manifested the increase and spread of wealth....

There was progress everywhere. Whoever ventured, won.... Never had

Europe been stronger, richer, more beautiful, or more confident of an even better future. [9](#)

One may justifiably object that such a perspective says much more about the trauma of World War II and the Holocaust than would a realistic description of the prewar world. Nonetheless, during the Belle Époque between the turn of the twentieth century and the outbreak of World War I, European nations could claim an unprecedented level of affluence and power. Europe dominated the world economy, which had become integrated as never before: decisions by investors in the stock markets of London, Paris, and other European financial capitals decided the fates of anonymous millions around the globe. European empires controlled the majority of the world's land surface and population, their resources and markets making an important contribution to European prosperity. As Zweig noted, warfare had disappeared from the European continent since the Franco-Prussian war, having been successfully exiled to the colonial world. [10](#)

If one global challenge to European hegemony loomed large, it was certainly the increasing power and wealth of the United States of America. By 1914 America could boast not only of the world's most productive economy, the source of more than one-third of the planet's entire industrial output, but also of some of the highest standards of living. Its national

population dwarfed that of any European nation. Moreover, while it had relatively few colonies, in the twenty years before World War I it had begun to create an overseas empire, expanding especially into the Caribbean and the Pacific. America had become a world power, and like those of Europe, [its national leaders exuded optimism and confidence in the future.](#)¹¹

For many citizens of Europe and America at the dawn of the twentieth century, freedom seemed a key aspect of their exceptional well-being. Although most of Europe was still ruled by monarchies and empires, in more and more countries not just middle-class but also working-class citizens played an important role in national politics. By the turn of the century the leading European nations either had universal manhood suffrage or were close to it, whereas in the United States it had been in place since before the Civil War, at least for white men. America and the most advanced and powerful European countries also had well-organized political parties, including major liberal and socialist movements, that sought and sometimes achieved national political leadership. While certainly not omnipresent, liberal democracy seemed not only the wave of the future but a major characteristic of the world's most powerful nations. [12](#)

For many, the faith in progress was a belief in a future when men (and for increasing numbers, women) would be ever more free.

Freedom was not just a matter of individual rights or even liberal democracy, however. As the discussion above suggests, it also became increasingly connected to the idea of citizenship, especially citizenship in a powerful nation-state. Such a connection did not happen automatically, of course, and even today parts of it remain quite controversial. To many political conservatives, for example, the nation-state, or at least aspects of it (“big government”) represents the enemy of individual freedom, not its advocate.¹³ As nation-states developed their own powerful political cultures in the modern era, however, the idea of freedom often loomed large in them. Even as early as the seventeenth century, John Lilburne’s idea of “the freeborn Englishman” served both to describe and rally the foot soldiers of Britain’s Puritan revolution.¹⁴ E. P. Thompson’s classic *The Making of the English Working Class* famously deals with both class consciousness and national identity, and the relationships between the two.¹⁵ The essence of modern French political culture is often summed up in the famous phrase “liberty, equality, fraternity,” with liberty taking pride of place. ¹⁶

Definitions of the term *Americanism* almost always allude to freedom as a key value shared by the peoples of the United States. ¹⁷ In particular, it has usually dominated popular immigration narratives, the idea that foreigners come to America not for material advantage but above all to achieve

freedom.¹⁸ To be free, therefore, was increasingly defined as enjoying citizenship in a free nation.

But what did it mean for a nation to be free? More specifically, was a free nation one that provided civil liberties and/or electoral democracy to its citizens, or was it a nation free from domination and control by other nations? Historians have written extensively about the rise of a new, more aggressive spirit of nationalism, expressed in particular by the British term *jingoism*, in Europe during the late nineteenth century. Part of the growth of mass society in general, the new nationalism had roots both in popular imperialism and imperial rivalries as well as in the development of broader social polities, engaging not just elites but also middle- and working-class

Europeans.¹⁹ One classic narrative of the origins of World War I argues that, beyond the diplomatic intricacies and problems of the alliance system, popular nationalism pushed the different European governments into the conflict; the tremendous demonstrations that greeted the outbreak of war in August 1914 seemed to prove this. ²⁰

Such nationalism, in the tradition of popular democracy in general, was less concerned about individual freedom and much more focused on national survival, the survival of the people as a whole. Regimes went to war to protect not personal liberty but the freedom of their nations from

invasion and occupation by others. The fact that during wartime all democratic belligerent nations severely restricted civil liberties, and to a certain extent even electoral democracy in general, illustrates this point.²¹ Moreover, the fact that most nations resorted to conscription, a kind of temporary indentured servitude of millions of young men, to mount their armies and pursue their military goals further illustrates this.²² In order to be free, a nation first had to survive, and generally for most (but not all) of its citizens this was worth the sacrifice of individual liberties.

As this section (and this chapter in general) will also show, freedom in wartime was very much a racial issue, in several respects. As the previous chapter demonstrated, freedom easily coexisted with slavery and empire in nineteenth-century Europe and America, as long as it was defined in racial terms, as white freedom. The vaunted supremacy of the Western world at the dawn of the twentieth century was in fact white supremacy, symbolized above all by the massive empires that ruled much of Asia and Africa. The era of the great world wars would both challenge and in some ways bolster that supremacy. World War I brought an unprecedented mixture of peoples on a global scale, so that tens of thousands of Asians and Africans traveled to Europe, while at the same time masses of African Americans were moving from south to north during the Great Migration. For these peoples,

wartime offered new opportunities but also frequently illustrated and reinforced their racially subordinate status. The realities of racial discrimination coexisted with the alluring prospect of an egalitarian multiracial freedom.

At the same time the wars fostered and intensified both official and popular cultural narratives that racialized the enemy, portraying him or her as a member of a different, hostile, and inferior race. Achieving national freedom and survival came to mean defeating other nations increasingly viewed as racially different. From the national propaganda campaigns of World War I to the racialized genocide of World War II, resistance to and destruction of the national enemy all too often took the form of race war. As a result, the era of the world wars powerfully reinforced ideas of white freedom, and on a global scale. At the same time, however, by promoting the ideal of national freedom it cleared the way for the massive challenges to white freedom in the postwar era of decolonization, which will be the subject of this book's next chapter. In the early twentieth century, race, war, and freedom were strange bedfellows, but exploring their interaction is crucial to understanding the history of the modern age.

The War to Begin All Wars

The conflict of races is now about to start openly within nations and between nations.... I am

convinced that in the next century people will slaughter each other by the million because of a

difference of a degree or two in the cephalic index.

—GEORGES VACHER DE LAPOUGE, 1899²³

World War I was in important respects a race war.²⁴ It took place in the context of an international political climate of increased national rivalries and popular tensions, where public commentators frequently portrayed one country's gain as another's loss. Moreover, it broke out in a climate of racialized nationalism in general. Scholars and popular writers often characterized nations as races, so that people spoke of the Latin race, the Teutonic race, the Slavic race, and so on. ²⁵ At the same time the war brought

hundreds of thousands of people of color onto the European continent, the center of the conflict. Many Europeans had the experience of meeting someone with dark skin for the first time in their lives. In both respects, World War I increased official and popular consciousness of racial difference, making it a significant aspect of the belligerent nations' struggles for freedom. ²⁶

World War I was also a war for empire. The war that broke out in Europe in the late summer of 1914 had, as many historians have pointed out, its roots in imperial rivalries both overseas and on the European continent

itself.²⁷ The two great imperial democracies, Britain and France, had established prosperous and free societies to an important extent on the basis of colonial mastery and exploitation, thus laying out a template for national success in the modern world. They saw the war as an opportunity to increase their colonial holdings and world dominance. At the beginning of 1916 they drew up the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement, which divided the Ottoman Empire between them. From the perspective of London and Paris, the war would not only increase their own power but that of imperial democracy in general.²⁸

By contrast, imperial Germany, which by the early twentieth century outmatched its European rivals in population and economy, suffered (in the minds of its leaders and many of its citizens) from a lack of colonial possessions. Like the United States, it was a global powerhouse that had gotten into the rush for empire relatively late in the game; the partition of Samoa between the two nations in 1899 highlighted both their imperial ambitions and their latecomer status. Unlike the United States, however, which ever since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 had laid exclusive claim to the vast region of Latin America, Germany's Second Reich had relatively limited overseas colonial opportunities.²⁹

As a consequence, it focused on the commercial and ultimately military

domination of eastern Europe. German settlers and invaders had traditionally dominated the Slavic peoples of the East, and the renewal of such dominance would be crucial to the nation's greatness. What would ultimately become policies of racial conquest, exploitation, and extermination achieved their apogee in World War II, but they began in the early years of the twentieth century.

The fact that Germany cast its imperial vision in racial terms exemplified the entanglement of empire and race in World War I.³⁰ On October 4, 1914, a group of prominent German intellectuals published the "Manifesto of the 93" defending Germany's invasion of Belgium and conduct during the war in general. This spirited defense at times took on racialized imagery: "[I]n *the east* the earth is saturated with the blood of women and children *unmercifully butchered* by the wild Russian troops, and in the west *dum dum bullets* mutilate the breasts of our soldiers. Those who have allied themselves with *Russians* and *Serbiens*, and present such a shameful scene to the world as that of inciting Mongolians and negroes against the white race, have no right whatever to call themselves upholders of civilization"³¹ (emphases in the original). The manifesto used the language of race in defense of Germany's struggle to defend its freedom, a vision of freedom that was thus essentially white.

Germany was hardly the only nation to express the struggle for national defense and freedom in racialized terms during World War I. Allied, especially British, propaganda frequently demonized the enemy as the Hun, portrayed as a bloodthirsty inhuman beast. The British seized in particular upon the German invasion of Belgium at the start of the war as an example of bestial cruelty, not stopping at images of Belgian babies being spitted on German spike [helmets.³²](#) One of the most striking racialized images of the enemy was published by the United States Army in 1918. Entitled “Destroy This Mad Brute!,” it featured a growling gorilla wearing a German spiked helmet. In one hand he held a club labeled “Kultur,” in the other arm he grasped a prostrate white woman. [33](#) Clearly grounded in American fears of miscegenation and rape, the poster portrayed the Germans as a racial enemy. During the war, therefore, both sides deployed racialized images of each other, illustrating the absolutist character of the conflict. In a climate of total war, the enemy had to be dehumanized and treated as the racial Other.[34](#)

The racialization of enemy European nations as savages occurred concurrently with the mobilization of nonwhite populations for the war effort and their introduction onto European soil. World War I was an imperial war, during which the leading nations mobilized their colonial

resources in service to the national effort. As the masters of the largest empires, the British and French took the lead in imperial mobilization. One of the most important of these resources was labor: ever since the era of African slavery colonial workers had been a key source of wealth for European empires, but the labor shortages caused by the mobilization of millions of European men into the military made this a critical need.

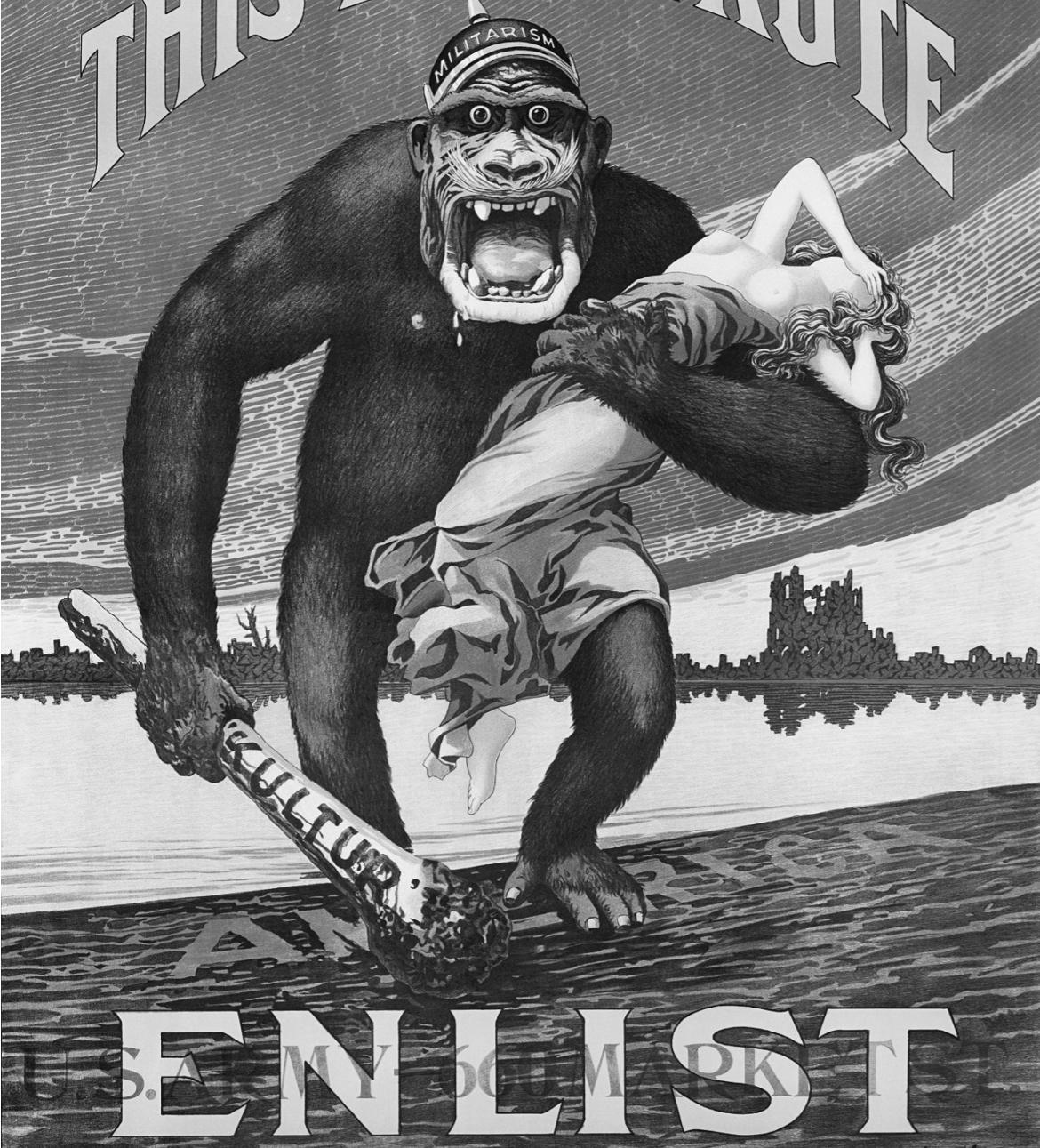
**DESTROY
THIS MAD BRUTE**



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FIGURE 23. Harry R. Hopps, “Destroy this Mad Brute” (1917). American World War I poster. Library

of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Digital ID ds.03216.

Colonial subjects served the war effort both on the front lines as soldiers and in wartime factories and fields as laborers. More than 100,000 Indian soldiers fought for the British Army on the Western Front in 1914. Britain also mobilized soldiers from the Caribbean and brought in Blacks from South Africa to work in industry. [35](#) France, however, made the most extensive use of colonial manpower during the war. France had a long tradition of employing colonial soldiers, going back to Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt in 1798, and during the nineteenth century the Armée d’Afrique had played a major role in the conquest and rule of North Africa. In his 1910 book *La Force Noire*, General Charles Mangin had argued strenuously for the use of Black African soldiers as a way to counter the Germany’s greater population. [36](#)



FIGURE 24. Indian troops at a crossroads on the Fricourt-Mametz Road, Somme, France (1916). John

Warwick Brooke/Imperial War Museums (IWM Q 3983.jpg).

World War I represented, however, the first time France deployed colonial soldiers on French soil. Faced with invasion and national disaster, the French government did not hesitate to recruit soldiers from all over the empire to take part in the defense of the nation. During the course of the war it brought some 500,000 colonial subjects, from North Africa, Black Africa, Indochina, and the Caribbean, to fight the Germans. They fought

extensively on the Western Front, notably in the bloody battle of the Chemin des Dames in 1917, rendering important service to the nation's war effort. The smiling African soldiers featured in the famous "Y'a Bon!" posters for Banania (a popular chocolate drink) illustrated the new wartime [presence of nonwhites in the French metropole.](#)³⁷

Colonial subjects came to France to work as well as fight. Confronted with a massive labor shortage, France began actively recruiting foreigners, bringing in more than 200,000 from European Italy and Spain, for example. When these proved insufficient, the government turned to colonial labor. The French imported some 300,000 nonwhite workers, not only colonial subjects but also Chinese nationals, to work in wartime industry and agriculture. The mobilization of young French men had left the national economy bereft of labor at a time when industrial production was more important than ever, so that national authorities rushed to bring in "exotic labor."³⁸

Colonial soldiers and workers were an important source of manpower for the Allied war effort during World War I, but many looked askance at the prospect of bringing large numbers of nonwhite men to the European continent. British authorities removed most colonial soldiers from the Western Front by 1915, sending them to fight in the Middle East instead.³⁹

The prospect of arming colonial subjects and telling them to shoot white people gave some British authorities pause. France, ten percent of which was occupied by the Germans, proved more accepting of colonial soldiers. Consequently, colonial regiments often received warm welcomes in French villages and towns. [40](#)

Colonial workers were another matter. As the conflict dragged on and antiwar sentiment mounted in France many French workers came to resent them, not only for taking “their” jobs but also for freeing them up to be slaughtered at the front. Then there was the issue of relations with French women. In order to deal with the shortage of wartime labor the French government and leading industries made extensive use of female workers, who often ended up working side by side with foreign and colonial workers. French authorities were greatly concerned by the prospect of interracial *liaisons*, in particular because they considered them a threat to the sexual and racial political order in the colonies to which the workers would return after the war. They tried to prevent them by keeping colonial workers in separate barracks and closely monitoring their correspondence for any signs of interracial intimacies. For many French male workers the prospect of nonwhite men taking both their jobs and their women was an outrage, so that by the spring of 1917 a series of race riots against colonial workers

erupted in France. In this case, and in many others during the war, questions of race, class, and gender intersected.⁴¹

Nonwhite soldiers and workers also came to the World War I battlefields of France from the United States. Roughly 200,000 African American soldiers saw military service on the French Front during the war, representing the first time in history a large number of Black Americans had traveled overseas. Most worked as longshoremen in French ports, unloading the endless amounts of military supplies and war materiel shipped from American factories across the Atlantic. About twenty percent, however, served as soldiers, taking part in a number of battles during 1918. The American Army was more than a little suspicious of the idea of Blacks as soldiers and while they were in France assigned them over to French army units rather than integrating them into the US military. This proved fortunate for the Black soldiers, who were often amazed to see that white officials could treat them with kindness, and helped to create the myth of France as a color-blind nation. During the war, therefore, France became the place where the fates of colonial subjects from European empires and men of color from the United States briefly intertwined. ⁴²

What motivated colonial and African American men to fight and work for freedom in a foreign land? Many, of course, had no choice. British and

French military authorities generally conscripted native soldiers, just as they did their own citizens. French colonial laborers were volunteers in theory, but many in effect came to France under duress; in Indochina, for example, village mandarins would frequently choose young men for service and “volunteer” them. Their service to their nations thus often reflected not their embrace of white freedom but their exclusion from it and raised the question of why they would accept it and fight for countries that wouldn’t fight for them. A German propaganda leaflet dropped over African American lines in 1918 made this point in stark terms:

Hello, boys, what are you doing over here? Fighting the Germans? Why? Have they ever done you any harm? Of course some white folks and the lying English-American papers told you that the Germans ought to be wiped out for the sake of humanity and Democracy. What is Democracy? Personal freedom; all citizens enjoying the same rights socially and before the law. Do you enjoy the same rights as the white people do in America, the land of freedom and Democracy, or are you not rather treated over there as second class citizens? [43](#)

The Germans had a case, since most Blacks in the US military worked in conditions little different from the chain gang. Yet most African Americans rejected such arguments, and not just because they came from the enemy.

The great majority of Blacks who served were drafted, however, the African American community overwhelmingly embraced the war effort; in several southern states more Blacks signed up for the army than whites. In memoirs of their wartime experiences many French African veterans spoke warmly of their times in France and of their love for the *patrie*. [44](#) Perhaps the most striking example of this kind of colonial loyalty during World War I was the extensive Irish support for the British war effort. More than 200,000 Irishmen fought in the war, with the widespread support of both Protestant and Catholic society. Only a small minority of radical nationalists opposed Irish participation, going on to mount the Easter Rebellion against British rule in 1916. [45](#)

For colonial and racial minority groups, the war represented an opportunity to increase their own integration and acceptance into their national communities. By fighting for the national cause, they would prove to their fellow citizens and colonial masters their worth as equal citizens.

The struggle for freedom overseas would bring freedom at home. In July 1918 W.E.B. DuBois published an editorial entitled “Close Ranks.” Calling the war “a crisis of the world,” he argued that:

We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome. That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations

of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate. Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder without our own white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy. We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly without eyes [lifted to the hills.](#)⁴⁶

Millions of people around the world hoped that the great war would bring a future world of both national freedom and racial equality. The settlements that structured the transition from war to peace in 1919 would show the futility of that hope.

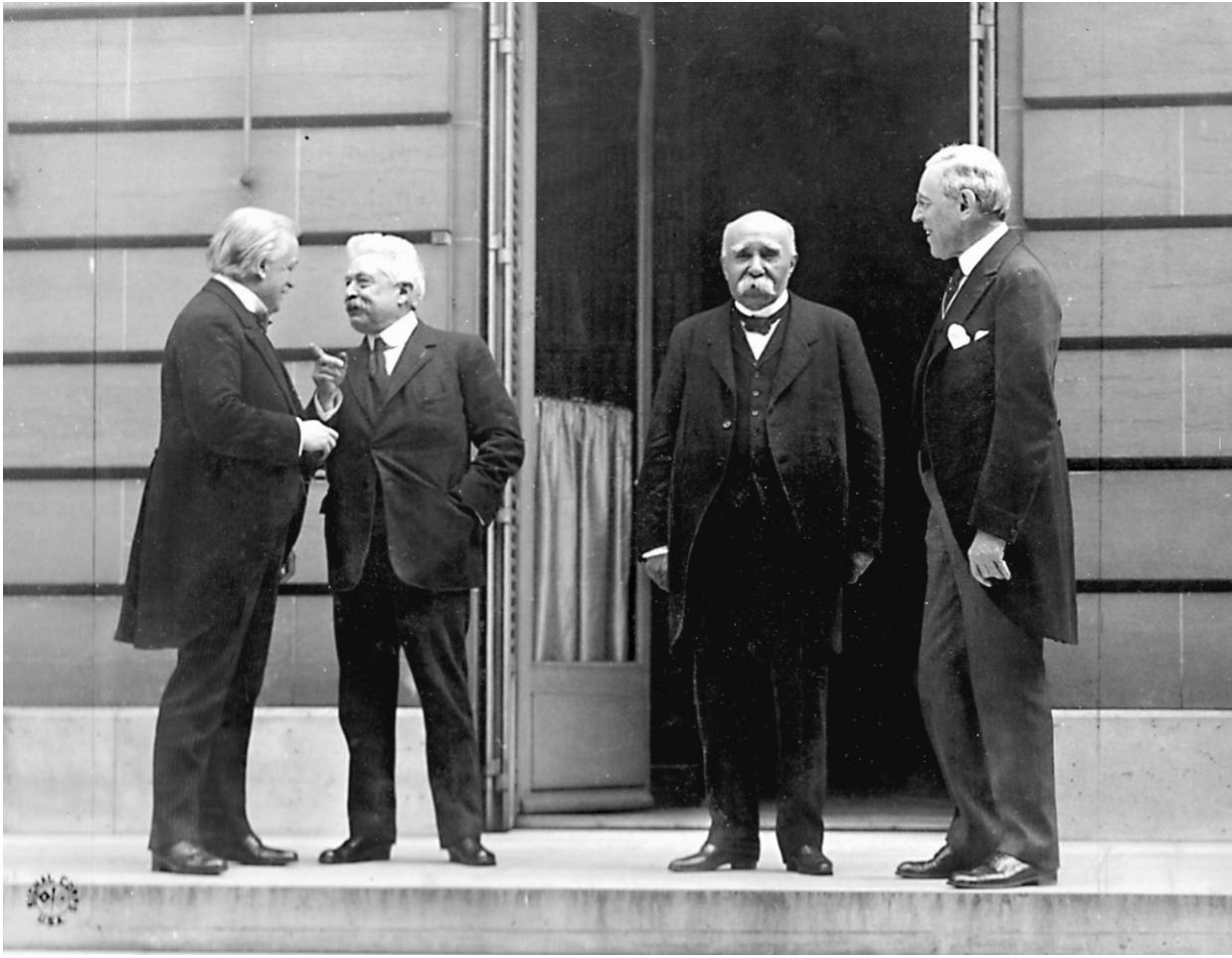
White Freedom and the Peace of Paris

World War I had begun as a classic war between Europe's major powers, but the spring of 1917 dramatically changed the significance of the conflict. Two great events, the overthrow of the czarist regime in Russia and America's decision to enter the war, fundamentally transformed the nature of the conflict into a struggle for liberty against despotism on a global scale. The triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution at the end of the year and the dramatic calls for world revolution issuing from the new Soviet Union reaffirmed the transformational character of the war.[47](#) With the collapse of Germany and the end of the war in November 1918 the world seemed set

for a new era of peace and freedom unparalleled in the modern era. It soon became clear, however, that the racialized liberty of the nineteenth century would not only endure but dominate the new era.

More than any other individual, American president Woodrow Wilson would symbolize the search for a postwar settlement emphasizing freedom and democracy. He would also represent the importance of racist ideas of liberty. Born in Virginia to a slave-owning family that had supported the Confederacy, Woodrow Wilson was the first southerner elected president since the Civil War. [48](#) As a scholar he supported the Dunning School's "Lost Cause" narrative of the Civil War, emphasizing the nobility of the Southern struggle for independence, and at times wrote approvingly of the Ku Klux Klan. [49](#) More concretely, as president he implemented widespread racial segregation of the federal administration, reinforcing white supremacy and [privilege at the heart of national life.](#)[50](#)

This was the man who would emerge as the leader of the free world in 1918–19. At the same time that he supported segregation, Woodrow Wilson embraced progressivism. As president, he enacted new regulations for worker safety and child labor and established the Department of Labor. Both progressive and racist ideas informed his approach to making peace at



the end of World War I.⁵¹ As leader of the most powerful victorious nation in 1918, he championed the idea of peace without annexations or indemnities, rejecting the idea that the Central Powers must be punished and instead viewing the peace treaty as a way to create a new, more harmonious world. In a speech to Congress on January 8, 1918, President Wilson outlined what became known as the Fourteen Points, a plan for the peace treaty and the postwar settlement that emphasized democracy, self-determination, and the rights of national minorities, as well as freedom of

the seas and of trade. This vision of a peace that would bury the hatreds of a long and bitter war made Wilson tremendously popular, so that when he traveled to Paris in December 1918 to take part in the peace talks, massive [crowds hailed him as a conquering hero.](#)⁵²

FIGURE 25. Council of Four at the WWI Paris peace conference, May 27, 1919. (L—R) Prime

Minister David Lloyd George (Great Britain); Premier Vittorio Orlando, Italy; Premier Georges

Clemenceau, France; President Woodrow Wilson, USA. Edward N. Jackson (US Army Signal

Corps).

The results of the Paris peace talks, embodied in the peace treaty signed at Versailles on June 28, 1919, reaffirmed Wilson's racist tendencies and the general idea that freedom should be reserved for whites. Perhaps the most significant result of the peace treaty was the creation of new nations in Europe out of the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Ottoman empires. To a significant extent the treaty simply recognized the realities on the ground created by insurgent national groups as those empires collapsed, but in doing so it recognized and gave a stamp of approval to new international realities. Moreover, these new nations took the form of democratic republics; whereas there had been only three republics on the European continent in 1914, there were thirteen by the end of 1918. [53](#)

Revolution had overthrown the Russian and German empires and replaced them with nation-states, and across central and eastern Europe national minorities clamored for democratic representation, leading to the creation of composite nations such as Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Although it would not last, in 1919 Europe presented an image of national liberty and self-determination.

The perspective from the colonial world was very different. The Fourteen Points had stated that the future of the colonies should be decided both by the imperial powers and by the residents of the colonies themselves. During the first half of 1919 delegations from different parts of the colonial world traveled to Paris to plead for national self-determination. In essence these pleas fell upon deaf ears. Unlike the situation in Europe, where the collapse of empires had led to the creation of free nations, the British and French empires had not only survived but won the war, and their leaders were in no mood to surrender power over any of their territories.⁵⁴

There remained the question of what should happen to the colonies of the defeated Central Powers in Africa, the Middle East, and the Pacific. Whereas European former colonies such as Poland and the Czech lands became free and independent nations, the victorious powers decided that those outside Europe were “not ready” for self-government. Instead they

developed the mandate system: created as a part of the new League of Nations established to maintain peace, the mandates were former German and Ottoman colonies placed under British and French rule, with the idea that they would be prepared for eventual independence. The system represented an unsavory compromise between Wilsonian ideals of self-determination and the determination of the other allies to profit from their victory. As skeptics noted, these were simply colonies under a new name, and the mandate system in the Middle East in particular simply fulfilled the goals of the Sykes-Picot [Agreement](#).⁵⁵

More broadly, however, the contrast between successful national self-determination in Europe and the perpetuation of colonialism in the imperial world bolsters an interpretation of the Paris peace of 1919 as a key moment in the history of white freedom. In the global outline for the new twentieth century that the peace treaty intended to provide, white nations could be free, but nonwhite colonial territories would remain dependent on European empires, at least for the foreseeable future. The lofty idealism that Wilson brought to the negotiations, and that informed much of the peace treaty, was thus firmly tied to whiteness and white privilege. The decision of the Allies to reject Japan's proposal to include a statement affirming racial equality in the constitution of the League of Nations illustrates this basic fact, as does

its refusal to pay serious attention to the pleas of the delegates to the Pan-

African Congress that met in Paris in February 1919.⁵⁶

Historians and other commentators have often portrayed the 1919 peace treaty as a compromise between the idealism and belief in self-determination of Woodrow Wilson and the cynicism and realpolitik of European leaders such as Georges Clemenceau and David Lloyd George. When it came to issues of race and whiteness, however, the eventual shape of the treaty, and of the world it created in the early twentieth century, perfectly replicated Wilson's own commitments to both progressive ideals and white privilege. If only briefly, freedom triumphed at the end of World War I, but that freedom was white.

Making a World Safe for Whiteness

We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting. Make way for Democracy!

—W.E.B. DUBOIS, *THE CRISIS*, MAY 1919

Workers of the world, unite and fight for a white South Africa.

—SOUTH AFRICA INDUSTRIAL FEDERATION, 1922

The years immediately after the Armistice, what the Italians call the *biennio rosso*, the “red two years,” were notable for extreme levels of political conflict and mobilization. Throughout much of the world revolution loomed on the horizon, or at least seemed to. The transition from world war to

global peace brought about a range of revolutionary political activism striking not only in its intensity but equally in its scope and breadth. From the Seattle general strike in February to the Amritsar, India, massacre in April, popular radicalism seemed poised to overthrow the established order. At the heart of the turbulence lay the defeated empires of Europe and Euro-Asia. The Russian revolutions of 1917 had made the new Soviet Union the world's revolutionary center, not only fighting its own civil war against conservative forces but also loudly calling for and trying to mobilize world revolution. In the chaos following the collapse of the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires at the end of 1918, different national and political constituencies struggled to create new regimes based on popular sovereignty. At the same time the dominant Allied powers, both during and after the Paris peace talks, sought to contain the forces pushing for a new world in the established structures of imperial power. During 1919 and 1920 in particular, the relationship between popular freedom and imperial hegemony seemed to hang in the balance. [57](#)

One particularly important aspect of new ideas of freedom in the postwar era was the new acceptance of women's suffrage. Women had played an active role in the war industries and public service of most belligerent nations, and in many they campaigned successfully for female suffrage after

the war. From 1917 onward a large number of countries, including not only the United States and Britain but Russia, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Sweden, Canada, the Netherlands, and New Zealand, all voted to grant women the vote in one form or another. Among Western nations France was the main holdout, not finally enfranchising women until after World War II. While granting women the vote certainly did not bring about full gender equality, it effectively doubled the number of active citizens in many nations and gave the idea of freedom a much more universal quality than before the war. [58](#)

At the same time, women's suffrage tended to reinforce white freedom. The new female suffrage movement applied almost entirely to white women in Western countries and had no impact on the situation of colonized women. African American women, like African American men, remained essentially disenfranchised after World War I. It is also important to note that in several countries, such as Britain, female enfranchisement was at least limited to women of property, only later being extended to working-class women. The great wave of women's suffrage after World War I thus both expanded popular ideas of freedom and equally demonstrated the [racial limits of that ideal.](#)[59](#)

As we have seen above, the new emphasis on national freedom reflected

in the Treaty of Versailles had a significant racial component, promoting democratic nationalism in Europe while firmly shunting it aside in Africa and Asia. This contradiction did not pass unnoticed by many colonial subjects. As a result, 1919 in particular saw an eruption of anticolonial revolts. In Korea, students inspired by President Wilson's Fourteen Points speech began organizing to demand the right of self-determination and independence from Japanese colonial rule. On March 1, millions of Koreans demonstrated throughout the country against imperial control, only to be met with brutal repression by Japanese authorities, resulting in the deaths of [thousands.⁶⁰](#) Similar violence erupted in India a month later. After a British crackdown on civil liberties triggered a massive protest movement throughout the country, Indians gathered in the Punjabi town of Amritsar to defy colonial repression. Colonial troops led by General Reginald Dyer responded by closing off the gathering and raking the crowd with machine gun fire, killing at least several hundred individuals. [61](#)

Events in Egypt and Ireland formed a partial exception to the rule of white freedom after World War I. In Egypt, popular expectations that Egyptian representatives would be able to attend the Paris peace conference provoked a conflict with the ruling British authorities. The movement soon began demanding the end of the British protectorate over Egypt and the

Sudan. Led by the Wafd party (*Wafd* means “delegation” in Arabic), a series of massive demonstrations broke out in March, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of protestors at the hands of colonial troops. The movement continued into the summer, leading the British to appoint a commission, which eventually recommended the end of colonial rule. In 1922 Egypt achieved semi-independence, limited by Britain’s continuing right to maintain a military presence in the country and control of the Suez Canal. [62](#)

In Ireland, the centuries-old struggle against British colonial rule came to a head in the years after World War I. British repression of the Easter Rising in 1916 had only increased Irish popular support for self-rule. In December 1918 the nationalist party, Sinn Féin, won an overwhelming victory during a national election, and the following month proclaimed independence for the island. Shortly thereafter the newly formed Irish Republican Army began a campaign of guerrilla warfare against British soldiers and institutions in the island. Britain responded in force, sending in the troops known as the Black and Tans, and for the next two years Ireland descended into violence and chaos. By 1921 the British concluded they could not win the war, and after extensive negotiations in 1922 the Irish Free State formally gained its independence. [63](#)

Again, the examples of Egypt and Ireland complicate and also ultimately

reinforce the importance of whiteness to national freedom in the aftermath of World War I. Unlike most of the imperial world, both were colonies that gained independence. For the Egyptians, however, this independence came with important limits, as would become clear during World War II, when the British essentially assumed control of the country. Irish independence was much more real, even though Ulster remained a part of the United Kingdom. When Ireland achieved independence it did so as a white European nation, similar to Poland and the other new nations of Eastern Europe. As the previous chapter demonstrated, by the late nineteenth century Irish immigrants in both Britain and the US had largely achieved white status. The independence of the Irish nation in 1922 thus represented the culmination of that achievement in the home island itself. White Ireland could finally leave its colonial past behind, whereas brown Egypt could not. The renewed emphasis on whiteness after World War I also took place within several Western nations. As we have seen, the war itself had brought large numbers of men of color to Europe, especially France, and in the United States had fueled the first Great Migration of African Americans to the North.⁶⁴ The end of the war brought a powerful rejection of this wartime multiculturalism and a reassertion of whiteness, at times in conjunction with radical and revolutionary labor movements. The ultimate example of this

came in 1922, when striking South African miners adopted the slogan *Workers of the world unite and fight for a white South Africa*, but this was not an isolated incident.⁶⁵ The year 1919 in particular saw intense labor and revolutionary struggles as well as widespread race riots. From January to August of that year, for example, a series of riots erupted in Britain's port cities, as white sailors and longshoremen attacked men from the Caribbean, Africa, and South Asia and the Middle East. In a climate of postwar economic downturn, white port workers and their unions attacked nonwhites for “taking” their jobs, often successfully expelling them from increasingly white workplaces on the docks of Liverpool, Bristol, London, and other cities. This took place in a climate of radical working-class politics in general, so that in Glasgow Scottish workers seemed to threaten revolution.⁶⁶

The situation was more extreme in France. During the war France had brought in more than 300,000 workers from its colonies and China to labor in its factories and fields. With the end of the war, tensions increased between industry, the government, and the unions over the role of labor in the postwar period. Dazzled by the specter of the Russian Revolution, many French workers moved sharply to the left, leading to the creation of the French Communist Party at the end of 1920.⁶⁷ At the same time, however,

France needed labor more than ever. Roughly 1.6 million Frenchmen had died in the war, and many more had returned wounded and unable to work. Moreover, the nation had one of the lowest birth rates in Europe and would soon achieve negative population growth in the interwar years, while at the same time it needed more workers to rebuild the country and repair the destruction caused by the war.⁶⁸

In this revolutionary climate, however, the one thing all the major parties could agree on was the need to get rid of colonial workers. By the end of 1919 French authorities had rounded up and repatriated 90 percent of the “exotic” workers in the country. At the same time, it made new arrangements to bring foreign workers from Southern and Eastern Europe, whose numbers would swell to the millions in the 1920s. In making the argument for European over colonial labor, French authorities made clear their desire to reverse the multiracial immigration that had begun during the war, saying “[It is necessary] To call upon labor of European origin, in preference to colonial or exotic labor, because of the social and ethnic difficulties which could arise from the presence upon French soil of ethnographic elements too clearly distinct from the rest of the population.”⁶⁹

The choice of European over “exotic” workers was a clear statement of the importance of whiteness to the character of the nation, and it paralleled the

contrast between the extension of liberal democracy in postwar Europe and the continuation of imperial rule in postwar Asia and Africa. [70](#)

Britain and France had emerged victorious from a war that, especially toward its end, emphasized the struggle for national freedom against German barbarism. At the same time, they remained the largest colonial powers in the world. This contradiction between freedom at home and racialized empire overseas remained more salient than ever in the years after the Armistice. The war itself had undermined that contradiction to a certain extent by bringing colonial subjects to Europe as both soldiers and workers, and it was vital to the racial politics of empire to reverse that phenomenon, to keep metropole and colony separate. European nations could remain free only if the colonial lack of liberty was not allowed to intrude into their political spaces, and the repression and exclusion of colonial labor (who, unlike colonial soldiers, had a reason to stay in Europe once the fighting stopped) played an important role in that process. In order to survive in Europe at the end of the war, freedom had to be white freedom.

A similar process unfolded in the United States at the end of the war. As noted above, the war had brought an unprecedented mobilization of African Americans, in two respects. Not only did nearly 400,000 Black Americans

serve in the armed forces, but roughly half a million Black southerners joined the Great Migration to the North between 1914 and 1920. In both cases, these movements out of the South (where ninety percent of the Black population lived at the time) brought new experiences of freedom and new levels of confidence. As the above quotation from W.E.B. DuBois in the magazine *The Crisis*⁷¹ makes clear, Blacks sent overseas to fight for freedom and democracy wanted to enjoy them at home as well.

White American society responded to this new sense of Black empowerment harshly, emphasizing the importance of maintaining and reaffirming the color bar in America. Many whites were particularly outraged by reports of egalitarian treatment of Blacks by the French and were determined to remind Blacks who had become “spoiled” by such magnanimity of their subordinate position in the United States. Senator James K. Vardaman of Mississippi warned against the danger that “French women-ruined negro soldiers” posed to white women and girls. ⁷² Some also

saw newly returned and more assertive Black veterans as a political threat, in the revolutionary context of 1919. Woodrow Wilson himself at one point declared “the American Negro returning from abroad would be our greatest medium in conveying Bolshevism to America.” ⁷³ The result was an unprecedented wave of lynchings of Black men. More African American

men, nearly one hundred, were lynched in 1919 than in any other year of American history, and many of them were ex-soldiers in military uniform.

[74](#)

The use of violence to restore the prewar racial order targeted not just Black individuals but entire communities. As we have seen, during the war hundreds of thousands of southern Blacks had moved north in search of both jobs and relief from racism, and at times took jobs formerly held by whites. This had already led to riots against Black communities in the summer of 1917, in East St. Louis, Illinois, and in Houston, Texas. The end of the war brought both an economic downturn and the return of millions of white veterans seeking jobs and finding Blacks employed where they had not worked before. The fact that Black workers had sometimes been used to break strikes by whites in 1917 further increased racial tensions in American cities.

[75](#)

This was the context that produced what Blacks called the Red Summer, a name that reflected the toxic mixture of political fears and racial violence. During the summer and fall of 1919, rioting between Blacks and whites broke out across the country, usually triggered by white invasions of Black [communities.](#)⁷⁶ Hundreds of people died, mostly Blacks, in what became the worst single wave of race riots in American history. Although the great riots in northern cities like Chicago and Washington, DC, attracted the most

attention, probably the majority occurred in the South, including in New Orleans and Tuscaloosa, Alabama. The worst single example took place in Elaine, Arkansas, and it exemplified the volatile combination of political and racial fears. In the majority-Black region whites responded with deadly violence to Black attempts to organize a sharecroppers' union. The resulting conflict took the lives of five whites and at least one hundred African Americans, probably many more. [77](#) Moreover, the violence continued after 1919. In May and June of 1921 white rioters attacked the prosperous Black community known as "the Black Wall Street" of Tulsa, Oklahoma, literally bombing it from the air and killing at least thirty-nine people. The early 1920s also saw a rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, this time not just in the South [but the North as well.](#)⁷⁸

African Americans were not the only ones affected by the racial backlash in the United States after World War I. Those concerned with preserving whiteness in America also targeted immigrants, especially those from southern and eastern Europe and from Asia. As we saw in the previous chapter, American racism had targeted a variety of different peoples, in different ways. Italian immigrants might have privileges that African Americans and Chinese did not, but they were still not considered equal to native Americans, nor fully white. In 1916 Madison Grant published *The*

Passing of the Great Race, which argued that new immigrants would destroy American civilization.⁷⁹ Together, racial animosities and fears of revolution proved a potent combination. The Palmer Raids of 1919 (see below) targeted immigrants in particular as dangerous radicals, deporting hundreds. In 1920 police in Massachusetts arrested two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, on suspicion of taking part in a bank robbery, but their real crime for many was being anarchists and Italian immigrants. As Vanzetti wrote from prison, “I am suffering because I am a radical and indeed I am a radical; I have suffered because I was an Italian, and indeed I am an Italian.”⁸⁰

The increasing hostility to immigrants culminated in the passage of new restrictions on immigration in 1924. During the 1920s American legislators passed laws to redefine the racial character of citizenship. For example, in 1924 Congress granted US citizenship to all Native Americans, breaking a pattern that had existed since the American Revolution. In the same year, however, it passed the Johnson-Reed Act, which sharply limited immigration from southern and eastern Europe, including Jewish immigration. The Act also extended the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act to virtually all Asians, except Filipinos, targeting in particular Japanese immigrants, and it established a complex series of national quotas that

heavily favored immigrants from Northern Europe and cut immigration from the rest of Europe and Asia to a trickle over the next few decades. [81](#)

In some respects the new legislation did not necessarily privilege whiteness: not only did Native Americans gain citizenship but Black Africans were exempted from the restrictions, for example, and many employers were willing to forgo European immigrants because they had started using African American labor. The law also continued to permit essentially unrestricted immigration from Latin America. But by favoring northern over southern and eastern Europeans it reinforced the image of the latter as racially suspect, even nonwhite. In particular, racial concerns together with fears of radicalism combined to reverse the acceptance of large numbers of European immigrants. Whiteness gained a new, political character as postwar immigrant legislation reflected the nexus of race and class.

In the years immediately after the Armistice concerns about both race and class spread throughout Europe and America. The prospect of red revolution fanning out from Moscow to engulf the world terrified not just capitalist elites but broad sectors of society throughout the West.[82](#) The idea of revolution frequently took on racial implications, however, not just in racialized images of the Bolsheviks as the new barbarians from the east, but

more generally in fears that unrest among native populations in the colonial world and racial minorities and immigrants in the United States represented both a political and a racial threat to the established order.⁸³ The fact that the

Bolsheviks spoke out forcefully against both racism and European colonialism, such as during the Congress of the Peoples of the East held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 1920, only underscored this connection.⁸⁴ Keeping the world safe for white democracy meant defeating red revolution, both in the colonies and in Europe and America. Tensions of race and class thus gave a new political dimension to white freedom in the early twentieth century.

“Freedom for the Wolves Means Death for the Sheep”:

Fascism and White Freedom

What we must fight for is to safeguard the existence and reproduction of our race and our

people, the sustenance of our children and the purity of our blood, the freedom and

independence of our fatherland.

—ADOLF HITLER, *MEIN KAMPF*⁸⁵

Arbeit Macht Frei [Labor Makes One Free]

—SIGN AT THE ENTRANCE TO AUSCHWITZ

As we have seen, 1919 was a year of both revolution and counterrevolution.

The Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917 had sparked a civil war with a

range of anticommunist forces ranging from reactionary to liberal and moderate socialist, and the resulting conflict did not end until 1922. Radical attempts to seize power elsewhere, such as in Germany and Hungary, prompted a frequently reactionary response: in Berlin Spartacus was crushed by the Freikorps, for example. Similarly, colonial uprisings in Egypt, Korea, and India brought an often brutal response from imperial powers. Sometimes the assertion of establishment power occurred in response not to actual revolution or social upheaval but to the threat of it. In the United States, in response to a major strike in the steel industry and to the threat of revolution overseas, the federal government unleashed a wave of repression against radical organizations. Under the direction of US Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, from November 1919 to January 1920 federal authorities raided the offices of radical organizations, arrested more than five thousand people, and deported hundreds of immigrants (including noted anarchist leader Emma Goldman). [86](#)

Such acts of repression for the most part sought to defend the liberal democratic order, even if (as in the colonies) those principles were not consistently exercised. But 1919 also saw the birth of another, much more radical, form of counterrevolution. On March 23, 1919, a small group of Italian war veterans and political activists came together in Milan to create

a new political movement. Led by veteran, former Socialist, and nationalist agitator Benito Mussolini, the group founded the Fasci Italiani di Combattimento, which began a terrorist campaign against the Italian Left. [87](#) Two years later it would formally reconstitute itself as the Italian Fascist Party. Earlier the same year, on January 5, a German locksmith and nationalist activist named Anton Drexler led a small group of activists in creating the new German Workers Party, dedicated to German populist nationalism, racial anti-Semitism, and anti-Communism. The small new party attracted the attention of a war veteran named Adolf Hitler, who joined and in February 1920 helped give it a new name, the National Socialist German Workers Party. Mussolini and his Fascists would take over the Italian government in 1922, creating the world's first fascist state. It would take the Nazis another decade to destroy the wobbly Weimar republic, but by the beginning of 1933 Hitler and his followers established a powerful fascist regime in the heart of Europe. [88](#)

On the face of it, discussing ideals of freedom in the history of fascism would seem not only ridiculous but obscene. Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany overthrew democratic regimes and the rule of law, assassinated their political opponents and destroyed civil liberties, and ultimately murdered millions of innocent people. Even the prosperity the Nazis

brought to Germany came at the expense of political repression and self-censorship, so that individual Germans quickly learned the limits of what they could safely say and do. The Nazis in particular turned much of Europe into a charnel house of unimaginable human suffering, whose ultimate symbol was the concentration camp. The only freedom they brought to [millions was the freedom that comes with death.](#)⁸⁹

And yet, as the quotation above from *Mein Kampf* suggests, ideas of freedom did play a significant role in the ideology of fascism. As I noted earlier in this chapter, by World War I, Western ideas of freedom had come to emphasize national self-determination and independence, not so much opposed to individual liberty as the necessary precondition for it. Interwar fascism, usually viewed as a rejection of Western traditions of freedom and democracy, in some ways represented the culmination of such an approach, the fulfillment of individual freedom through membership in a national community. As Benito Mussolini argued in 1932:

Anti-individualistic, the Fascist conception of life stresses the importance of the State and accepts the individual only in so far as his interests coincide with those of the State, which stands for the conscience and the universal, will of man as a historic entity. It is opposed to classical liberalism which arose as a reaction to absolutism

and exhausted its historical function when the State became the expression of the conscience and will of the people. Liberalism denied the State in the name of the individual; Fascism reasserts the rights of the State as expressing the real essence of the individual. *And if liberty is to be the attribute of living men and not of abstract dummies invented by individualistic liberalism, then Fascism stands for liberty, and for the only liberty worth having, the liberty of the State and of the individual within the State.* The Fascist conception of the State is all embracing; outside of it no human or spiritual values can exist, much less have value. Thus understood, Fascism, is totalitarian, and the Fascist State—a synthesis and a unit inclusive of all values—interprets, develops, and potentiates the whole life of a people [emphasis added]. [90](#)

Freedom was thus the freedom of a nation, and only through national freedom could the individual citizen find his or her own liberation. Unlike liberal democracy, fascism viewed the nation-state as a goal rather than a means to an end, but to an important extent both considered freedom inseparable from citizenship and membership in the national community. [91](#)

The question therefore became, how did one define the nation, and it is through this perspective on national freedom and survival that race became so important. Race, as some scholars have argued, is not necessarily key to

fascist ideology in general. Fascist Italy, for example, had no significant racial legislation until 1938, nearly a generation after the establishment of the fascist state.⁹² However, as Aaron Gillette has shown, not only were racial scientific theories widespread in Italy at the beginnings of the twentieth century but they had an important influence on Mussolini and other Italian fascists.⁹³ Ideas of “the Italian race,” while often vague and contradictory, nonetheless permeated fascist discourse: as Mussolini informed an audience in 1927, “We need to be seriously vigilant in regard to the destiny of the race; we need to take care of the race.”⁹⁴

To a far greater extent than in Italian fascism, racial definitions of the nation, and its enemies, lay at the heart of German national socialism. Historians have examined roots of Nazi racism in the historical genealogy of racism in modern Europe, starting with the Enlightenment and proceeding through the rise of racial anti-Semitism in the late nineteenth century to the rise of the Nazi racial state.⁹⁵ Racism, and a racialized vision of the German nation, formed the core of Nazi ideology from the beginnings of the movement. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler identified the German people as a racial group, the “Aryan” race, arguing that it not only had the right to dominate inferior races but that such domination was the motor of human progress. He elaborated a typology of human races, ranging from the

superior Aryans down to Latins, Slavs, and ultimately nonwhites, arguing, “If we were to divide mankind into three groups, the founders of culture, the bearers of culture, the destroyers of culture, only the Aryan could be considered as the representative of the first group.” [96](#) Aryan Germany was thus both a nation and a race, and its freedom was white freedom, a function of its racial supremacy and dominance.

Although Nazi racism constituted a worldview in which many different peoples found their place in a racialized hierarchy of mankind, racialized anti-Semitism and hatred of the Jews lay at its heart. Nazi anti-Semitism was a rather bizarre compendium of theories and prejudices, but above all it emphasized race over religion: the Jews were a race, not a spiritual or religious community. [97](#) Some leading themes drew from traditional anti-Semitism, such as the Jew as capitalist exploiter of others, which went back to medieval stereotypes of Jews as usurers. Others were more modern, such as the idea of the Jew as dangerous radical and Bolshevik, and an important part of the work of Nazi anti-Semitism lay in its amalgamation of such different and often contradictory stereotypes. Ultimately, many of the aspects of modern life attacked by the Nazis, such as capitalism, socialism, liberal democracy, and modernist culture, became personified in the figure of the Jew. [98](#)

Two aspects of Nazi anti-Semitism in particular are important to the argument of this book. First, the Nazis believed that not only were the Jews a race but an alien race, one that was not European and did not belong in Europe. As the Nazi Party's 25-Point Program of 1920 put it, "Only a member of the race can be a citizen. A member of the race can only be one who is of German blood, without consideration of creed. Consequently, no Jew can be a member of the race."⁹⁹ The Jews came from Asia, from the Levant, and therefore could not be considered Aryan, European, or ultimately white. They were therefore racially inferior, lacking true culture or creativity. To an important extent Nazi anti-Semitism existed as part of a worldview based on white supremacy. ¹⁰⁰

But another important difference gave Nazi anti-Semitism a particularly vicious character. Second, and more crucial, the Jews were not just an inferior race, they were also an evil and an enemy race, one whose existence and machinations constituted a mortal danger to the Aryan people. Nazi propaganda constantly harped upon the Jews' manipulations of German institutions, politics, and culture in their efforts to destroy Aryan civilization and achieve world domination. This theme frequently blended anti-Semitism with anti-Marxism, portraying the Russian Revolution as the seizure of power by the [Jews.](#)¹⁰¹ Ultimately, with the German invasion of

the Soviet Union in 1941, the wars against communism and against the Jews would become one. For Germany to be free, therefore, and even to survive, it must shake off the stranglehold of Jewish power, which it could only accomplish by destroying the Jews. As Adolf Hitler declared in 1939: “The struggle for world domination will be fought entirely between us, between Germans and Jews. All else is facade and illusion. Behind England stands Israel, and behind France, and behind the United States. Even when we have driven the Jew out of Germany, he remains our world enemy.”¹⁰²

In

Nazi Germany, freedom was inextricably entangled with the struggle against the racial enemy. The road to genocide was built upon the ideological paving stones of white freedom.

As noted above, historians George Mosse and Leon Poliakov among others have explored the intellectual roots of Nazi anti-Semitism and the Final Solution in the history of modern Europe, in particular the counterreaction to the Enlightenment and modernity. They have portrayed the rise of *völkisch* ideology in the late nineteenth century, coupled with the devastating economic and political impact of World War I on not only Germany but much of central and eastern Europe, as the essential preconditions for fascism in interwar Europe. In particular, scholars in this tradition have focused on the shift from religious to racial anti-Semitism as

a product of increased social tensions generated by the modernization of European societies, producing anxieties that crystallized around the figure of the Jew as symbol of all the ills of the modern world. [103](#)

Other scholars have taken a different approach to the history of fascism and the Holocaust. One key issue has been the relationship between Nazi genocide in Europe and European colonialism overseas, with several intellectuals arguing for a close link between the two, that in fact the latter was a main precursor of the former. No one is more closely associated with this perspective than the great German Jewish émigré philosopher Hannah Arendt. In 1951 Arendt published her celebrated and controversial study *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. [104](#) A comparative analysis of Nazism and communism as examples of totalitarian political movements, *The Origins* examined among other things the rise of modern imperialism and its role in creating scientific racism. Arendt thus argued that the Nazi racism which brought about the Holocaust had substantial roots in the history of European overseas colonialism. Arendt referred to this as the “boomerang effect,” noting that “African colonial possessions became the most fertile soil for the flowering of what was later to become the Nazi elite. Here they had seen with their own eyes how peoples could be converted into races and how, simply by taking the initiative in this process, one might push one’s

own people into the position of the master race.” [105](#)

Arendt was the most famous but far from the only writer to make the analogy between colonialism and fascism. W.E.B. DuBois made the same point a few years earlier, arguing that “There was no Nazi atrocity—concentration camps, wholesale maiming and murder, defilement of women or ghastly blasphemy of childhood—which the Christian civilization of Europe had not long been practicing against colored folk in all parts of the world in the name of and for the defense of a Superior Race born to rule the [world.](#)¹⁰⁶ The Black French intellectuals Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon made similar arguments, contending that Europe had been racist long before the Holocaust, and that what made the Final Solution singular was its application to other whites. A survey of the modern historical record can find numerous points of overlap between colonialism and fascism, ranging from the numerous examples of colonial genocide like the Belgian Congo or the German devastation of the Herero peoples in Southwest Africa to Hitler’s admiration of (and hopes to emulate) the British Empire. As I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, from this perspective Nazi racism and genocide arose from the implementation of colonial rule over other whites in Europe itself.

If European colonialism provided one model for Nazi anti-Semitism,

American racism was the source of another. Historians have long debated the extent to which Hitler and the Nazis drew inspiration from racially discriminatory ideology and practices in the United States. The fact that America proclaimed itself a white nation from its birth and inscribed Black slavery into its Constitution did not pass unnoticed in the Third Reich. In *Mein Kampf*, written right after the passage of the Johnson-Reed Act, Hitler praised America's racial approach to immigration: "There is today one state in which at least weak beginnings toward a better conception are noticeable. Of course, it is not our model German Republic, but the American Union, in which an effort is made to consult reason at least partially. By refusing immigration on principle to elements in poor health, by simply excluding certain races from naturalization, it professes in slow beginnings a view which is peculiar to the folkish state concept." [107](#)

In his recent study *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*, James Q. Whitman methodically illustrates the links between American and Nazi racism, specifically the ways in which the Third Reich used the racial legislation of the United States as a model. Challenging historians who have argued that references to American racism were merely propaganda, he explores how such parallels appeared repeatedly in internal party debates and literature. In particular, he shows

how a variety of Nazi theorists closely studied American race laws, using them as a template for the Nuremberg Laws of 1934–35. He also points out that at times the Nazis considered American ideas of race, notably the one-drop rule of Black identity, too extreme and not relevant to Germany. [108](#)

America's policies toward Native Americans also attracted a lot of attention in Nazi Germany. The Nazis often made parallels between America's westward expansion and their *Drang nach Osten*, especially during the beginnings of the invasion of the Soviet Union: Hitler at one point claimed that the Volga would be the German Mississippi; “Europe—and not America—will be the land of unlimited possibilities.” [109](#) For Germany, eastward expansion and ultimately racial purification would offer the same advantages America had gained from its conquest of the West.

Carroll Kakel and Edward B. Westermann have looked at the relationship between the extermination of America's Native population and the Holocaust, exploring both the similarities and differences between the two. [110](#) Kakel in particular takes pains to demonstrate that there was more than a little similarity between the concepts of Manifest Destiny and *Lebensraum*. As one American settler in Oregon during the 1850s wrote, “Extermination, however unchristianlike it may appear, seems to be the only resort left for the protection of life and property.” [111](#)

Such considerations do not constitute a study in comparative genocide, and certainly not a judgment about the relative horror of each. The point is that Nazi racism took place in a larger context of white racist ideology and practices developed throughout Europe and America, often by nations that viewed themselves as paragons of freedom, and that the Nazis were fully aware of this context and learned from it. What differentiated fascism in general most from liberal democracy was not the presence or absence of racism but rather the view of freedom as something belonging to the state and the collective people as a whole rather than to the individual, and even this distinction was not absolute. The fact that Hitler and Mussolini defined freedom differently from the liberal West does not, however, gainsay the fact that both defined freedom in racial terms.

Starting in 1938 with the *Anschluss* (annexation) of Austria, Nazi Germany proceeded to build a continental empire that by the end of 1941 rivaled that of Napoleon as the greatest in European history. The next section of this chapter will explore the relationship between the Nazi empire and the overseas empires of the European colonial powers, in particular considering the relationship between race and freedom in both. In its own peculiar way, imperial Nazism would write a new chapter in the history of white freedom.

Empire of Race in Europe

As noted above, historians have long debated the relationship between colonialism and fascism, and in recent years that debate has [intensified.](#)¹¹² One reason for this has been the rise of postcolonial studies, with its emphasis on the ways in which European colonial encounters have shaped life in Europe itself. Picking up on the “boomerang” thesis of Arendt and others, such scholars have tended to view the history of fascism through a colonial lens, often arguing that colonialism shaped not just fascism but liberal democracy and other European political practices. They tend to support the idea that Nazi imperialism and the Holocaust represented the application of colonial methods and atrocities to Europeans, and that much of the horror associated with them arises from the idea of colonial rule over white people. In the words of Robert Young, fascism was simply “European [colonialism brought home to Europe.](#)¹¹³

One aspect of this new perspective on empire and fascism has been the rise of a new historiography of German colonialism, also a response to the new emphasis on imperialism in the historiographies of Britain and France. Lora Wildenthal and George Steinmetz have challenged the traditional neglect of German colonialism with studies that emphasize its importance to the history of Germany’s rise as a modern nation. Especially in the

context of not only colonial but the new transnational historiography, studies of German colonialism advance a vision of Germany as a global nation, both influencing and shaped by trends in the wider world beyond Europe.¹¹⁴

Underlying much of this research has been the so-called “continuity” thesis, the exploration of the relationship between German colonialism and Nazi practices of empire and genocide. ¹¹⁵ In general, during its military campaigns to establish colonial rule in Africa, the German army adopted a policy of extreme brutality and destruction, shooting Africans *en masse* and destroying entire villages. The only way to defeat the enemy was to annihilate him. For example, Carl Peters, a major colonizer and founder of the German East Africa company, led a brutal war against the Masai in the late 1880s and would go on to frequent anti-Semitic circles in Germany, seeing both their ideas and the killing of Africans as germane to his *völkisch* ideas. ¹¹⁶

In particular, historians have pointed to Germany’s brutal suppression of the Herero and Nama peoples in German Southwest Africa. Prompted by a revolt against German attempts to expropriate tribal lands in favor of their own settlers, starting in 1904 the German army began a brutal war of aggression against the Herero and Nama, one that forced many into

concentration camps and starved hundreds of thousands to death. Scholars have estimated that a majority, at least sixty percent, of Herero and Nama peoples died during the [conflict.¹¹⁷](#) In 2005 George Steinmetz published an article about the catastrophe titled “The First Genocide of the Twentieth Century and its Postcolonial Afterlives: Germany and the Namibian Ovaherero,” portraying the war as not just colonial conquest but deliberate genocide and thus as a model for other genocides of the modern age. [¹¹⁸](#) In general, while some advocates of the continuity thesis have argued for a direct link between German imperialism and the Holocaust, the majority view tends to emphasize connections that are not necessarily causal but nonetheless significant.

Historians have also considered the relationship between colonialism and fascism in the case of Fascist Italy. Unlike Germany, which had been stripped of its African colonies after World War I and never regained them, Italy did combine fascism and overseas colonialism. One of Mussolini’s greatest achievements was the conquest of Ethiopia in 1935 and 1936. Before the mid-1930s the attitude of the Italian Fascists to racism had been ambivalent, to say the least: Nordic racism in particular often used as a way of arguing for Italian inferiority, especially after the Nazi seizure of power, had relatively little appeal. At the same time, however, some fascist

theorists, notably Enrico Corradini and Giuseppe Sergi, promoted the image of Italy as a nation of the Mediterranean race, with its own racial gifts and characteristics. [119](#)

Erasing the shame of Italy's defeat at Adowa in 1896 and demonstrating that fascism was able to succeed where liberal democracy had failed, Italy's victory over the Ethiopians and its new role as a colonial power in Africa both illustrated and fostered the racist dimensions of fascist ideology. [120](#)

The

occupation of Ethiopia intensified anti-African prejudice among Italian Fascists, and in particular spurred fears of racial mixing and therefore racial degeneration. In August 1936 the Italian government began to enact measures strictly segregating whites and Blacks in Ethiopia—not merely to preserve the biological sanctity of the Italian race but also to promote racial consciousness in Italy. As Mussolini argued,

Naturally, when a people becomes conscious of its own racial identity, it does so in relation to all the races, not of one alone. We became racially conscious only in the face of the Hamites, that is to say, the Africans.

This is why the racial laws of the empire will be rigorously observed and that all who sin against them will be expelled, punished, imprisoned.

Because for the empire to be preserved the natives must be clearly and forcefully aware of our superiority. [121](#)

A series of other racial laws followed in colonial Africa, foreshadowing the rise of racial legislation in Italy itself. For example, in 1936 the Fascist regime proposed forcing Jews to move from Italian cities to a region of Ethiopia that had traditionally been the home of the Falasha Jews, where they would create a Jewish state controlled by Italy.¹²² Further racial legislation for the African colonies followed in 1937. In July 1938 Fascists published the “Manifesto of Race,” proclaiming that Italians were an Aryan race to which Africans and Jews did not belong. This set the stage for the laws of November 1938, the first major Italian laws targeting the Jews as a race, the beginnings of systematic anti-Semitic exclusion and persecution in Italy. Widely seen as modeled on Germany’s Nuremberg Laws, it is clear they had an important colonial dimension as well. Historians have long debated the reasons for Mussolini’s striking turn toward anti-Semitism in the late 1930s after having long argued in favor of Italy’s Jews, but one answer lay overseas. In Fascist Italy, the rise of overseas empire and colonial racism marched in sync with the development of fascist anti-Semitism and ultimately the Holocaust.¹²³

Finally, one cannot adequately discuss fascist racism and imperial expansion without considering the place of the Slavic peoples in Nazi ideology and the creation of the Nazi empire in Europe. Unlike Fascist

Italy, Nazi Germany did not devote much energy to restoring the overseas empire it had lost after World War I. Instead, following traditions of eastward expansion that dated back to the Middle Ages, it decided to establish its empire in eastern Europe. As Hitler argued in *Mein Kampf*: “For Germany, consequently, the only possibility for carrying out a healthy territorial policy lay in the acquisition of new land in Europe itself. Colonies cannot serve this purpose unless they seem in large part suited for settlement by Europeans … such a colonial policy could only have been carried out by means of a hard struggle which, however, would have been carried on to much better purpose, not for territories outside of Europe, but for land on the home continent itself.” [124](#)

The concept of *Lebensraum* formed the key template for the idea of creating a racially based German empire in the East. *Lebensraum* as an idea first arose in the late nineteenth century in Germany, but it received new attention in the aftermath of World War I. Basically, the concept argued that for Germany to survive and prosper it must expand eastward, seeking new resources as well as new lands for agricultural exploitation and on which to settle its growing population. In one sense the idea, or at least the practice, was nothing new; during the Middle Ages groups including the Hanseatic League and the Teutonic Knights promoted what became known as the

*Ostsiedlung.*¹²⁵

Lebensraum built upon this (at times legendary) history, but with some modern twists. First, it reinterpreted the move to the East as an expansion of the German *state*, a state that was defined racially. As the 1938 occupation of Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland demonstrated dramatically, ethnic Germans throughout eastern Europe were to be a part of the Reich, and their presence would both facilitate and justify Germany's domination of the East. ¹²⁶ Second, during the interwar years lebensraum developed in a world in which Germany had been stripped of its overseas empire.

Colonialism in eastern Europe was not only more desirable but also seemed to be the only real option for a renewed German empire.¹²⁷

Lebensraum envisaged the mass settlement of German colonists in the empty lands of the East, forming a dynamic new population of robust farmers and their families that would not only form thriving new communities but also by their example help revive the vitality of Germany itself. The problem, of course, was that these lands were not empty. As a result, from its beginnings the idea of lebensraum had contained a strong racial component. Its proponents argued that the rich lands of the East were wasted on the inferior Slavs, who must make way for the new, superior German population. The Third Reich adopted such ideas enthusiastically

and built upon them once the war began. Nazi views of the Slavs (like much else in Nazi ideology) had always been vague and somewhat contradictory: Hitler himself distinguished between different populations, regarding the Czechs more highly than the Poles, for example, and some Nazis saw them capable of assimilating into the German *Volk*. In general, however, the Nazis viewed and all too often treated the Slavs as subhumans, people to be displaced at best, eliminated at worst. Moreover, the fact that Soviet Russia, the Bolshevik enemy, was a Slavic country only highlighted and intensified [Nazi disdain for the Slavs.](#)¹²⁸

The result, with the German invasions of first Poland and then the Soviet Union, was a bloodbath. The brutality and massacres created by the Nazi armies in eastern Europe had no parallel in the occupied West, home to populations viewed as racially superior. Massive racist war crimes ranging from the murder of much of the Polish intelligentsia to the deliberate starving to death of 3 million Soviet prisoners of war testified to the brutal character of what was in effect a race war against the Slavs. Indications are, moreover, that had Nazi Germany triumphed in its campaign for lebensraum in the East it would have gone further. Between 1939 and 1942 officials in the SS developed what was known as the *Generalplan Ost*, or Master Plan for the East. This plan would have realized the idea of

lebensraum by clearing the Slavic population out of eastern Europe entirely, either by deporting them into Siberia or by starving them to death. Timothy Snyder has estimated that, if the plan had gone into effect, up to 45 million inhabitants of Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Ukraine, and other Slavic lands [would have died to make room for the new German settler population.](#)¹²⁹

The ultimate bloodbath in eastern Europe, of course, was Hitler's war against the Jews, and it was not just theoretical but all too real. The German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 brought together the crusades against Bolshevism and against the Jews in a savage war of annihilation. Led by the *Einsatzgruppen*, paramilitary death squads unleashed on Jews and other enemies of the Reich, the invading Nazi armies made the brutal elimination of the racial Other one of their priorities. Many Soviet Jews succeeded in escaping eastward ahead of the Nazi armies, but those who did not rarely survived. In September Germans murdered more than 33,000 Kievan Jews in the infamous Babi Yar massacre, and a month later killed 50,000 in Odessa. Between the invasion of Russia in June 1941 and the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, before the development of the death camps and the implementation of systematic mass murder, German forces executed some 900,000 Soviet Jews. [130](#)

As noted above, lebensraum, in both its earlier theoretical and in its

ultimate Nazi variations, drew heavily upon the model of America's westward expansion and the idea of Manifest Destiny. [131](#) Manifest Destiny not only proclaimed white American racial superiority but resulted in the devastation of indigenous peoples in the territories it claimed. From the Nazi perspective, this then constituted a template for the replication of American power and prosperity on the European continent. The Nazi belief that the Slavs were an inferior people who must give way to the Germans as the avatars of civilization and progress directly replicated American arguments about Native [Americans.](#)[132](#) More generally, the racism displayed by German colonists in Africa as well as eastern Europe prompted analogies with American racial practices. As Hitler himself noted, "Who remembers the Red [Indians?"](#)[133](#) Even the victims of Hitler's policies sometimes made these links; as a Ukrainian woman mused in 1941 after the German



invasion, “We are like slaves. Often the book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* comes to mind. Once we shed tears over those Negroes, now obviously we ourselves [are experiencing the same thing.](#)”¹³⁴

FIGURE 26. German concentration camp, Auschwitz, Poland. Taken May 22, 2010. Xiquinhosilva

(<https://www.flickr.com/photos/xiquinho/16380127035/>). CC BY 4.0.

One must note, however, that the idea of Manifest Destiny represented not just American empowerment in particular but equally the progress of freedom and democracy in general. Lebensraum, especially in its Nazi interpretation, saw the conquest and settlement of the East as a key

component of German national and racial progress, and thus of German freedom. As we have seen, for fascism in general freedom was the property of the nation-state rather than the individual, and in Nazi Germany in particular it was defined as a racialized concept, an aspect of the triumph of the race. Like America with its Manifest Destiny, Nazi Germany had to grow or die, had to develop an empire or perish. The struggle for lebensraum was thus not just for “freedom” but for the very survival of the German people.

This chapter has explored the many important colonialist roots of fascist and Nazi ideology and empire building in Europe. There is, however, a major difference here from the history of European overseas imperialism, and it proved crucial. Unlike the establishment of Iberian empires in the Americas or western European colonies in Asia and Africa, Nazi Germany in particular built its empire in the throes of the greatest global conflict the world has ever known. The racist crimes of the Nazi regime were also frequently war crimes, and in general the Holocaust and the many other massacres of subject populations took place in the context of a *guerre à outrance*, a war to the [death.¹³⁵](#) Both racial discrimination and even exterminism existed in European overseas empires, but the context of total war gave them an unprecedented urgency for the Nazi regime. In order for

Germany to be free it must conquer, and in the end it could conquer only by exterminating its enemies, defined as racial enemies. As Joseph Goebbels declared in 1942, “this is not the Second World War, this is the Great Racial War. The meaning of this war … is to decide whether the German and Aryan will prevail or if the Jew will rule the [world.](#)”¹³⁶ The identification of freedom as a national, racial characteristic led inexorably to the elimination of those defined as nonwhite and thus incapable of true freedom.

Questions of the relationship between race and freedom also lay at the heart of the global struggle against fascism. As we have seen, World War I reinforced the idea that freedom was the natural, even exclusive, province of white peoples. Such perspectives certainly remained powerful among the coalition that ultimately destroyed the Nazi empire in World War II. At the same time, however, the great antifascist mobilization strained and exposed the contradictions of white freedom to an unprecedented degree. The final section of this chapter will explore the ways in which the struggle against Nazi racism and fascism in general both shook and in some ways reinforced the racial assumptions at the heart of ideals of liberty.

Race and Freedom in the Great Antifascist War

Paris! Paris outraged! Paris broken! Paris martyred! But Paris liberated!
Liberated by itself,

liberated by its people with the help of the French armies, with the support and the help of all

France, of the France that fights, of the only France, of the real France, of the eternal France!

—CHARLES DE GAULLE, PARIS, AUGUST 25, 1944[137](#)

I venture to think that the Allied Declaration that the Allies are fighting to make the world safe

for freedom of the individual and for democracy seems hollow, so long as India, and for that

matter Africa, are exploited by Great Britain, and America has the Negro problem in her own

home.

—LETTER FROM MAHATMA GANDHI TO FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, JULY 1,

1942[138](#)

Few if any wars of the modern era have made freedom more central to their cause than World War II, in particular the great struggle waged by the Western powers and their dependents against Nazi Germany. From the Spanish Civil War and the antifascist movements of the prewar era to the titanic armed struggles of the war itself, first small groups of political activists then ultimately the Allied powers together held up freedom as a banner and a rallying cry. In Europe and East Asia subject peoples fought for the liberation of their nations from German and Japanese occupation. In

America government leaders and opinion makers in general constantly trumpeted the idea of the war as a struggle to protect their free society and to destroy fascist authoritarianism. Throughout the world millions took up arms to die to make men free, in the words of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” [139](#)

It was readily apparent, however, both at the time and in historical perspective, that this crusade for freedom had its own contradictions. The fact that one of the leading, in some senses *the* leading, antifascist powers, the Soviet Union, was a brutal dictatorship that had executed millions of its own people during the 1930s, and that the ultimate military struggle of the war in Europe which finally crushed fascism was a battle between dictators, complicated the idea of a war against tyranny.[140](#) As many in eastern Europe

would learn after the war, liberation did not necessarily bring freedom. It was also true, as the quotation above from Gandhi illustrates, that the Western powers had their own complex relationship to the idea and practice of liberty. To an important extent Britain and France fought the war against fascism both for national freedom and for empire, and the contradiction between these two aims did not trouble many. The United States waged the war in Europe and the Pacific with segregated armed forces, so that the army units which disembarked in Vichy-controlled North Africa in 1942

carrying copies of the Atlantic Charter were divided between Blacks and whites. In the fight for freedom and against Nazi racism it did not hesitate to imprison its own citizens, at least in part because of the color of their skin. Rather than accuse the Allies of hypocrisy, one must emphasize the fact, as this study has taken pains to do, that the idea of freedom was a complicated affair. Never did these complications stand out in sharper relief than during the war against fascism.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, during the early twentieth century the idea of freedom became in effect nationalized, emphasizing the integrity of the nation rather than (and in some cases over that of) the individual. For the Allies that came together in the grand alliance to destroy fascism, the war was above all one of national salvation, and the victory one of national triumph. It is worth noting in this context that the two major Allied powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, entered the war only when they were physically attacked by the Axis. In 1939 the Soviets turned their backs on the antifascist crusade in order to protect the Russian state, and when war did come to them officials promptly labeled it the Great Patriotic War, a defense of the homeland rather than a war against fascism. [141](#) Similarly, in spite of its hostility to both Germany and Japan as well as its creeping alliance with the British, the American government did

not enter the war until forced to do so by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Moreover, only when Nazi Germany declared war on the US did Washington respond in kind and pledge itself to fight in the European theater, at that point making the conflict a true world war. [142](#) In the case of both great powers, but especially the Soviet Union, the antifascist fight for freedom merged with and was dominated by the struggle for national survival.

The final section of this chapter will first consider the ways in which white freedom manifested itself in the world war against fascism, examining how the salient contradictions of waging a racist war against Nazi racism forced a reappraisal of Western ideas of freedom and how its racial underlying logic in many ways endured. It will then move on to explore the movements for a more expansive vision of freedom mounted by subaltern groups in both America and Europe's colonies. [143](#) This exploration

will set the stage for the last chapter of this book, a study of white freedom in the era of civil rights and decolonization.

A War on Two Fronts

I'm just a Negro soldier
Fighting for "Democracy,"
A thing I've often heard of

But very seldom see ...

To hell with a war perpetuated by greed

While the hungry masses cry

But to win complete equality

I'd gladly fight and die.

—BILL HORTON, “JUST A NEGRO SOLDIER” [144](#)

I joined the Army of Liberation as a volunteer, and I die within inches of Victory and the final

goal. I wish for happiness for all those who will survive and taste the sweetness of the freedom

and peace of tomorrow. I'm sure that the French people, and all those who fight for freedom,

will know how to honor our memory with dignity.

—MISSAK MANOUCHIAN, ARMENIAN MEMBER OF THE FRENCH RESISTANCE,

EXECUTED BY THE GERMANS IN FEBRUARY 1944[145](#)

On June 4, 1940, facing a desperate struggle against the triumphant Third Reich, Winston Churchill gave perhaps the finest and most famous speech of his political career. Defiantly avowing before Parliament and the British people the continued resistance to Nazi aggression, he said, “and if, which I do not for a moment believe, this island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the

British Fleet, would carry on the [struggle](#).”¹⁴⁶ In this bold declaration Churchill emphasized a basic truism, that the United Kingdom was bigger than Britain and Northern Ireland, and that its colonies were central to the realm.

Far more than in World War I, Europe’s overseas colonies played a key role in World War II. In part, this was because war came directly to the colonies. In World War II the Axis forces had a much greater global reach than did the Central Powers in the first world war, so that the Western Allies battled the Germans in North Africa, and the Japanese not only overran British Malaya, French Indochina, and the Dutch East Indies but at times threatened to invade India and Australia. Colonial forces did not just defend their home turfs, however. National governments also mobilized imperial personnel and material resources in the desperate struggle against the Axis in Europe itself. For the second time in the twentieth century, imperial governments called upon and mobilized in the defense of national freedom populations that were not free.

In 1939 the British Empire constituted the biggest political unit in the world, and in human history, encompassing twenty-five percent of the world’s population and thirty percent of its [landmass](#).¹⁴⁷ A crazy quilt of dominions, crown colonies, and other territories, its complexity was to a

significant extent organized along racial lines. The dominions, or British Commonwealth, consisting of Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, were former white settler colonies that by the outbreak of the war functioned in effect as independent nations. Not just between the metropole and the colonies but even within the British Empire, the principle of white freedom largely held sway. The response of the dominions to London's call to arms was immediate (all four declared war on Germany within a week after Britain did, Australia and New Zealand on the same day) and dramatic. The dominions sent hundreds of thousands of soldiers to participate in all the theaters of war, ranging from flying fighter planes during the Battle of Britain to fighting against the Germans in North Africa and the Japanese in East Asia. By the end of the war Canada had the third-
[largest navy in the world.](#)¹⁴⁸

The response of the nonwhite colonies to the imperial war effort was more ambiguous, and for good reason. They had contributed generously during the First World War, but hopes that this support would be rewarded with greater freedom or even independence had largely come to naught. In India, for example, many were painfully aware that Britain had rewarded their wartime service to the Empire with the Amritsar massacre.
[149](#) As we shall see below, the British call for support during World War II met a large

amount of ambivalence and even resistance. Nonetheless, some 2 million Indians served in the British armed forces during the war, as did 500,000 subjects from Britain's African colonies. The colonies also furnished massive amounts of war materiel as well as military bases and port facilities. All told, the majority of British troops in the World War II came from the Empire.

Imperial resources played an even more important role in France during the war. Unlike for the British, the nightmare scenario outlined in Churchill's speech quoted above actually came true for France in June 1940 with defeat and conquest by the Germans. While the French government capitulated to Hitler's forces and set up a collaborationist regime in Vichy, Charles De Gaulle, the youngest general in the French Army, refused to accept defeat and fled to London. There on June 18 he issued a famous call for continued French resistance, one that, like Churchill's speech two weeks before, emphasized imperial themes: "For, remember this, France does not stand alone. She is not isolated. Behind her is a vast empire, and she can make common cause with the British Empire, which commands the seas and is continuing the struggle."¹⁵⁰

De Gaulle's London speech in effect created the French resistance, and right from the start it became clear that the empire would play a central role

in the movement for a free France. In effect, the struggle against the collaborationist Vichy state began in the colonies: although most colonial administrators rallied to Vichy as the legitimate government of France, in Chad, Félix Éboué, the only Black governor of a French colony, declared for De Gaulle and Free France in August. Éboué's troops went on the offensive against Vichy forces in Africa, and by October had conquered most of French Equatorial Africa, although meeting defeat in French West Africa. [151](#) By the end of the year New Caledonia and Tahiti had also rallied to De Gaulle, and Brazzaville in Chad became the first capital of Free France. The Allied invasion of North Africa at the end of 1942, followed by revolts against Vichy in the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe in 1943, would spell the end of the collaborationist regime in the colonies. The first Free French troops were Black Africans, and during the war as a whole the majority of De Gaulle's soldiers came from the colonies. If, as De Gaulle claimed, France to a significant extent liberated itself during World War II, this liberation came from the [empire.](#)[152](#) Colonial France was Free France, and yet its subjects were not free men and women. While the forces of Free France fought outside the country, a powerful series of resistance movements arose within occupied France. Similar to the colonial subjects who played a central role in the armies of Free France,

many partisans of the French resistance were also outsiders. In recent years historians have devoted more attention to the contribution of foreigners and Jews to the resistance in France. On the eve of the war France, and Paris in particular, had been a haven for refugees from all over Europe, people who had nowhere to go once the Germans marched [in.153](#). As a result, foreigners, including antifascist Germans, Italians, and Poles, exiled Spanish Republicans, and others, started resistance movements of their own and gradually merged with the French Resistance in general. The French Communist Party in particular took the lead in organizing immigrants after the invasion of the Soviet Union, forming the MOI (*Main-d’Oeuvre Immigré*, Immigrant Labor Section) of its resistance army.[154](#)

The role of French and especially foreign Jews in the Resistance deserves special mention. As anti-Semitic legislation and harassment increased in France, culminating with the roundup of thirteen thousand Parisian Jews at the Vélodrome d’Hiver (known as the “Vél d’Hiv”) in July 1942, many foreign Jews felt they had no choice but to go underground. [155](#) Jews fought both as members of French resistance organizations and in their own networks. Jewish Communists in particular built up a series of important networks, and Zionist Jews also organized resistance. Many of these organizations specialized in saving Jews, especially Jewish children,

by hiding them or smuggling them over the frontiers into Switzerland or Spain. Jews also formed the majority of several MOI groups, notably the Manouchian network, which operated in Paris for a few months during 1943. [156](#) Annie Kriegel, a young Jewish girl who joined the group after her family fled Paris, and eventually became a distinguished historian of France, described its appeal.

To understand it is necessary to start from one basic fact: the brutal collapse for them of all those systems of protection, even if sometimes oppressive, which an individual acquires from belonging to a regulated society. Homeland, name, family, house, school, neighborhood, work, everything which provides a point of fixity, and definition of self, had been swallowed up in nothingness.... Thus the resistance provided membership of a group, a narrow group, but one which was tightly structured and hierarchical, the reconstitution of a network of interpersonal relations where the survival of each depended on the solidarity of all the others. [It] once again peopled the days with faces and gave them back a savour and a value, an existence freighted with [both fear and hope.](#)[157](#)

This group became famous for daring attacks against German soldiers, even succeeding in assassinating an SS General. For many Jewish partisans,

resistance work was a way of creating and integrating themselves into the

France of their dreams, a land of freedom and justice for all.¹⁵⁸

Whether France deserved such loyalty was another question entirely. The roundup at the Vél d'Hiv was organized by French police, not German troops, and in general foreign Jews (the majority of the Jewish population in wartime France) were in danger not just because of the Nazi occupation but also because the Vichy government made a deal with German authorities to round up and deport them if the Germans spared Jews with French citizenship.¹⁵⁹ Thanks in part to this arrangement three-quarters of Jews in France survived the war, but it also represented a betrayal of the French universalist principle that freedom should extend to all and underscored the idea that freedom came from citizenship.

This pattern of people fighting for national freedom denied to them as racial outsiders characterized much of the experience of Allied colonial subjects in general during the war. In spite of widespread opposition from Indian politicians, the British government of colonial India declared that questions of self-rule and independence would have to wait until after the war was over. The British also used the war to reassert imperial authority in the Middle East, overthrowing the government of Iraq in 1941 and the Egyptian regime in 1942.¹⁶⁰ The clear message was that, at least until the

defeat of the Axis, colonialism would remain firmly in place. The fact that imperial and Commonwealth soldiers fought for Britain also did not shield them from British racism. Black soldiers in particular received lower pay, worse rations, and far fewer chances for advancement than their white counterparts. The British military generally refused (as in World War I), to deploy them in Europe; they also tried to prevent contacts between them and African American soldiers for fear that the antiracist attitudes of the [latter would undermine the empire.](#)¹⁶¹

The French situation was different, since colonial troops did not enter France until the Liberation. Yet the Gaullist argument that Free France represented France as a whole tended to mask the diversity of both the Free French and the Resistance. In arranging for French troops to liberate Paris in 1944, for example, De Gaulle bowed to American demands for the exclusion of Black colonial soldiers, so that the LeClerc Division, which entered the French capital on August 25, 1944, consisted largely of Spanish Republican exiles. The liberation of Paris must be a white liberation. [162](#)

The United States during the war also mobilized people of color to an unprecedented degree while at the same time stubbornly retaining traditional racial standards. World War II represented the greatest overseas war effort the nation had ever seen, the first time America (or any nation)

had waged such a massive struggle on two oceans at the same time. Over 16 million Americans served in the armed forces during World War II, more than any other war effort before or since. Moreover, the tremendous mobilization of production that made the United States the “Arsenal of Democracy” required vast labor resources, prompting the migration of millions to new jobs and transforming the nation’s industrial landscape. [163](#)

This massive military and economic mobilization took place in a new political context, for America had changed significantly since World War I. The New Deal represented one of the most progressive regimes, and political cultures, in US history, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s attitudes toward race were far removed from those of Woodrow Wilson. [164](#)

The result was a multicultural war effort that dwarfed that of the First World War. More than 1 million African Americans served in the armed forces, compared to fewer than 400,000 during World War I, and hundreds of thousands more left the South on “liberty trains” to find work in the war plants of the Midwest and [California.](#)[165](#) In August 1942 the US and Mexican governments signed the Mexican Farm Labor Agreement, the beginnings of the *bracero* programs that would bring tens of thousands of Mexicans a year (and hundreds of thousands after the war) to work in America’s fields. [166](#) Hundreds of thousands of Mexican Americans served in

the US military during the war, as did 25,000 Native Americans.¹⁶⁷ In 1943

the US government finally repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act, and some

13,000 Chinese Americans also fought for their country during World War

II.¹⁶⁸

One notable aspect of the war on American race relations was the

changing view of European immigrants and those of immigrant heritage. As

noted in [chapter 1](#), the decline of immigration and the maturation of an

assimilated second generation of Americans of eastern and southern

European origin had led to increasing acceptance of European immigrants

as white during the interwar years. The New Deal mobilized support from

immigrants and appointed several to high-level positions in Roosevelt's

cabinet. In 1933 New York elected Fiorello LaGuardia as its first Italian

American mayor.¹⁶⁹ Emma Lazarus's poem "The New World Colossus" on

the Statue of Liberty had been largely ignored for decades, but by the end of

the 1930s it began to receive new attention as a symbol not just of

immigration but of Americanism in [general.](#)¹⁷⁰ By June 1941 the *Detroit*

Free Press could portray a smiling Statue of Liberty welcoming young

people of European descent as "my children."¹⁷¹

World War II marked a major step forward in the assimilation of

European immigrants and their descendants into the mainstream of

American life. Hollywood movies about the American armed forces, such as *Air Force* (1943) and *Lifeboat* (1944) frequently featured a wide variety of white characters of different ethnic backgrounds, all fighting together for America. [172](#) This process was not complete: thousands of German and Italian Americans were interned as threats to national security during the war. [173](#) Nonetheless, World War II marked a major stage in the transformation of European immigrants from foreigners into white ethnics. More generally, World War II did mark some important achievements in America's struggle for racial equality. For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt became the first president in American history to denounce lynching as a crime. During the 1940 presidential campaign Roosevelt's Republican opponent Wendell Willkie ran on a civil rights platform, pledging to integrate the armed forces and the federal government if elected. After Black labor leader A. Philip Randolph threatened a massive march on Washington to protest segregation in the defense industry, in June 1941 Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 banning racial discrimination in war plants and creating the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) to enforce it. [174](#) Although the FEPC had little power, the prospect of a federal agency actually devoted to fighting racial discrimination had great symbolic weight and did help Blacks and other minorities gain access to

jobs in the burgeoning war industry.

In general, however, racial discrimination and segregation persisted in America during World War II. Whatever his personal feelings, Roosevelt's New Deal coalition depended upon the support of white southern legislators, who remained adamantly opposed to policies promoting racial equality. Roosevelt may have denounced lynching, but the US government never enacted federal anti-lynching legislation. During the 1930s many New Deal social programs, such as the Federal Housing Authority, discriminated against Blacks, and this pattern continued during the war. [175](#) Most notably, in spite of some Democratic promises to the contrary, America's armed forces remained segregated for the duration of the conflict. As in World War I but to an even greater extent, the US military [fought around the world for white freedom.](#)[176](#)

Racism in World War II was not just a matter of government policy. During the war race riots erupted in American cities, usually involving white attacks on Blacks and other peoples of color. In June 1943 the so-called Zoot Suit Riots (named after a clothing style made popular by Black jazz musicians and embraced by minority youth) broke out in Los Angeles, involving attacks by thousands of white soldiers and sailors primarily against Latino young [men.](#)[177](#) A scant two weeks later Detroit experienced

its own major race riot, prompted by attempts to integrate the city's housing and defense industries. [178](#) Public transportation and other facilities remained

largely segregated, and not just in the South. At times this went so far as to require Black soldiers in uniform to give up seats on trains to German prisoners of war.

The most egregious example of racial discrimination in America during World War II was the internment of Japanese Americans. At the beginning of the war the Japanese American community in America numbered around a quarter of a million individuals, most of whom lived on the West Coast and in Hawaii. As noted in the previous chapter, California in particular had a long history of anti-Asian racism, directed mostly against Chinese immigrants, which culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor revived such sentiments and now targeted the Japanese American community. As historian John Dower has demonstrated, the Pacific war between the United States and Japan was to an important extent a race war. For many Americans, it made no sense to wage war against "Japs" abroad while at the same time tolerating them at [home.](#)[179](#)

Spontaneous rioting against Japanese Americans broke out right after Pearl Harbor. By the beginnings of 1942 many whites, especially in the

West, claimed that Japanese Americans were a potential (or actual) fifth column, threatening national security. In response to this pressure, in March 1942 President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, expelling all Japanese Americans from the West Coast and placing them in internment camps. More than 110,000 men, women, and children—two-thirds of them American citizens—were forced out of their homes, many losing everything they owned. This policy contrasted markedly with the treatment of German and Italian Americans, only a few of whom were interned. Also deeply ironic was the fact that it mostly did not affect Japanese Americans living in Hawaii, who constituted nearly forty percent of the territory's population, even though the attack on Pearl Harbor had targeted those islands rather than California. [180](#)

The internment of Japanese Americans speaks both to the racism that continued to mark American life during the war and to the mobilization of communities of color in service of the national war effort. More than eighteen thousand Japanese Americans served in the US military during World War II. Most came from Hawaii, but some, whose relatives were often in internment camps, were from the West Coast. They served primarily in the famed 442nd Infantry Regiment. Deployed in North Africa and Europe (the army refused to use them in the Pacific war), the unit

helped liberate the Dachau concentration camp and in general became the most highly decorated unit in American military history. Japanese American servicemen and -women thus provided another example of people fighting [abroad for freedom that was denied them at home.](#)¹⁸¹

Many have at times viewed the sordid history of Japanese American internment as an exceptional moment in the prosecution of America's "good war." In fact, it represented rather an extreme example of the overarching theme of white freedom and how that ideal persisted during World War II. Contradictions between not only the battle for freedom but also the rejection of fascist racism, on the one hand, and the survival and even reinforcement of the color line among the Allied powers, on the other hand, were a key characteristic of the greatest war in human history. As we have seen, European colonial subjects and American peoples of color often dealt with these contradictions by focusing on supporting the national effort in hopes of a better day after the war. At the same time, however, some chose either not to accept continued racial subordination or searched for ways to combine the struggles against fascism and for racial justice.



FIGURE 27. Japanese American soldier in France, World War II. A Company F, 442nd Regimental

Combat Team squad leader, November 1944. Courtesy of U.S. Army.

For Jews in Britain and America the choice was clear. Both nations had a history of anti-Semitism that did not disappear during the Second World War. In both countries, fascist movements had been active during the 1930s, preaching anti-Semitic propaganda. In America, Catholic priest Father Coughlin attracted millions of listeners with radio broadcasts supporting fascism and vilifying [Jews.¹⁸²](#) In Britain, Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists staged street battles with Jewish groups in [London.¹⁸³](#) Both nations also proved reluctant to admit Jewish refugees after 1933. Nonetheless, for Jews in America and Britain, the advent of the war meant their concerns for their people and their loyalties to their nations became one. In both countries Jews, many of European refugee origin, joined the armed forces in numbers greater than their percentage of the national population. One example was Max Fuchs, a New York Jew born in Poland who took part in the Normandy invasion and in October 1944 led the first public Jewish religious service in Germany since the beginning of the war. [184](#)

How to deal with America's call to arms soon became a poignant issue for African Americans. African American newspapers constantly made analogies between Nazi and American racism, for example, portraying both as the enemy of Black people. On January 31, 1942, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the most popular Black newspaper in America, published a letter to the

editor from James G. Thompson of Wichita, Kansas, entitled “Should I Sacrifice to Live ‘Half American’?” Thompson’s letter squarely posed the dilemma felt by many African Americans as their nation went to war:

Being an American of dark complexion … these questions flash through my mind: “Should I sacrifice my life to live half American?” … “Would it be demanding too much to demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of my life? Is the kind of America I know worth defending? Will America be a true and pure democracy after this war?”

...

I suggest that while we keep defense and victory in the forefront that we don’t lose sight of our fight for democracy at home....

The V for victory sign is being displayed prominently in all so-called democratic countries which are fighting for victory over aggression, slavery and tyranny. If this V sign means that to those now engaged in this great conflict, then let we colored Americans adopt the double VV for a double victory. The first V for Victory over our enemies from without, the second V for victory over our enemies from within. For surely those who perpetrate these ugly prejudices here are seeking to destroy our democratic form of government just as surely as the Axis forces. [185](#)

The *Courier* embraced Thompson's suggestion, polling its readers, who responded overwhelmingly in favor of the idea. An editorial two weeks later pledged the paper's full support of the new campaign, arguing, "Thus in our fight for freedom we wage a two-pronged attack against our enslavers at home and those abroad who would enslave us. WE HAVE A STAKE IN THIS FIGHT ... WE ARE AMERICANS TOO!"¹⁸⁶

So was born the Double V campaign. Appropriately enough, in a nation that was waging a two-front war, African Americans fought their own struggle on two fronts. The campaign spread throughout America's Black population, and beyond, with the speed of a prairie fire. The *Courier* ran Double V articles in every issue for the next year, encouraging the formation of Double V clubs. Supporters wore Double V pins and created Double V gardens. There was even a Double V hairstyle, the "Doubler." The campaign won support not only from leading Black politicians and celebrities but also whites, including Wendell Willkie. Although many in the federal government feared that the campaign, and the Black press in general, might undermine the war effort, African Americans overwhelmingly supported it. For Black Americans the Double V was in reality one campaign, for a vision of liberty that transcended white freedom to embrace all peoples.¹⁸⁷

Fighting both fascism and Western racism during World War II was also a key issue for the colonial subjects of European empires. This was especially true of those in Asia, confronted by the threat (or reality) of Japanese invasion and occupation. More than in the case of the Allied struggles against Nazi Germany and Vichy in North Africa, Imperial Japan's approach to the war made this a very complex question. On the one hand, Japan's war effort, especially against China, was motivated by its own racial prejudices. Japanese troops frequently looked down on the Chinese as dogs, and such attitudes helped facilitate widespread massacres against the civilian [population.¹⁸⁸](#) On the other hand, the Japanese portrayed the war in the Pacific as a pan-Asian campaign against Western imperialism and their conquest of colonies like the Dutch East Indies and the Philippines as wars of liberation. Japan certainly had its own colonies, notably Korea and Taiwan, but it nonetheless saw itself as a force for Asian racial deliverance and freedom. During the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 Japan had supported a resolution for racial equality that was defeated by the Western powers, and many Japanese saw the Pacific war as merely a new phase in this struggle for racial equality.

In August 1940 Japan formally announced the creation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. [189](#) Heralded with slogans like *Asia for the*

Asiatics, the Sphere proclaimed its intention to bring all the peoples of East Asia together in opposition to Western imperialism and racism. For the most part, the Sphere merely masked Japanese interests in the occupied Asian nations; the Japanese nationalists in power clearly saw the nation's empire as a source for raw materials and other benefits for the imperial war economy. Nonetheless, Japan continued to use it to argue for racial solidarity in the region. In November 1943, as the tide of the Pacific war was clearly turning against Tokyo, Japan hosted a Greater East Asia Conference. Attended by delegates from several Asian countries, it proclaimed their intention to fight against the racist imperialism of the West. There the ambassador to Japan from the Philippines declared, "the time has come for the Filipinos to discard Anglo-Saxon civilization ... and to recapture their charm and original virtues as an oriental people." [190](#)

This stance prompted a variety of different reactions throughout colonial Asia. It had perhaps the greatest success in the Dutch East Indies, a vast territory prized by the Japanese for its oil resources. During its occupation of the colony Japan both destroyed the Dutch colonial infrastructure and encouraged Indonesian nationalism; as a result the nationalist parties declared the independence of Indonesia two days after the Japanese surrender in August 1945. [191](#) The situation in the Philippines was very

different. The American government had granted the islands semi-independent Commonwealth status in 1935, with the expectation of full independence to follow. The Japanese occupation interrupted this process, leading the Filipino government to go into exile and prompting a major resistance movement against Japan in the islands. After the liberation, the Philippines achieved full independence in 1946. [192](#)

The situation in India was more ambiguous. Many Indians had bitter memories of Britain's unfilled promises for more autonomy during World War I, and in spite of the fact that by early 1942 the Japanese had conquered Burma and were threatening to invade, India was less than enthusiastic about supporting the British war effort a second time. The Indian National Congress denounced Nazi Germany and temporarily suspended its activities during the Battle of Britain. Nonetheless, when the war with Japan broke out it responded with the Quit India Movement. In August 1942, the congress announced its refusal to cooperate with the British war effort until the crown granted Indian independence. On August 8, Mahatma Gandhi gave a major speech supporting the Quit India Movement and calling for nonviolent resistance against the Japanese. [193](#)

The movement shocked the British, and the colonial government responded harshly, throwing much of the Congress leadership in prison for

the duration of the war. Many other Indian political parties and factions rejected the movement, notably the Muslim League, the colony's largest Muslim political organization. As we have seen, some 2 million Indian soldiers fought for the British during the war.¹⁹⁴ Nonetheless, the fact that the colony's largest political party refused to support the war effort unless Indians were treated as an equal sovereign people illustrated the limits to white freedom in the colonial era in general.

Wartime Vietnam presented one of the most noteworthy examples of the relationship between antifascism and anticolonialism. When France surrendered to Nazi Germany in June 1940, the new Vichy government moved to consolidate control over the nation's overseas colonies. It replaced the Third Republic's regime in French Indochina with its own governor, Jean Decoux, assuming effective control of the colony. Over the next few months Decoux pursued a complicated series of negotiations with both Vichy and Tokyo until Japan invaded and took over the colony in September. The Japanese left the Vichy regime largely undisturbed, however, even encouraging its repression of anticolonial forces.¹⁹⁵

The effective unity between Japanese fascism and French colonialism prompted the Vietnamese resistance to oppose both. French Indochina had a long and vigorous history of anticolonialism dating back to the early years

of the twentieth century, and in 1930 both Communist and non-Communist groups had staged major uprisings against French rule. In the winter of 1941, Communist leader Ho Chi Minh returned from exile in the Soviet Union to Vietnam and that spring led the founding of a new Communist resistance movement, the Viet Minh. Right from the beginning the Viet Minh called for resistance to both French and Japanese rule, like Communist resistance movements in Europe downplaying its Marxism for the sake of a broad-based struggle against fascism and for national independence. Like the Double V campaign in America, it waged a struggle on two fronts, for a postwar world of national freedom and the end of colonial white privilege. [196](#)

Peoples of color around the world played a massive role in the struggle against fascism and for freedom during World War II. To a much greater extent than during World War I, many asked what kind of freedom would victory bring and, more pointedly, whether that freedom would extend to them. The war thus brought the practice of white freedom to the breaking point, on a global scale. As the defeat of the Axis loomed, questions about the relationship between race and freedom became ever more pressing. As we shall see in the next chapter, these questions would in significant ways dominate the postwar era.

Conclusion

The great wars of the early twentieth century brought the diverse peoples of the planet together as never before in history. The 1919 Peace of Paris was the first truly global political settlement the world had ever seen, and World War II in particular coordinated military struggles and strategic objectives across the globe to an unprecedented degree. In such a globalized reality, ideas of both freedom and race took on new meanings and dimensions. As we have seen, the rise of the nation-state, brutally accelerated by the needs of total war, came to dominate ideas of freedom. To be free meant more than ever before belonging to an independent nation, even if that national independence came at the cost of individual liberties. Ideas of race also became nationalized to an important degree, so that conflicts between nations at times assumed the character of race wars. In the case of Nazi Germany above all, nation and race were indistinguishable, and thus the struggle for the survival of the Aryan race and German nation necessitated the subjugation and even extermination of rival and hostile races.

World War II ended with the complete defeat of the fascist model of freedom through race war, and the revelations about the Holocaust made that model not just a military failure but morally completely beyond the pale. Yet it did not put an end to the idea of white freedom, of which

fascism was merely one variant. Although the Soviet Union ultimately played the key role in the destruction of Nazi Germany, the liberal democracies of Britain and the United States also emerged victorious in the struggle with fascism, and they did so as representatives of a different kind of white freedom. It was certainly less deadly than the Nazi version, but nonetheless to an important extent based on the idea and practice that one must be white to be free.

At the same time, the era of the great wars challenged the idea of white freedom like never before. From the Korean and Egyptian revolutions of 1919 to the Quit India and Double V movements of World War II, peoples of color throughout the wartime world asserted a radically different vision of human liberty, which was not grounded in racial superiority. The war years, especially World War II, illustrated but ultimately did not resolve the contradictory nature of white freedom, in part because of the common need to overcome the fascist menace. With the surrender of Germany and Japan in 1945, however, the challenges to white freedom that had begun during the world wars became more urgent than ever, as we shall see in the final chapter of this book.

CHAPTER 6

Freedom Now?

THE FALL AND RISE OF WHITE FREEDOM DURING THE COLD WAR

On May 8, 1945, spontaneous celebrations broke out in cities across the world as Nazi Germany formally and unconditionally surrendered to the Allied powers, ending World War II in Europe. In the city of Sétif on the coast of Algeria a crowd of several thousands gathered both to celebrate the victory and also to protest French colonial rule. Demonstrators marched through the city's streets with banners calling for a Free Algeria and the release of nationalist leader Messali Hadj. Scuffles broke out between the demonstrators and the French police, leading the latter to fire upon the crowd. Armed Algerians responded over the next few days, killing roughly one hundred French settlers (*pieds noirs*). This led the French military to crack down in force, along with *pieds noirs* vigilantes summarily executing hundreds of Algerian Muslims. By the time the violence ended, between 1,000 and 45,000 Algerians had perished. The full-fledged armed struggle to liberate Algeria from the French would not break out for another nine years, but the Sétif massacre marked the beginning of the end of colonial rule. On the day the war in Europe ended the war against European colonialism began. [1](#)

World War II brought an unprecedented series of challenges to the idea

and practice of white freedom, exposing its weaknesses and inconsistencies as never before. In Europe in particular, it took the shape of a war for freedom and against racism. The contradiction of nations like the United States and Britain fighting against Nazi bigotry and for racially segregated and oppressive societies was not lost on most observers, especially their own citizens and subjects who belonged to those subordinate groups. As we saw in the previous chapter, the view of the war as a struggle for freedom

and justice on many fronts engaged millions around the world, suggesting that victory should bring not just the defeat of fascism but a fundamentally new and more just world order.

The postwar challenge to white freedom took two primary forms. Most dramatically, after the war European nations relinquished most of their colonial possessions as peoples throughout the world struggled for national independence. The great wave of decolonization during the 1950s and 1960s fundamentally transformed the politics of the globe, creating a host of new independent nations in Asia and Africa and highlighting the diminished power of white Europeans in the postwar era. At the same time, the civil rights movement in the United States exposed and challenged the contradiction between the American ideal of liberty and the American practice of racial discrimination, not only addressing the grievances of African Americans but also serving as a model for other movements for racial and social justice. The movements for colonial liberation and for civil rights both grew directly out of the wartime experience, and together they posited and demanded a vision of freedom that would be truly egalitarian and postracial.

To a very important extent, these movements transformed both the nature of freedom and the world in general in the decades after 1945. A

generation after the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964 banning racial discrimination in America. By that year virtually all the former European colonies had achieved independence, so that Black, brown, and Asian national leaders sat next to their white colleagues at the United Nations as peers and equals. In sharp contrast to the League of Nations in 1919, the 1945 United Nations Charter linked freedom and racial equality, stating its belief in “promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for *fundamental freedoms* for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion” (emphasis added). [2](#) The idea that all men (and, increasingly, women) deserved to be free became a staple of political discourse after 1945.

And yet the idea and especially the practice of white freedom survived and even prospered in the late twentieth century. By the time of the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in 1980, racial difference had reasserted itself as a major factor in European and American political life. The rise of a new conservative movement that emphasized the freedom of the individual against the demands of the welfare state went hand in hand with a “whitelash” against minorities as privileged recipients and symbols of that new political order. Many former colonies became authoritarian

regimes after independence, thus introducing a new global contrast between the freedom of whites and the oppression of nonwhites. In a world where colonial liberation all too often turned into a postcolonial impoverished reality, migrants from Asia and Africa sought a better life in Europe's former imperial powers, introducing new complications of race and politics there. As humanity approached the dawn of the twenty-first century, freedom and whiteness in many respects still went together.

This final chapter will explore the postwar struggle against white freedom, making note of its many victories as well as the fact that racialized ideas and realities of liberty remained a potent force at the end of the twentieth century. The survival of white freedom illustrated just how deeply rooted it was in global political culture, so that even powerful mass movements did not dislodge it completely. Dominant political ideologies might proclaim the importance of both racial equality and human freedom, but white identity and white privilege nonetheless remain significant determinants of the ability to be free.

The Fight for a Free World

Liberty and Race in the Cold War Era

In 1942 Twentieth Century–Fox released the documentary film *Prelude to War*, part of the Why We Fight series directed by Frank Capra. The

documentary, an analysis of the rise of fascism and a clarion call for America's entry into the struggle against it, centered around the portrayal of two planets, one white and one Black, one free and one slave. It quoted Henry Wallace's statement that "This is a fight between a free world and a slave world." At the end of the film the white planet literally eclipses and destroys the Black planet as the narrator dramatically proclaims, "Two worlds stand against each other. One must die, one must live." In *Prelude to War* [the struggle for freedom was a struggle for whiteness.](#)³

The idea of the free world, based in a Manichean struggle between light and dark, may have originated in World War II, but it became a defining characteristic of the cold war.⁴ In March 1947, President Harry Truman delivered a speech before Congress that proclaimed what came to be known as the Truman doctrine of resistance to global communism. In the context of a struggle between a Western-oriented authoritarian regime and Communist insurgents in Greece, Truman declared:

We shall not realize our objectives, however, unless we are willing to help free peoples to maintain their free institutions and their national integrity against aggressive movements that seek to impose upon them totalitarian regimes.... At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is

too often not a free one. One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression. The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and [radio; fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms.](#)⁵

A year earlier Winston Churchill had delivered his famous speech in Fulton, Missouri, warning against the existence of an Iron Curtain dividing Europe in the aftermath of World War II.⁶ The two leaders thus established a world divided between free and unfree, between light and darkness.

The concept of the free world clearly referred to the United States and the liberal democracies of Western Europe, whereas the Soviet Union and its Communist satellite states in Eastern Europe constituted the unfree world of captive nations. At the end of World War I, as we saw in the previous chapter, the Peace of Paris had effectively constituted Europe as a free space, giving its blessing to the establishment of newly independent and democratic European states east of the Rhine River while tolerating the persistence of colonial rule elsewhere. This had broken down partially during the interwar years, with most of the new Eastern European states

falling into authoritarian rule but nonetheless remaining independent. From the perspective of the Western allies, they had gone to war to free occupied Europe from Nazi rule, only to see the eastern half of the continent subjected to a new authoritarianism—communist dictatorship—after 1945.

The fact that freedom remained alien to large parts of the European continent seemed a violation of the world order established by the victorious powers in 1919, of the idea that Europe should be free.

It is easy enough to point out the contradictions inherent in the cold war concept of the free world. It included a number of nations, for example Spain and Portugal, ruled by anti-Communist dictatorships. No one seemed quite sure how to classify Yugoslavia, after 1945 a Communist authoritarian state but nonaligned and the recipient of significant American aid.⁷ Most notably for the purposes of this study, however, the concept of the free world during the cold war had an ambivalent relationship to Europe's colonies in Asia and Africa. In his Iron Curtain speech, for example, Winston Churchill stated, "We cannot be blind to the fact that the liberties enjoyed by individual citizens throughout the British Empire are not valid in a considerable number of countries, some of which are very powerful."⁸

Yet these colonies did not generally enjoy rights like representative institutions and civil liberties characteristic of the free world, and as a result

were usually ignored in discussions of it. The free world thus included a lot of people who were not free.

Revisionist historians of the cold war have responded to this paradox by accusing the West of hypocrisy. The real issue, many have argued, was less freedom than capitalism, and as long as regimes accepted the capitalist global order they were therefore part of the “free” [world](#).⁹ As William Appleman Williams has argued:

Beginning with the rise of Jacksonian Democracy during the 1820s, moreover, Americans steadily deepened their commitment to the idea that democracy was inextricably connected with individualism, private property, and a capitalist market economy.... Seen in historical perspective, therefore, what we are accustomed to call the Cold War ... is in reality only the most recent phase of a more general conflict between the established system of western capitalism and its internal and [external opponents](#).¹⁰

There is much truth to this, of course, but I’d like to propose an alternate perspective, namely that the concept of the free world centered around ideas of freedom as whiteness. In particular, Western cold warriors were outraged by the denial of freedom and independence to the white nations of Eastern Europe, an outrage that certainly did not extend to the absence of self-

determination for the peoples of the colonial world. White people must be free, and any political order that denied this freedom, be it either fascist or communist, was simply beyond the pale.

Let us consider, for example, the idea of “captive nations,” widely applied to the Communist satellite states of Eastern Europe during the cold war. [11](#) During the early 1950s natives from several Eastern European countries exiled in America formed the Assembly of Captive European Nations, and for the next several years organized to raise awareness among both government officials and the American public as a whole of the plight of their [homelands](#).[12](#) In 1959 President Dwight Eisenhower proclaimed “Captive Nations Week” in support of their efforts to publicize and ultimately overthrow the authoritarian regimes of Communist Eastern Europe. The US Congress passed a supporting resolution, stating that:

Whereas the enslavement of a substantial part of the world’s population by Communist imperialism makes a mockery of the idea of peaceful coexistence between nations and constitutes a detriment to the natural bonds of understanding between the people of the United States and other peoples; and

Whereas the imperialistic policies of Communist Russia have led, through direct and indirect aggression, to the subjugation of the national

independence of Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, Ukraine, Czechoslovakia, Latvia, Estonia, White Ruthenia, Rumania, East Germany, Bulgaria, mainland China, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, North Korea, Albania, Idel-Ural, Tibet, Cossackia, Turkestan, North Viet-Nam, and others;

Now, therefore, be it resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the President of the United States is authorized and requested to issue a proclamation designating the third week in July 1959 as "Captive Nations Week" and inviting the people of the United States to observe such week with appropriate ceremonies and activities.¹³

Not all in the West during the cold war approved of the idea of captive nations. Some Soviet exiles, for example, argued that it neglected the absence of freedom in Russia itself, and others considered it too provocative, committing the American government to the overthrow of foreign governments. ¹⁴ What is interesting here is the attack on Communist rule as imperialistic, at a time when the US government had backed away from its earlier opposition to European colonialism. The list of captive nations in the resolution is predominantly European, with some exceptions. Even though the resolution began by emphasizing America's commitment to racial equality, signaling the impact of both decolonization and the civil

rights movement (which this chapter will address below in depth), in effect it highlights the idea that imperialism and enslavement were especially egregious when applied to white people. No one referred to British and French colonies in Africa and Asia as “captive nations,” or for that matter as nations at all. The idea that countries like Poland and Hungary had been sovereign and independent, only to be occupied by a foreign power, lay at the heart of the idea of captive nations. But because this idea applied primarily to Eastern Europe, it had an important racial dimension. Captive nations were those denied the privilege of white freedom.

This emphasis on white freedom in the cold war included a view of the conflict as the opposition between liberty and slavery. In April 1950, officials of the US Department of State drew up a secret memo for President Truman entitled “United States Objectives and Programs for National Security.” One of the most forthright statements of the American view of the cold war, what became known as NSC-68 dramatically portrayed a world divided between Western freedom and Communist slavery, a total conflict that only one side could win.

The antipathy of slavery to freedom explains the iron curtain, the isolation, the autarchy of the society whose end is absolute power. The existence and persistence of the idea of freedom is a permanent and

continuous threat to the foundation of the slave society; and it therefore regards as intolerable the long continued existence of freedom in the world. What is new, what makes the continuing crisis, is the polarization of power which now inescapably confronts the slave society with the [free.](#)¹⁵

NSC-68 conceived of freedom as a progressive ideal; the document praised diversity as one of the key strengths of a free society, and it explicitly condemned colonialism as well. Planners wrote it in the aftermath of the shock produced by the Communist victory in China and focused on the threat to the Eurasian continent as a whole. Nonetheless, the heavy emphasis on the opposed tropes of freedom and slavery inevitably recalled the polarity between white and Black, between white freedom and Black slavery. The focus of this document, and of American cold war ideology generally, on the enslaved nature of the Soviet Union's Eastern European satellites reinforced the perspective that something was wrong with a world in which white people lived in bondage. The struggle against communism was thus a struggle for their liberation, and for white freedom in general. [16](#)

The idea of freedom that powered the anticommunist perspective during the cold war emphasized the classic liberal tenets of liberty: freedom of expression, individual freedom, freedom from political oppression; in short,

freedom *from*. But this was not the only interpretation of freedom to emerge from the cauldron of World War II, and especially from the struggles against fascism. For many, the defeat of the fascist dictators represented not just a victory for individual liberty but equally the triumph of a more just and socially egalitarian society. This vision, often distinctly anticapitalist if not necessarily revolutionary, felt the postwar world should not simply restore that of the prewar era but rather create social democracies, regimes that guaranteed adequate standards of living for all as well as individual liberties. [17](#) It was this interpretation of freedom that made Britain's Beveridge Report, a white paper that advocated national health care and social services, a runaway best seller in 1942. [18](#)

In March 1944, the French National Resistance Council published a charter outlining its vision for France after the Liberation. It devoted several sections to the idea of national freedom, first political, then social and economic. Political freedoms included freedom of speech, assembly, and of the press; economic and social freedoms received more attention, including “the establishment of a true economic and social democracy,” and “guarantees of wage levels that would assure each worker and his family security, dignity, and the possibility of a truly human life.” [19](#) Significantly, as we shall shortly see, the document ended with a vague statement about

guaranteeing the rights of natives and colonized populations.

Even in the United States the idea that social and economic prosperity and justice were central to freedom played an important role. In 1943 American artist Norman Rockwell painted his famous Four Freedoms series of oil paintings. One of the four scenes, *Freedom from Want*, showed a Thanksgiving table laden with food, a scene that spoke not only to the privations of the Depression but to the idea that freedom without a decent life for everyone was [incomplete.²⁰](#) Whereas the Truman Doctrine of 1947 called for an armed struggle against Soviet subversion, the Marshall Plan of 1948 provided billions of dollars to help rebuild the economies of Western Europe in the belief that prosperity was democracy's best safeguard against communism. [21](#) Although the United States remained firmly committed to classic liberalism, after World War II it became clear that freedom must have an important social component.

Both concepts of freedom represented a reaction to the privations of World War II, to the oppressive authoritarianism of fascism, and to the social conditions that allowed fascist movements to thrive and take power. They represented a vision of a new, prosperous, and peaceful world that the Allied victory was supposed to bring. The fact that this did not happen in a large portion of the European continent meant that in effect victory was

incomplete, that the cold war represented the continuation of the wartime struggle for liberty. The very idea of the cold war betrayed the Eurocentric bias of this perspective, because if the conflict between America and Russia did not bring armed conflict to Europe, the same was not true in other parts of the world. The battle between the two world views produced “hot” wars in Asia, especially Korea and Vietnam, so that whereas the cold war represented a campaign for white freedom, its actual military victims were mostly nonwhite. [22](#)

This happened largely because the rivalry between communism and the West soon intersected with the struggle against empire and for colonial independence. Ultimately, both interpretations of freedom in the postwar West had to wrestle with the challenge to imperialism. The movements for both decolonization and civil rights occurred during the cold war era, and both movements traced their origins to the Second World War. Above all, both centered around the idea of freedom, and their interactions highlighted the multiple forms this ideology could take. In particular, the contrast between anticommunist and anti-imperialist struggles was not only geographical but also racial. Their interplay would highlight both the struggle against white freedom and the reasons for its continued importance.

The Struggle for Freedom and the End of Empire

Not so very long ago, the earth numbered two thousand million inhabitants: five hundred

million men, and one thousand five hundred million natives.

—JEAN-PAUL SARTRE²³

I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside over the liquidation of the

British Empire.

—WINSTON CHURCHILL, 1942²⁴

The collapse of formal European empires in the twenty years after the end of World War II was one of the most dramatic series of events in modern world history. In that generation Britain, France, and other European nations granted independence, willingly or not, to most of their colonial possessions. In much of the Asian continent and virtually all of Africa, colonies became independent nations, with their own flags, legislatures, and armies. The United Nations grew from 55 member states in 1946 to 117 in 1965, and most of the new members were former colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. For the first time in history, the modern nation-state expanded beyond Europe and the Americas to embrace all the peoples of the world. ²⁵

For most political activists in the colonies, the struggle against

colonialism was above all a struggle for freedom. In 1940, for example, the Indian National Congress passed a resolution demanding freedom and independence for India from the British Empire.

The Congress hereby declares again that nothing short of complete independence can be accepted by the people of India. Indian freedom cannot exist within the orbit of imperialism, and dominion status, or any other status within the imperial structure is wholly inapplicable to India, is not in keeping with the dignity of a great nation, and would bind India in many ways to British policies and economic structure. The people of India alone can properly shape their own constitution and determine their relations to the other countries of the world, through a Constituent Assembly elected on the basis of adult suffrage. [26](#)

During the 1950s and 1960s many other anticolonial activists clothed their struggles against empire in the language of freedom. Kwame Nkrumah, leader of the Gold Coast's anticolonial movement and first president of the independent nation of Ghana, wrote several books and essays on the topic of colonial freedom and the anti-imperialist movement to achieve it. In *I Speak of Freedom*, for example, he wrote: "People listening to my speeches throughout the years could not have failed to notice two recurrent themes. The first is freedom of the individual. The

second is political independence, not just for Ghana or West Africa, but for all Africa. I do not know how anyone can refuse to acknowledge the right of [men to be free.”²⁷](#)

Other leaders of the colonial struggle for independence after World War II spoke and wrote extensively about their movement as a freedom struggle and commented on the different aspects of that freedom. Julius Nyerere, the first president of independent Tanzania, wrote some six separate books with the word *freedom* in the [title.²⁸](#) His classic essay, “Freedom and Development,” began with a concise definition of the meaning of freedom for the people of newly independent Tanzania:

For what do we mean when we talk of freedom? First, there is national freedom; that is, the ability of the citizens of Tanzania to determine their own future and to govern themselves without interference from non-Tanzanians. Second, there is freedom from hunger, disease, and poverty. And third, there is personal freedom for the individual; that is, his right to live in dignity and equality with all others, his right to freedom of speech, freedom to participate in the making of all decisions which affect his life, and freedom from arbitrary arrest because he happens to annoy someone in authority—and so on. All these things are aspects of freedom, and the citizens of Tanzania cannot be said to be truly free until

all of them are assured. [29](#)

The passages quoted above delineate multiple meanings of freedom, but two stand out: freedom for the individual and freedom for the nation. [30](#)

Postwar anticolonial struggles focused on national independence as both the ultimate goal and as a necessary precondition for personal freedom. Only through independence from the colonial overlord could the colonized peoples realize the freedom of the individual. For many anticolonial activists and proponents, a key aspect of personal freedom that could come only with the end of colonial rule was racial equality, the ability of all members of society to be treated the same regardless of their race. As many historians and other scholars have argued, racism formed a central aspect of colonial societies during the modern [era.](#)[31](#) Not only was the general structure of colonialism rule by a minority of white Europeans over masses of nonwhites in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, but a complex range of legal, social, and cultural practices established racial difference and discrimination as key aspects of the colonial order. Racist practices were perhaps worst in white settler colonies, such as Rhodesia and Algeria, but throughout the colonial world white privilege was the norm. [32](#) In his autobiography, *Freedom and After*, Tom Mboya, a trade unionist who later became one of the leaders of Kenyan independence, described having to

negotiate racial boundaries in colonial Kenya:

But there were a good many ... racial incidents. I was put under a European inspector to gain experience, and the two of us went around Nairobi together several times in the course of our work. I was surprised to find that from time to time he expected me to sit in the car when he went to inspect premises. I refused to do this and we had some heated words. He drove back to City Hall and said we could never work together again.

A number of times I was thrown out of premises I had gone to inspect by Europeans who insisted they wanted a European, not an African, to do the job ... even inside the department there was discrimination. African inspectors were paid only one-fifth of the salary which a [European inspector received for doing the same job.³³](#)

As Mboya's comments suggest, colonial racism had a particular impact upon native elites, one that increased over time. As colonial societies grew more complex under imperial rule, it became necessary to promote educated native subjects to positions of some responsibility, even if always under the supervision and control of Europeans. These individuals, like Mboya, often found themselves in situations where they were doing the same work and had the same qualifications as Europeans, but with

significantly less authority. Moreover, they were often consigned to live in segregated “native” quarters even when they could afford to live in nicer areas that were reserved solely for Europeans. For many, consequently, colonial oppression was a matter of racial discrimination pure and simple. [34](#)

The well-known example of Mohandas Gandhi’s expulsion from a South African train in 1893, because he was riding in a first-class compartment ostensibly reserved for whites, exemplified the impact of racism on colonial elites. Gandhi, a young lawyer at the time, was inspired by the incident to stay in South Africa and fight for the rights of Indians, developing the techniques of nonviolent resistance that would ultimately go on to transform colonial India (and earn him the honorific title of Mahatma). [35](#)

Among other things, his example would decades later be a model for another transformative act of resistance to segregation on public transportation, that of Rosa Parks. [36](#)

Especially in the early years of the struggles against empire, social elites dominated many anticolonial movements. The founding members of the Indian National Congress, for example, were educated men, mostly lawyers and [journalists](#).[37](#) Some historians and other scholars have argued that social and intellectual elites often led struggles against colonial rule because they had the economic and cultural resources necessary to do so. [38](#) But I would

also argue that these elites came together first to pursue racial justice in the colonial context. As the slim possibility of this became increasingly clear, they began to demand national independence as the only way of guaranteeing racial equality. Even when they grew into mass movements, anticolonial campaigns emphasized freedom for all, without regard to race. [39](#) As Kwame Nkrumah put it in *Freedom Now*: “Many of the advocates of colonialism claimed in the past—as some of them do now—they were racially superior and had a special mission to colonise and rule other people. This we reject. We repudiate and condemn all forms of racialism, for racialism not only injures those people against whom it is used but warps and perverts the very people who preach and protect it.” [40](#) The anticolonial freedom struggle was thus a struggle against white freedom, in which national liberation from European rule would bring liberty for [peoples of every race and heritage.](#)[41](#)

The social elites that fought for colonial liberation were also usually male elites, a fact that calls for an analysis of the role played by gender in the history of decolonization. Women engaged in anticolonial struggles in a variety of ways, ranging from critiques of the masculine leadership of the movement to active participation of many different kinds. Feminist scholars have long critiqued and debated Frantz Fanon’s attitudes to gender, notably

in his important essay “Algeria Unveiled.” [42](#) Women played an instrumental role in the fight for the independence of India and Pakistan, for example, not just as family members of male movement leaders but as leaders in their own [right.](#)[43](#) Throughout the colonial world women also took up arms for freedom, ranging from the Algerian women who planted bombs in the European quarter during the Battle of Algiers to the women of Zimbabwe who fought in guerilla armies against the [British.](#)[44](#) The struggle against white freedom thus developed as a struggle for the liberty of all.

Movements for colonial freedom and independence took many different forms, ranging from the peaceful and orderly turnover of power to violent conflicts and cataclysmic wars. Studies of decolonization for a long time contrasted the relatively peaceful end of the British Empire with the violent anticolonial struggles that consumed France, and to a lesser extent the Netherlands and Belgium. [45](#) Yet even the end of British rule over the Indian subcontinent in 1947 led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people in intercommunal violence as India and Pakistan established themselves as independent nations.[46](#) At the same time the British withdrawal from Palestine produced bitter warfare between Israelis and Palestinian Arabs, a war that over seventy years later has yet to end. [47](#) Not for nothing has Frantz

Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, which is among other things an extended meditation on the poetics of violence, become the classic text of the decolonization era. [48](#)

In short, violence was endemic to the end of European empire after World War II, and although it took many different forms, race frequently played a key role in the carnage. This was especially true of the great wars of decolonization, such as in Kenya, Indochina, and above all Algeria. [49](#) These military conflicts between anticolonial militants fighting for independence and the forces of order committed to maintaining imperial rule often took on the character of race wars. In particular, in colonies that, like Algeria and Kenya, combined major insurgencies with a large European settler population, the conflicts over independence derived much of their brutality from racial conflict. Fanon considered race central to colonialism and anticolonial violence merely a reaction to the racial violence of the imperial order. In his chapter “On Violence” he argued: “Looking at the immediacies of the colonial context, it is clear that what divides this world is first and foremost what species, what race one belongs to. In the colonies the economic infrastructure is also a superstructure. The cause is effect: You are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.” [50](#) During the insurgencies in both Kenya and Algeria,

guerrillas and imperial troops massacred civilians indiscriminately, largely because of their racial identities. The British in Kenya placed virtually the entire Kikuyu Nation under administrative detainment, during which thousands of people died from [abuse](#).⁵¹ In Algeria, the French military responded to FLN attacks against white settlers by slaughtering hundreds of thousands of Arab civilians, as during the Philippeville massacre of 1955.⁵² This racial violence extended to metropolitan France, most notably during the police riot of October 17, 1961, which killed up to two hundred [Algerians in the heart of central Paris](#).⁵³

The violence of decolonization reaffirmed the relationship between freedom and race, and the challenge to white freedom, in the decades after World War II. All too often imperial authorities responded to colonial movements for liberation by racially informed repression, in effect reinforcing the reality that to be nonwhite was to be [unfree](#).⁵⁴ More generally, the resistance to decolonization, even if it involved reforms and more liberal visions of colonial life, fundamentally rested upon the conviction that white elites had not only a monopoly on freedom but the right to rule nonwhite populations around the world. Decolonization ultimately destroyed that conviction, at least in theory, and so upended traditional parallels between whiteness and freedom.

In doing so, decolonization did not affect just the colonies. As a generation of Europeanist historians has argued, the end of empire reshaped life in the metropoles as much as it did in their colonial possessions. [55](#)

Especially for Britain and France, decolonization and the retreat from empire had a major impact on how those nations saw themselves and their relationships to the wider world. In an era of superpowers, the attempt to maintain imperial power represented both their efforts to cling to great power status and, to a significant extent, their failure to do so. As Kristin Ross has argued for France, the loss of the colonies also implied Europeans' [new status as colonies of the United States.](#)[56](#)

Just as the creation of European colonial empires in the nineteenth century went together with the rise of liberal democracy, so too did decolonization coincide with the turn toward social democracy in Europe after World War II. Facing the need to rebuild from the devastation of the war, many Europeans saw themselves confronted with a choice between fighting to retain their empires and investing in physical and social reconstruction at home. The parallel was closest in Britain, where the first majority-based Labour government, elected in 1945, presided over the granting of independence to India and Pakistan at the same time as it implemented a major expansion of welfare state [policies.](#)[57](#) In France as well

the retreat from formal empire under the Fourth Republic took place at the same time as the dramatic growth of *l'état providence*.⁵⁸ Social democracy, which blended the mass character of liberal democracy with the socialist commitment to social equality, or at least the guarantee of basic living standards, arose inexorably from the trauma of the Second World War, as did widespread decolonization.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, social democracy rose out of a new conceptualization of freedom that emphasized not just individual liberties but also social justice and mass well-being. The fact that the rise of the welfare state in Europe took place at the same time as the collapse of colonialism raises the question of the relationship between the two: why was jettisoning the empire integral to the creation of freer, more democratic European societies? Such a formulation shows how far postwar Europe had come from the social imperialism of Cecil Rhodes and others at the beginning of the century, the belief that colonial exploitation would guarantee higher living standards in the metropole. In Britain in particular, many saw the cost of empire as outweighing its benefits after 1945 and argued that ensuring the prosperity and freedom of the metropole meant getting rid of the colonies.⁵⁹ France managed to create the structures of social democracy while at the same time fighting two ruinous colonial wars,

but by the end of the 1950s much of the French nation had come to the same conclusion, that empire wasn't worth it. [60](#)

The turn against empire in postwar Europe was not only economic, however, but also had a significant racial component. Decolonization was not the only alternative to imperialism in the years after 1945. One could also transcend the colonial past by granting the colonies not independence but equality in the national framework. [61](#) In 1950, for example, Léopold Senghor developed the idea of *Eurafrlique* as a nation in which Africans and metropolitan French would enjoy equal rights and status. [62](#) The constitution of France's Fourth Republic, promulgated in 1946, had abolished the legal distinction between metropolitan citizens and colonial subjects, yet it still fell far short of Senghor's egalitarian idea. Ultimately the vision of a truly multicultural France, the majority of whose population would be non-European and nonwhite, was simply not feasible. Ideas of the equality of all members of the national community, not just in principle but in fact as well, could not accommodate the radical, and racialized, inequality between colonizer and colonized. Given a choice between making the natives equal or setting them free, the logic of decolonization led inexorably to the latter. [63](#) Granting the colonies national independence might create new multiracial ideas of liberty, but it would at the same time preserve the

European metropoles as a space for white freedom.

The actions and attitudes of the United States constituted a final important aspect of the history of race and freedom in the process of decolonization. In 1945 America was not only the most powerful nation in the world but was also widely acknowledged as the global standard bearer of freedom. During the war the US government had made its disapproval of European colonialism clear; for President Roosevelt, for example, the Atlantic Charter of 1942 was meant to apply to all peoples, not just those occupied by the Axis [powers](#).⁶⁴ The Americans also practiced what they preached with their own empire. Having agreed in 1934 to grant independence to the Philippines after a ten-year waiting period, in 1946 the US formally ended colonial control over that nation. [65](#) A little over a decade later America implemented Senghor's alternative route of postcolonial equality by making Hawaii a full-fledged state, the only state with a [majority nonwhite population](#).⁶⁶

After victory was assured, America took steps to prevent the restoration of the European [empires](#).⁶⁷ In particular, Washington was concerned they would hurt free trade or, in essence, America's ability to dominate the global economy, so it tailored its financial aid to its former allies to prevent that from happening. The most prominent example of this was the Anglo-

American Loan Agreement of 1946. Under its terms America loaned an economically prostrate Britain 3.75 billion pounds, at extremely low interest rates, to help it rebuild. However, one important term of the loan was that the pound be made convertible to the dollar within twelve months. The impact of this was in effect to force London to choose between its welfare state programs and its overseas commitments, and the political climate forced it to choose the former. As William Roger Louis and Ronald Robinson put it, “The imperial economy, in effect, was to be dismantled.” [68](#)

By the end of the 1940s, however, American opposition to European imperialism had diminished significantly. As the cold war intensified, many American policymakers began to rethink their support for anticolonialism, particularly anticolonial insurgencies led by (or perceived to be led by) communists. [69](#) This was especially true as the cold war became a major concern in Asia, and above all with the Communist victory in China and the Korean war. The fact that both Maoist China and North Korea saw themselves as very much a part of the global revolt against European imperialism led many in Washington to see anticolonial revolutions in general as primarily communist movements dedicated to the suppression of freedom rather than popular struggles for liberty. [70](#) By the beginning of the 1950s, therefore, the US government had in effect committed itself to

propping up the European empires as a bulwark against communism. The most notable example of this was the French war in Indochina. [71](#)

During World War II the United States had supported the Viet Minh in its struggle against the Japanese occupation of Vietnam. The French decision in 1946 to reoccupy Indochina by force in 1946, and its bombardment of Haiphong Harbor and landing of troops in the North in November, forced the US to reassess its position. America's primary concern was the threat of communism in Europe, and in France, French Communist support for the Viet Minh was not only one of the party's key commitments but also one of the major factors in the collapse of the Tripartite coalition with the Socialist Party. [72](#) The logic of anticommunism in Europe thus led the US inexorably to support the French war in Indochina against the Communist Viet Minh, so that in effect the war in Southeast Asia became a kind of proxy for the cold war in France. By the end of the war in 1954 the US government was shouldering the lion's share of the financial burden for the French war and would of course go on to pursue its own disastrous conflict in Vietnam. America would fight for the freedom of the natives from Communist rule, even if it meant supporting colonial and racist rule. Political freedom was important, but ultimately must not conflict with white freedom.[73](#)



FIGURE 28. Captured French soldiers, escorted by Vietnamese troops, walk to a prisoner-of-war camp

in Dien Bien Phu (1954). <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/vietnam-celebrates-60th-anniversary-battle-dien-bien-phu-victory-1447556>.

The history of the first Indochina war illustrates the fact that postwar decolonization took place in the context of the cold war. For America in particular, the struggle against communism was a global phenomenon and also had a significant racial dimension. Preserving free Europe from Soviet rule generally took priority, even if the rise of communism in China and elsewhere in Asia led it to wage war there to forestall its spread. The fact

that America's anticommunist wars in Asia had their own colonial and racial dimension affirmed the place of white freedom in its cold war crusade. [74](#) At the same time, the fact that American society was hardly immune from racial prejudice had its own implications for American anticommunism. The next section of this chapter will explore the significance of the challenge to white freedom posed by the civil rights movement for the relationship between race and liberty both in the United States and on a global scale.

The Struggle for Black Freedom in the Land of Liberty

Oh, freedom!

Oh, freedom!

Oh, freedom over me!

And before I'd be a slave

I'll be buried in my grave

And go home to my Lord and be free.

—AFRICAN AMERICAN SPIRITUAL

When we allow freedom to ring ... we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's

children, Black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able

to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last, Free at last, Great

God a-mighty, We are free at last.”

—DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., “I HAVE A DREAM,” MARCH ON WASHINGTON,

1963

On March 5, 1957, the people of Ghana celebrated the end of British rule and the independence of their new nation. One of Kwame Nkrumah’s invited guests was Martin Luther King Jr., experiencing his first moments in the international limelight after the triumph of the Montgomery bus boycott the year before. At one point he commented to another American guest, Vice President Richard M. Nixon, that “I’m very glad to meet you here, but I want you to come visit us down in Alabama, where we are seeking the same kind of freedom Ghana is celebrating.” [75](#)

At the end of World War II the United States was not only the wealthiest and most powerful nation on earth but also prided itself on being the most free. Whereas the great industrial powers of Germany and Japan were dominated by bombed-out cities and shattered factories, America produced half of the world’s manufactured goods in 1945. The Soviet Union might have a larger army, but the US alone had the atomic bomb. Moreover, unlike most other wartime belligerents, America’s population had actually grown between 1939 and 1945. Not for nothing did *Time* publisher Henry Luce proclaim the dawn of the American Century at the end of the war.[76](#)

Yet at least as important for many Americans was not just their nation's military and economic prowess but its freedom. From being the ultimate refuge for refugees from Nazism during the 1930s to leading the global military crusade against fascism in both Asia and Europe during the 1940s, Americans prided themselves on their commitment to freedom for all of humanity. With the onset of the cold war the American struggle for liberty assumed a new form, the fight against world communism, but this shift only reemphasized the importance of freedom to American life and the centrality of America to the global fight for liberty. [77](#)

One must approach the history of the postwar civil rights movement from the perspective of this broader context, the general history of freedom in America. For example, Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech focused on the phrase *Let freedom ring*, a line drawn directly from the famous patriotic song "My Country 'Tis of Thee." As historians Brenda Gayle Plummer, Penny Von Eschen, and Mary Dudziak have demonstrated, the history of the civil rights movement is intimately connected with that of the cold war: American policymakers constantly had to confront, when preaching alliances to peoples overseas, the contradiction between America as the land of freedom and its oppression of its Black population. One could not convincingly champion freedom globally while denying it locally. [78](#)

The issue of freedom was thus central to the civil rights movement, and also made that movement central to American history. Historians have debated how to draw the boundaries of the movement, both geographically and chronologically.⁷⁹ From looking at the movement's relationship to US foreign policy to considering how peoples around the world reacted to it, studies have considered the ways in which the struggle for Black liberation went far beyond the borders of the US South.⁸⁰ At the same time, scholars such as Adrienne Lentz-Smith and Chad Williams have argued for a direct connection between the Black experience in World War I and the beginnings of the movement, for example, and many now point to efforts like the Double V campaign as ways in which World War II generated the struggle for civil rights.⁸¹

In one sense, of course, the fight for Black freedom in America began when the first African slave set foot on what was to become the United States some four hundred years ago. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this study it makes sense to focus on a narrow interpretation of the civil rights movement, ranging in time from the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court decision in 1954 to the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. Several reasons recommend this approach. In this era the movement had a geographical and thematic unity that tended to dissipate in later years.

To a greater extent than in later years, it both appealed to and attracted significant white support by portraying the oppression of Blacks in America as a fundamental contradiction to the ideals of the republic. Frequently referred to as the Second Reconstruction, it explicitly linked itself to earlier struggles for racial justice. Moreover, focusing on these specific years highlights the movement's strong parallels with decolonization in Africa and Asia, parallels evident at the time and commented upon ever since. [82](#)

Above all, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s saw itself as a movement for freedom, making the idea of liberation from racism the essence of what it strove to achieve. Like decolonization, but perhaps to an even greater extent, the civil rights movement argued that all peoples should be free, no matter what the color of their skins. Phrases like *freedom rides*, *freedom schools*, *freedom trains*, *freedom marches*, and *freedom summer* summed up its central ideas. The number of books about the movement, both memoirs and histories, that contain the word *freedom* in their titles is almost too numerous to [count.](#)⁸³ As Martin Luther King Jr. argued in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," freedom was the ultimate goal of the worldwide struggle against racism:

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The urge for freedom will eventually come. This is what has happened to the

American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom; something without has reminded him that he can gain it. Consciously and unconsciously, he has been swept in by what the Germans call the Zeitgeist, and with his Black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America, and the Caribbean, he is moving with a sense of cosmic urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. [84](#)

The movement thus challenged white freedom as a contradiction, and like the battles for colonial liberation sought to move beyond it to a world where freedom had no color.

The emphasis on freedom went far beyond Martin Luther King Jr., of course. For African Americans living in the South, freedom meant above all the final realization of the abolition of slavery. It meant dismantling the entire apparatus of Jim Crow built up by the white Southern establishment to keep the former slaves dependent and subordinate. Not for nothing did the Black press hail *Brown v. Board of Education* as a “second Emancipation Proclamation.”[85](#) Not for nothing did the Black church, the one institution in African American life that had given enslaved Blacks a glimpse of self-determination, frequently assume the leadership of the [movement.](#)[86](#) Not for nothing did the Black Muslims take new names (or

non-names like X) to replace those inherited from the slave era. Within this broader context the civil rights movement struggled for many specific examples of freedom. As Eric Foner has put it: “[Freedom] meant enjoying the political rights and economic opportunities taken for granted by whites. It required eradicating historic wrongs such as segregation, disenfranchisement, confinement to low wage jobs, and the ever-present threat of violence. It meant the right to be served at lunch counters and downtown department stores … and to be addressed as ‘Mr.,’ ‘Miss,’ and ‘Mrs.,’ rather than ‘boy’ and ‘auntie.’ ” [87](#) At its heart, however, the struggle for freedom waged by the civil rights movement took up the unfinished business of America’s long battle over Black slavery. It meant risking (and suffering) beatings, imprisonment, even death, simply because in the end one would rather die a free man or woman than live as a slave. In 1901 George Henry White, the last of the Black Reconstruction-era congressmen from the South, had predicted that his people would rise again (see [chapter 4](#)). Some fifty-odd years later, his prophecy seemed about to come true. Like Reconstruction, the history of the civil rights movement was dominated by two main issues: education and voting rights. Education would give Blacks the knowledge and understanding of how to protect their freedom, and voting rights would give them the ability to put that

knowledge into practice. The two great bookends of the movement, *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, illustrated the centrality of these issues to the new movement for Black freedom. They also highlighted its connection with the old: the freedom schools recalled those established by the Freedmen's Bureau for ex-slaves after the Civil War, and the emphasis on voting rights constituted a direct response to the overthrow of Reconstruction. In its struggle around these issues, the Second Reconstruction would succeed where the first had failed in finally abolishing slavery.

The movement to desegregate southern schools not only struck at the heart of American racism but also took place in a context of a new attention to education in general. America had long been a global leader in providing education for the masses, but this became even more important during the economic boom years after World War II, and it was especially true of higher education. In 1944 Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, or GI Bill, which sent millions of veterans to college on the government dime, providing an unprecedented new model for mass higher [education.⁸⁸](#) Public universities expanded impressively in the decades after World War II: to take one example, the University of California grew from two undergraduate campuses in 1943 to eight by 1965. [89](#) Leaders of

government and industry argued that America must make this investment to secure the benefits of both economic prosperity and political liberty: as President Eisenhower argued, “No man flying a warplane, no man with a defensive gun in his hand, can possibly be more important than a teacher.” [90](#)

Mass higher education thus became a particularly American condition of freedom.

This was just part of a broader emphasis on education and schools in general. The “baby boom” between 1945 and 1964 brought an enormous new school-age population into American society, and many communities desperately scrambled to build new schools just to keep up. [91](#) The Soviet launch of the Sputnik satellite in October 1957 prompted massive government investment in public education, especially science education, in response to fears that America might lose its edge in science, technology, and defense-related knowledge in [general.](#)[92](#) The idea that a free populace must be an educated populace had deep roots in American culture, but never did this idea appear more important than in the era of the cold war. [93](#)

This emphasis on education as a key to liberty made the yawning gaps between the schooling of Blacks and whites more egregious than ever. First, America spent much more to educate white children than Black children at the start of the civil rights movement. This was especially true in the South:

in 1945, southern states spent twice as much per white child as per Black child. Second, this went hand in hand with the overwhelming segregation of schools. In 1954, the year of the *Brown* decision, seventeen southern states required the racial segregation of schools, and four others permitted it. [94](#) The schools of the nation's capital had been segregated since the Civil War. Although most salient in the South, this was a national problem. School segregation in the North arose from segregated neighborhoods, but as Richard Rothstein has conclusively demonstrated in *The Color of Law*, neighborhood segregation itself arose from government policies. [95](#) School segregation both promoted racial inequality and made it manifestly clear: in 1940, for example, Mississippi's expenditures on Black schools were only fifteen percent of its expenditures on white schools. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 Supreme Court decision that had upheld school segregation, had based its decision on the principle of "separate but equal." [96](#) Even a cursory glance at American public education after World War II, however, made it clear that segregated education was inherently unequal and racially discriminatory.

This was the essence not only of *Brown* but of the civil rights movement in [general](#).[97](#) The *Brown* decision gave it a focus on the battle against segregation, one that embraced both the movement's legal and activist

strategies. The struggle for school integration in particular became a central part of the movement, especially as the white Southern political establishment made it clear it would fight attempts to integrate Southern schools by any and all means necessary. When Black students tried to attend white schools and universities, they were frequently met with violence. In 1956 a mob prevented a Black woman, Autherine Lucy, from enrolling as a student at the University of Alabama. Five years later Alabama governor and segregationist firebrand George Wallace would literally stand in the doorway of the entrance to the university to prevent Black students from attending. In 1957 Arkansas governor Orval Faubus deployed the National Guard to stop nine Black students from enrolling in Little Rock's Central High School, only to be overruled by federal troops, who patrolled the school for a year. In 1962 James Meredith became the first Black student ever to enroll in the University of Mississippi, only after winning victories in the federal courts and in the face of white student riots.⁹⁸

Inspired by *Brown*, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s embraced the struggle against segregation in many different facets of American life. The movement's first mass campaign, the Montgomery Alabama bus boycott of 1955–56, demanded the right of Blacks to have the

same access to the city's buses as whites, to sit anywhere on the bus no matter their [race](#).⁹⁹ In February 1960, Black students in Greensboro, North Carolina, staged a sit-in in a Woolworth's lunch counter demanding the right to be served in an area reserved for whites. The sit-in movement spread rapidly throughout the South, mobilizing tens of thousands by the end of 1960 who campaigned for the integration of restaurants, swimming pools, movie theaters, and other public and commercial [facilities](#).¹⁰⁰ These were followed by the freedom rides of 1961, in which integrated groups of passengers would ride buses throughout the South, defying local segregationist practices. [101](#)

But school segregation remained the most egregious, and most enduring, example of racial discrimination and white freedom during the civil rights movement. In theory, for example, the segregation of the Montgomery city buses did not have to be discriminatory: people on the front and back of the bus got to their destinations at the same time. This in essence was the logic of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In reality, however, as the situation of the public schools so graphically demonstrated, segregation meant white privilege and Black inferiority. This simple reality explained both the mass mobilization of southern Blacks, in spite of the apparatus of white terror that all too often confronted them, and the fierce resistance of southern whites. Racial

segregation in the South (and, as we shall see, in America generally) was the bulwark, the front line of defense of the whole apparatus of white freedom, now under assault as it had not been since Reconstruction.

The other main theme of the civil rights movement was the right to vote: if *Brown* marked the beginnings of the movement in 1954, the Voting Rights Act signaled its culmination in 1965. As we saw in [chapter 4](#), the entire edifice of Jim Crow rested on the massive disenfranchisement of Black freedmen throughout the South after Reconstruction. Because few



African Americans could vote, white local governments were free to implement a range of segregationist and racist legislation. At the national level as well, Southern congressmen and senators fought effectively against any challenges to the racist hierarchies in their home districts. As Frederick Douglass had recognized a century early, the right and ability of Blacks to vote was the essential requirement for the final destruction of slavery and thus the precondition for Black freedom. The integration of Southern society depended on the ability of Blacks to exercise political power, and by the early 1960s the struggle to register African Americans to vote had become the heart of the civil rights movement.

FIGURE 29. March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (photographer unknown). August 28, 1963.

U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (NAID 542003). Still Picture Records Section,

Special Media Services Division (NWCS-S).

The campaign for Black enfranchisement in the South was led by SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Formed by Black students in April 1960 under the sponsorship of major civil rights organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SNCC cut its teeth in the freedom rides and sit-ins but soon developed its own independent perspective on the movement. [102](#) Starting in the fall of 1961, under the

leadership of activist Bob Moses, SNCC began a project to register Black voters in McComb County, Mississippi. [103](#) Local whites responded with violence, including the murder of a local Black man, and most of the SNCC volunteers saw jail time by the end of the year. Voter registration work was painstakingly difficult and extremely dangerous: not only did organizers risk violence but they also put their local Black hosts in peril. On several occasions, racist vigilantes firebombed the homes of Blacks who hosted civil rights workers. Yet SNCC persisted, seeing voting as the key to the overthrow of Jim Crow. It adopted the campaign slogan *One man, one vote* and stepped up its efforts. As Bob Moses argued, “[Blacks in Mississippi] want to learn. They want to vote. They feel that for once they have a chance at bettering their conditions.”[104](#)

Perhaps the most dramatic example of the campaign for voter registration was what SNCC called Freedom Summer. The successful March on Washington in 1963 had brought national attention and goodwill to the civil rights movement, but the white South still violently resisted attempts to enfranchise Blacks or overthrow Jim Crow. The fight for desegregation in Birmingham, Alabama, during which the chief of police, Eugene “Bull” Connor, attacked Black children with dogs and high-pressure fire hoses in the spring of 1963, made that abundantly clear. In

response, SNCC and other civil rights organizations decided to launch a major voter registration drive in Mississippi during the summer of 1964. Freedom Summer built upon SNCC's local grassroots organizing in the state during 1963, including the organization of a mock vote that mobilized thousands. In February 1964 SNCC organizers began touring northern college campuses, recruiting white students to spend their summer in Mississippi registering Blacks to vote. In June volunteers underwent a week's training on a college campus in Oxford, Ohio, before heading south to enfranchise Black voters. [105](#)

In Mississippi they found the epicenter of American racism. Mississippi had a greater percentage of African Americans than any other state in the Union, and one of the smallest percentages of Black voters, less than seven percent of the Black population. It also had a record of lynchings of Black men unmatched anywhere else in [America.106](#) During the ten weeks of the project Black and white volunteers worked to register Blacks to vote as well as organizing freedom schools to teach subversive subjects like Black history and constitutional rights. Activists also organized the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, a parallel political organization that ran its own elections and went on to challenge the regular state party at the Democratic National Convention in August.

Freedom Summer volunteers did this in the face of considerable violent resistance. More than one thousand volunteers were arrested, eighty were beaten, and more than thirty Black churches and homes were firebombed during Freedom Summer. On the first day of Freedom Summer, local whites kidnapped three activists, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, unleashing a massive manhunt that culminated with the discovery of their bodies six weeks later. The murder of the three civil rights volunteers, especially the fact that two of them were white, served to focus national attention on the situation of Blacks in Mississippi like never before. [107](#) Freedom Summer did not succeed in gaining the right to vote for most Blacks in the state, yet the campaign marked the beginning of the end for Jim Crow, not just in Mississippi but nationally. On July 2, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, banning racial discrimination in public facilities and federal projects. [108](#) This was a major step forward, yet the new law's safeguards for voting rights were relatively weak. Clearly more was needed.

The groundwork for Black voting rights laid by Mississippi's Freedom Summer in 1964 came to fruition in 1965. In the early months of that year the campaign shifted to Selma, Alabama, where SNCC had been organizing Blacks to vote since 1963. On October 7, 1963, for example, it had declared

“Freedom Day” in Selma, lining up hundreds of Blacks to register to vote: most were denied their rights by the local authorities. In early 1965 local activists invited Martin Luther King and the SCLC to Selma to lend their weight to the movement. King took part in several marches in Selma, and after one demonstrator was murdered by local police he and others organized a march from Selma to the state capital of Montgomery for voting rights. On March 7 the march left Selma only to be attacked by mounted police wielding whips, billy clubs, and other weapons. The images of “Bloody Sunday,” with peaceful demonstrators being beaten by armed police for seeking to vote, were broadcast on television worldwide and shocked the nation. Hundreds of people from throughout America responded to the call to join a second march a week later while sympathy protests broke out across the country, including the first-ever sit-in at the White House itself. [109](#)

The violence led President Lyndon B. Johnson to speak up more forcefully than ever before in support of the civil rights movement and voting rights for Southern Blacks. Shortly after Bloody Sunday he gave a televised address to the nation, calling on all Americans to support the movement and using its own language to claim that “we shall overcome.” In late March, the Johnson administration sent the draft of the Voting Rights

Act to Congress for approval. The violence in Selma helped convince both the House of Representatives and the Senate to pass the bill by overwhelming majorities, and on August 6, 1965, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. The new law outlined discriminatory practices like literacy tests designed to prevent Blacks from voting and deployed federal marshals throughout the South to enfranchise citizens of all races. It had an immediate and dramatic impact: by the end of 1965, sixty percent of eligible Blacks in Mississippi had registered to vote, and within two years a majority of Black adults in most of the former Confederacy had [registered.¹¹⁰](#) Southern states fought the new law tooth and nail, but by the end of the 1960s it was clear that a revolution had occurred in the old land of slavery. For once at least, the slogan *Freedom now* seemed to accurately describe not only the desires but the achievements of the civil rights movement, and it was freedom for all, not the white freedom that had so long dominated the region and the United States in general.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 paralleled the work of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments a century earlier. Both sets of laws had challenged the ideas of white freedom and Black slavery, and the fact that legislators had to reaffirm the legislation of the Reconstruction era one hundred years later showed just how pernicious

and enduring those ideas were in American history. With the Voting Rights Act in particular the Second Reconstruction had triumphed, but how complete the triumph was, and whether one day a third Reconstruction would be necessary, remained to be seen.

White Freedom

Continuities and Rebirth, 1965–89

To an important degree, the year 1965 seemed to represent the definitive death of white freedom on a global scale. South Africa might still embrace apartheid and white Rhodesia declare its independence as a racial state, but most of the formerly colonial world had shaken off imperial rule for good. Moreover, Europe in general seemed to have definitively turned its back on empire; by the late 1960s Portugal, the one remaining European colonial power (and one of the poorest nations on the continent) futilely fought African wars of independence that would triumph within a decade. Increasingly the membership of the United Nations consisted of the nonwhite representatives of former colonies, now independent nations. In America, the Voting Rights Act marked the triumph of the classic phase of the civil rights movement.

I want to stress this point. So far, this book's tale has recounted the development of freedom and racism at the same time in the modern world,

continually interacting to produce ideas and practices of liberty that depended on racial difference. The rise of racially defined empire on a global scale, followed by the antiliberal and genocidal racism of the Nazi era, dramatically weakened the idea of white freedom, and the antiracist and anticolonial insurgencies in America, Africa, and Asia after 1945 seemed to deal it a death blow. A generation after the end of World War II few peoples, political movements, or states throughout the world made the explicit argument that liberty depended on whiteness, or that only whites deserved to be free. Those that did, like South Africa, increasingly became international pariahs, out of step with modern visions of progress and justice. One could argue, therefore, that after 1965 white freedom became increasingly anachronistic, that in a sense this book should end here.

As we shall see in the rest of this chapter, however, there is more to the story. The late twentieth century witnessed the rise of new variants of white freedom, as the attempt to make freedom color-blind not only faltered in practice but also gave birth to new ways of linking liberty and racial hierarchies. Many peoples in the colonized world found it was a lot easier to raise the flag of independent new nations than to bring the many relations of dependency with the formal colonial powers to an end. In the United States, the civil rights movement fragmented as it moved from challenging

legal segregation and white terror in the South to the broader structures of racial inequality in America, and this evolution provoked widespread opposition that embraced whiteness as an aspect of color-blind ideology. In both Europe and America, new powerful waves of immigration from the nonwhite Third World brought new racial distinctions and conflicts, making the contrast between white affluence and nonwhite poverty local as well as global. Finally, the collapse of Soviet Communism in Eastern Europe and Russia signaled a major new era of freedom centered for the most part in Europe. Looking at the world on the eve of the twenty-first century, whiteness and freedom thus still seemed closely linked.

The final section of this chapter will therefore consider new forms of white freedom that arose in the aftermath of, and to an important extent in reaction to, the massive rejection of racism after 1945. It will explore both their continuities with earlier forms of racialized liberty and the ways in which they broke new ground. Freedom remained as important a goal as ever on the eve of the twenty-first century, and for all too many people across the world whiteness continued to be a crucial aspect of their ability to be free.

Independence without Freedom

You know, Ali, it's hard enough to start a revolution, even harder to sustain it, and hardest of all

to win it. But it's only afterwards, once we've won, that the real difficulties begin.

—GILLO PONTECORVO, *THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS*, 1966

On July 5, 1960, Émile Janssens, the commander of the Force Publique, Belgium's colonial army in the Congo, called a meeting of his officers to discuss the rapidly changing political situation. Although anti-imperialist movements had come late to the Belgian Congo, they had burst into full flower the year before, prompting a panicked administration in Brussels to accede to nationalist desires for the end of colonial rule. A week earlier, on June 30, Belgium had formally granted independence to the new Congolese government. In convening his officers, however, Janssens emphasized the continuity of military power, and colonial rule in general. As he told them, "Independence brings changes to politicians and to civilians. But for you, nothing will be changed ... none of your new masters can change the structure of an army which, throughout its history, has been the most organized, the most victorious in Africa." To emphasize his point, he wrote on the blackboard, "Before independence = After independence."¹¹¹

Give the devil his due. Congolese soldiers reacted to Janssens's speech with outrage, that night launching a revolt which soon spread all over the country and triggered Belgian military intervention a few days later. By the end of the year the newly independent nation was involved in a full-fledged

civil war that threatened to mesh with the global cold war as rival factions appealed to both the United States and the Soviet Union for military aid. The Congo crisis came to an end only with the definitive seizure of power by Colonel Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, who established a military dictatorship over the country that endured until his overthrow in 1997. Mobutu's military regime harshly suppressed any political dissent while trading influence for economic favors with a series of foreign nations and companies. The dreams of freedom that powered the movement for independence in the Belgian Congo during the late 1950s bore bitter fruit in subsequent decades. [112](#)

A key theme in the study of postcolonial Asia and Africa has been the extent to which the end of formal empire did or did not bring about true independence and freedom for the formerly colonized. In 1965 Kwame Nkrumah published *Neo-Colonialism: The Highest Stage of Imperialism*, a ringing denunciation and analysis of the former colonial powers' continued influence on African and non-Western affairs. In *Neo-Colonialism* Nkrumah made it clear that national independence was only the beginning of a long struggle for true colonial liberation, that even without formal colonial rule the structures of imperialist domination remained largely intact. In Nkrumah's Marxist analysis the ultimate world struggle took place between

rich and poor countries, which represented a much more insidious form of colonialism: “The neo-colonialism of Today represents imperialism in its final and perhaps most dangerous stage … The essence of neo-colonialism is that the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside … Investment under neo-colonialism increases rather than decreases the gap between the rich and the poor countries of the world.” [113](#) As Nkrumah and many others realized, the struggle to make viable, independent nations free of outside control, especially control by international capital and the former colonial powers, went far beyond raising a new national flag.

In practice, the former colonial powers continued to wield significant economic and military influence over their former colonies, especially in Africa, after granting them formal independence. In the Congo, for example, Belgian firms retained control of the bulk of the country’s lucrative mining industry well after the end of that nation’s crisis of independence. [114](#) In the postwar era, Britain became noteworthy for peacefully granting its former colonies national independence, but this often went along with economic dominance of the new national economies by British financial institutions and multinational companies. During the 1950s

and 1960s Britain's Commonwealth of Nations helped link the economies of the former colonies to London, and after Britain joined the European Union in 1972 it continued to retain special economic ties to its former empire. Such ties were often subtle, and for the most part the British did not intervene militarily in Anglophone Africa after independence. Nonetheless, they ensured a continued British presence in its former colonies that [transcended the granting of formal sovereignty to the empire.](#)¹¹⁵

France played a much more direct and powerful role in its former colonies after the mid-1960s. In 1958, in the context of the crisis produced by the Algerian war and the collapse of the Fourth Republic, France held a referendum in its African colonies offering them either continued association with (and aid from) France or immediate independence. With the signal exception of Guinea, all the colonial subjects voted for the former.¹¹⁶ Two years later, however, faced with increasing African demands for independence, the government of Charles De Gaulle decided that the days of direct colonial rule in Africa had come to an end. In 1960, as a result, France granted independence to no less than fourteen colonies in sub-Saharan Africa. French officials shuttled from one colonial capital to another, lowering the French flag and hoisting that of the new nation. By the time Algeria achieved its freedom in 1962, the French Empire in Africa

was no more.¹¹⁷

That hardly spelled the end of French economic and political influence on the continent, however. Even more than Britain, France retained considerable influence over the new governments of its former African colonies, a phenomenon often referred to as *Françafrique*.¹¹⁸ In 1960 De Gaulle appointed Jacques Foccart, a veteran of the Gaullist resistance during World War II, special adviser to the president in African affairs. Foccart constructed a special office in the Élysée Palace, removed from parliamentary oversight or control, and used it for most of the rest of the twentieth century to direct French involvement in African affairs.¹¹⁹ Foccart's office directed covert payments to African leaders to ensure their loyalty and compliance, and also financed secret wars against insurgent forces that threatened French interests. For example, French forces waged a secret war in Cameroon, overthrowing Marxist insurgents and ensuring the establishment of a compliant independent regime in ^{1960.}¹²⁰ More generally, France included its former African colonies in a financial union called the franc zone, opening them to investment by French companies and in effect subsidizing France's economy. France also signed agreements for technical, cultural, and military cooperation with most Francophone African states and sent technical advisers, teachers, and other experts to Africa to

promote French culture and politics.

Perhaps most strikingly, France intervened militarily time and time again in Francophone Africa. The French retained garrisons with thousands of soldiers in its former African colonies and used them to prevent challenges to French interests. Throughout the late twentieth century France maintained large military garrisons in Francophone Africa, frequently deploying their troops across the region. Between 1960 and 1995 France intervened thirty-five times in African conflicts, usually to prevent challenges to allied regimes. For example, in 1964 French paratroopers landed in Libreville, the capital of Gabon, to defeat an attempted overthrow of that regime. French interventions sometimes took place outside Francophone Africa. In 1977 and 1978 France intervened in the Congo to protect dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, a strong defender of Western interests in Africa. The fact that these interventions usually occurred at the invitation of a local ruler did not contradict the fact that as a general phenomenon they challenged the reality of Francophone African independence, independence which seemingly had to be defended time and time again by a white man's army.^{[121](#)}

The particular issue of French military intervention in Francophone Africa relates to a broader question, that of the relationship between

independence and democracy in the postcolonial world during the late twentieth century. As this study has shown, most colonial territories in Asia and Africa had been controlled by democratic European states, and many of them had inherited the structures of formal parliamentary democracy from their imperial masters, structures that in many cases the colonized used in the struggles for independence. Frequently, however, these structures did not endure into the postcolonial era. Instead, all too often colonial rule gave way to military dictatorship. This was especially true in Africa; as we have already seen, the independence of the Belgian Congo led quickly to the overthrow and assassination of democratically elected Patrice Lumumba and the dictatorship of Colonel Mobutu. In February 1966 Kwame Nkrumah, perhaps Africa's greatest independence leader, was overthrown by a military coup d'état widely rumored to have been facilitated by the American CIA. [122](#) When Algeria became independent in 1962, FLN leader Ahmed Ben Bella established an authoritarian regime, only to be overthrown by the army three years later.[123](#) By the end of the 1960s virtually all of the newly created African states had become military dictatorships.

Although this pattern occurred most noticeably in Africa, other parts of what had become known as the Third World were certainly not immune.

Although the Middle East had been a major pioneer in the revolt against colonialism after World War II, the area soon fell under the control of a mixture of monarchies and military regimes. Latin America, which had largely freed itself from colonial rule in the early nineteenth century, remained dominated by military dictatorships in the late twentieth century, often aided by the neocolonial influence of the United States. The armed forces seized power in Brazil in 1964, in Argentina in 1966, and in Chile in 1973, among other examples, and in general, whether or not it was actually in power, the military remained a powerful political force throughout the region. [124](#) The main alternative to military rule in the postcolonial Third World was not liberal democracy but rather Marxism. Communist regimes in Vietnam, Cuba, and above all China, for example, had often successfully challenged the monumental problems of poverty and land reform in the postcolonial world, without making freedom a priority.[125](#)

There were of course some exceptions, notably India, which by the second half of the twentieth century could justifiably claim to be the world's largest democracy. India, however, had assets rare elsewhere in the postcolonial world, including a large educated middle class and a tradition of parliamentary and political activism that went back to the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885. [126](#) These were exceptional, and so in

general was the presence of liberal democracy in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. If one glanced at the global political order in the last quarter of the twentieth century, therefore, one would see a world where political regimes that championed liberty largely existed in Western Europe and North America. Although there were major exceptions like India and Eastern Europe, these were exceptions to a general rule that freedom was essentially white.

After Civil Rights

Busing and White Backlash in America

On April 5, 1976, Ted Landsmark, an African American attorney, was walking to work in downtown Boston. At the time, the Massachusetts



capital was reeling from the racial tensions and violence resulting from the plan to integrate the city's schools, while at the same time preparing for the celebration that summer of the bicentennial of the American Revolution. A year and a half earlier another Black man, Andre Yvon Jean-Louis, had been pulled from his car and nearly murdered by a white mob in broad daylight while driving through South Boston. A month earlier, during the Massachusetts presidential primary, Boston had given a majority of its votes to the arch-segregationist governor of Alabama, George Wallace. [127](#) As

Landsmark walked down the street he was suddenly set upon by a group of white teenagers. One of them attacked him with an American flag, severely beating him and producing a famous photograph that later won the Pulitzer Prize. In a city long known as America's cradle of liberty, on one spring day freedom took the form of racist violence. [128](#)

FIGURE 30. "The Soiling of Old Glory." Photo of Ted Landsmark by Stanley Forman,

[StanleyForman.photos.com.](#) © Stanley Forman. "That's me in the picture: Ted Landsmark is

assaulted in Boston, at an 'anti-bussing' protest, 5 April 1976," by Abigail Radnor, *The Guardian*,

April 17, 2015.

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/apr/17/thats-me-in-picture-ted-landsmark-boston-anti-busing>

The period from the high-water mark of the civil rights movement in 1965 to the end of the 1980s illustrated both the revolutionary impact of the struggle for racial equality in modern America and the limits of that struggle. One of the great triumphs of the campaign for Black freedom was a permanent shift in American racial discourse. After the early 1960s most Americans no longer accepted racist language or appeals to racial bigotry.

The idea that all men are created equal, enshrined in the founding documents of the Republic, now extended to men (and increasingly women)

of all colors. Those who continued to harbor racist sentiments had to express them in veiled form or risk both condemnation and irrelevance. By the 1970s, Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, a die-hard foe of integration and founder of the Dixiecrat Party in 1948, had denounced racism publicly and begun to work with African American leaders in his home state.¹²⁹ After the mid-1960s writers, politicians, and other public figures agreed, at least in theory, that overt racism had no place in American life.

The civil rights movement reshaped American life far beyond the concerns of African Americans. The movement sparked a crucial change in American immigration law. The landmark Immigration and Nationalization Act of 1965 overturned the Johnson-McCarran Act of 1924 by removing racial qualifications for foreigners desiring to settle in the United States. Passed the year after the Civil Rights Act, the overwhelmingly majority of Congress that voted for the new immigration law clearly drew inspiration from the movement's ideal of racial equality; as Attorney General Robert Kennedy noted, "Everywhere else in our national life, we have eliminated discrimination based on national origins. Yet this system is still the foundation of our immigration law."¹³⁰ The authors and proponents of the law predicted in 1965 that it would not have much of an impact on

American life, but they were wrong. From 1965 to 2000, ninety percent of new immigrants to the United States came from outside Europe, a sharp break from the past. For the first time in history, most Americans accepted the idea that to be American did not necessarily mean to be white. [131](#)

The civil rights movement also inspired a number of other struggles for social equality during the 1960s in particular. The rise of the massive baby boom generation to young adulthood and the resultant student and New Left movements often drew direct inspiration from the campaign for Black equality; veterans of Mississippi's Freedom Summer played a key role in the first major student uprising, Berkeley's Free Speech Movement in the fall of [1964.](#)[132](#) The rise of second wave feminism took place in the context of the struggle for civil rights, much as the movement for women's suffrage in the nineteenth century arose out of the abolitionist movement. [133](#) Civil rights activism provided both a positive example of the mass mobilization of women and men as well as at times a negative example of patriarchy and gendered hierarchies. [134](#)

The rebirth of feminist activism in the context of the civil rights movement led in particular to new multicultural visions of women's struggles for equality. Black feminism has a long history in America, going back to antislavery activists Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. African

American women played a seminal role in the civil rights movement: not only Rosa Parks but many others had powered the Montgomery bus boycott, for [example.](#)¹³⁵ During the 1960s, motivated by what they considered exclusion from the dominant narratives of both the civil rights and feminist movements, Black women spoke up and organized to highlight the confluence of gender and racial equality. In a similar fashion, Chicana feminism grew out of Chicano social and political movements, asserting the centrality of women's efforts in the racial struggle for inclusion in American society. During the 1960s and after, multicultural feminists not only demanded new attention to the challenges faced by women of color but also transformed feminism itself. The critique of "white feminism," of feminism as a movement for white, middle-class women, became increasingly central to the movement during the late twentieth century as the struggle for women's rights struggled to include and define itself as a movement for all women. [136](#)

Other groups in American society also began asserting their rights to full and equal citizenship. Latinos, who for so long had constituted much of the underclass that fueled the American dream in the West, especially California, began organizing to improve their condition both as workers and as Americans of color. In 1962 activists César Chavez and Dolores Huerta

founded the United Farm Workers, organizing primarily Mexican American agricultural laborers to fight for better conditions and at the same time mobilizing the fast-growing Latinx population. [137](#) American Indians began calling themselves Native Americans and launched the Red Power movement. In 1969 activists occupied Alcatraz Island in San Francisco bay to draw attention to America's seizure of native lands. [138](#) That same year a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a bar in New York's Greenwich Village frequented by homosexuals, prompted patrons and others to fight back, triggering three days of riots and beginning the modern movement for gay rights.[139](#) All of these movements had their own distinct histories that predated the civil rights struggle, but the fact that one of the most despised and oppressed groups in American society was now demanding equality reinforced the importance of their own causes. At the heart of the phenomenon that became known as "the Sixties" lay a universal vision of freedom, uncircumscribed by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or identity in general. [140](#)

The civil rights movement thus helped spark a broader series of popular struggles that dealt a body blow to the idea and practice of white freedom. Yet white freedom hardly disappeared from American life; instead it assumed new forms that during the next twenty years produced a powerful

renaissance of the idea. Some of this had to do with the history of the civil rights movement after the Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts. These were of course major accomplishments, helping to transform African American life in the South in particular, but they did not achieve the ultimate goal of making Blacks equal partners in American life. As the movement began to target issues beyond public segregation, like housing and economic inequality, and as it expanded into the North and West, it encountered new types of resistance. In 1966 the SCLC started a campaign to integrate housing in Chicago, a campaign that met with violent resistance from many whites in the city.¹⁴¹ At the same time, many African Americans became disillusioned with the slow pace of peaceful change, turning instead to the Black Power movement against racism. In the same year as the Chicago campaign, Black activists Bobby Seale and Huey Newton founded the Black Panther party, organizing heavily armed citizen patrols to shadow the police in Oakland, California. Within a few years chapters of the militant organization had spread throughout the country, a symbol of the new assertiveness and the turn away from nonviolence of Black protest.¹⁴²

By the last quarter of the twentieth century, although in many ways Black life had improved enormously compared to the heyday of Jim Crow, it was nonetheless clear that white freedom had not disappeared, that race

remained a major determinant of American quality of life. The issue of school integration was one major example. As we have seen, the battle against educational segregation had not only given the civil rights movement its first signal victory, *Brown v. Board of Education*, but had in general served as a key rallying cry for Black activists and their allies. It also scored some notable successes: for example, the percentage of Black students in the South attending majority white schools rose from two in 1964 to thirty-five in [1971.143](#). That, and the sharp rise of Black elected officials in southern states, were the civil rights movement's most tangible achievements.

As the struggle for school integration became nationwide, however, it encountered new forms of resistance. In February 1964 ten thousand white parents marched across the Brooklyn Bridge from Brooklyn to New York City Hall in Manhattan in protest against plans to desegregate the city's public schools, plans fueled by a massive school boycott of Black and Puerto Rican parents a month earlier.[144](#) This and other protests in New York

had a direct impact on the 1964 Civil Rights Act, by helping to enshrine an ultimately rather specious distinction between *de jure* and *de facto* segregation. The argument that northern schools were segregated by accident, rather than by deliberate government policies as in the South,

generally did not hold water when one considered policies like the segregation of public housing, federal mortgage redlining, and the tendency of school boards to site new schools so they would not be integrated; as James Baldwin archly noted in 1965, “De Facto segregation means Negroes are segregated, but nobody did it.” [145](#) Nonetheless, in spite of the protests by

Southern senators against the rank hypocrisy of such a move, the 1964 Civil Rights Act did not challenge the issue of de facto segregation of public schools, which applied essentially to schools in the North. [146](#)

In particular, the Act contained provisions banning the busing of students to counteract de facto segregation, and the struggle over “forced busing” would redefine the movement for school integration during the next

[decades.](#)[147](#) In 1971 the Supreme Court decided, in the case of *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg*, that in cases where school authorities had consciously created segregated schools, busing was one acceptable means of achieving the integration mandated by *Brown* and the Fourteenth Amendment. Subsequent decisions by lower courts ordering busing put paid to the idea of de facto segregation, because in every case they found evidence that public authorities had intentionally violated the law. [148](#) This reality was largely lost in the firestorm of white public outrage and protest that greeted school busing programs for integration. Opponents portrayed

busing as an attack on neighborhood schools, or as a physical and health burden for small children. This outrage ignored some basic facts, like the fact that millions of (mostly rural) schoolchildren were bused to school every day across America without controversy, or the fact that no one seemed to object when Black children were bused past white schools nearby to Black schools farther away. The Reverend Theodore Hesburgh, civil rights activist and later president of Notre Dame University, once noted, “I remember Medgar Evers saying that his first recollection of busing was the new school buses passing him and other Black children [walking] on the way to school … splashing them with mud as the white children on their way to a good school yelled out the window, ‘Nigger! Nigger!’ No objections to busing then.” [149](#) As Black civil rights activists observed during the busing crisis of the early 1970s, “It’s not the bus, it’s us.”[150](#)

There can thus be no doubt that, at bottom, the mass movement against busing strove to preserve white privilege and Black inequality. As Matthew Delmont has pointed out, the campaign against “busing” was really a campaign against school integration, waged by whites who did not want their children attending school with Black kids. The focus on “busing” rather than integration allowed whites to argue that their protest had nothing

to do with race, but rather with a desire to preserve schools and neighborhoods that just happened to be overwhelmingly white. Even many white liberals, who would have been horrified at being called racist, came to sympathize with what they regard as a working-class populist movement against elite social engineers; casting the movement as a struggle against busing rather than against integration made this possible. Joseph Biden, then a young senator from Delaware, was a case in point. Initially a supporter of busing, he turned against it after getting an earful from white constituents, ultimately going on to sponsor congressional antibusing legislation in alliance with arch-segregationist Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina.¹⁵¹ As he made clear, the problem was not “busing” but integration in general.

The new integration plans being offered are really just quota systems to assure a certain number of Blacks, Chicanos, or whatever in each school. That, to me, is the most racist concept you can come up with.... What it says is, “In order for your child with curly Black hair, brown eyes, and dark skin to be able to learn anything, he needs to sit next to my blond-haired, blue-eyed son.” That’s racist! Who the hell do we think we are, that the only way a Black man or woman can learn is if they rub shoulders with my white child? ¹⁵²

For those who believed segregation and racism were a Southern phenomenon, the antibusing movement of the 1970s came as a rude shock; as Malcolm X had observed a few years earlier, “As long as you south of the Canadian border, you South.” [153](#)

The resistance to integration, north and south, also took on the guise of a freedom struggle. In March 1956, ninety-six southern congressional representatives issued the “Southern Manifesto,” denouncing *Brown* as a violation of individual rights. They argued that “parents should not be deprived by Government of the right to direct the lives and education of their own children.” [154](#) In the South, thousands of whites resisted integration by creating and enrolling their children in “segregation academies,” all-white private schools. The number of white students in such schools in Mississippi tripled between 1968 and 1970, for [example.](#)[155](#) They were widely known as “freedom of choice schools” and in the 1970s would serve as one of the inspirations for the charter school movement. [156](#) In the North as well, opponents of integration draped themselves in the language of choice and freedom. The main antibusing organization in Boston took the name ROAR (Restore Our Alienated Rights) and condemned busing as an attack on parental and community rights. [157](#) Irene McCabe, leader of the antibusing movement in Pontiac, Michigan, organized a protest march in

September 1971 that featured signs like “Bury the Bus, Keep Freedom Alive.” Notably, antibusing activists often drew upon the organizational and rhetorical model of the civil rights movement. McCabe proclaimed that “Martin Luther King walked all over and got a lot of things done. This is our civil rights movement.” [158](#) Just as the civil rights movement represented

a struggle for Black freedom, so was resistance to integration a campaign for white freedom.

The most dramatic resistance to busing took place in Boston, when federal judge Arthur W. Garrity concluded that the Boston School Board had deliberately segregated the city’s public schools and consequently ordered school busing to start in the fall of 1974. The massive antibusing movement that resulted highlights some of contradictions explored in this study. [159](#) Boston was of course famed as America’s Cradle of Liberty, the city that had led the resistance against royal absolutism and the founding of the United States as the land of the free. Just two years earlier it had led Massachusetts into being the only state that voted for liberal Democrat George McGovern for president, and during the early 1970s it was preparing to celebrate the Bicentennial of the American Revolution. Yet Boston also had a reputation as one of the most segregated and racist cities in America, and during the busing crisis that racism came out in full

force. [160](#) The beating of Ted Landsmark was merely one example among many: whites greeted Black students in South with signs like “Niggers Go Home!,” and when police arrived to escort Black students from South Boston High School back home one day after a racial stabbing incident, crowds surrounded the bus shouting, “Bus ’em back to [Africa!](#)!”[161](#) The combination of white racism and freedom even permeated the celebrations of the Bicentennial: in 1975 ROAR members marched in a celebration of the 205th anniversary of the Boston Massacre carrying signs like “Boston [Mourns its Lost Freedom.](#)”[162](#)

By the 1980s the antibusing forces had clearly won, defeating not only school busing for integration but integration in general. In the 1974 *Milliken v. Bradley* case, the Supreme Court ruled against a school desegregation plan between Detroit and its suburbs. This meant that the courts would do nothing to stop white flight to evade integration, a body blow to efforts to integrate metropolitan schools, which became increasingly divided between minority inner cities and white [suburbia.](#)[163](#) The massive and violent nature of antibusing movements in Boston and other areas, and the willingness of both conservative and liberal politicians to support those movements against integration, dramatically weakened the resolve of the courts to enforce school desegregation. In particular, the strident opposition of

President Reagan to busing during the 1980s, and his success in appointing hundreds of conservatives to the federal judiciary, increasingly stalled the process of desegregation in both North and South. The fact that study after study showed that Black students, indeed all students, benefited from desegregation made no difference. [164](#)

Busing for school integration effectively ended in Boston in 1988, a year that represented the high-water mark of American school integration in general. A series of Supreme Court cases in the 1990s released most major cities from court-ordered busing programs, and more generally facilitated the resegregation of the nation's schools. By the time America commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown* in 2004 that process was racing ahead, so that seventy percent of Black students in America attended majority-minority schools. [165](#)

Roughly a century after George Henry White left Congress, signaling the end of the Reconstruction, the decline of school integration in America most clearly heralded the defeat of the Second Reconstruction. Obviously, much divides the two historical eras, but this is nonetheless a parallel worth noting, because it speaks to the survival, the resiliency of white freedom in America. The resegregation of American schools was not just about education; it had a profoundly political dimension. The mobilization of

whites against Black demands for liberty would play a major role in the rise of a new conservative movement which would transform the politics of the United States during the last quarter of the twentieth century. The birth and triumph of the New Right would write a new chapter in the history of white freedom in the United States.

The New White

Race and Conservatism in the Reagan Era

You start out in 1954 by saying, “Nigger, nigger, nigger.” By 1968 you can’t say “nigger”—that

hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states’ rights, and all that stuff, and

you’re getting so abstract. Now, you’re talking about cutting taxes, and all these things you’re

talking about are totally economic things and a byproduct of them is, Blacks get hurt worse than

whites.... “We want to cut this,” is much more abstract than even the busing thing, uh, and a

hell of a lot more abstract than “Nigger, nigger.”

—REPUBLICAN PARTY STRATEGIST LEE ATWATER, 1981¹⁶⁶

America in the 1960s experienced not only a wave of liberal and leftist activism but also the birth of a new conservative political movement.

Starting with the founding of Young Americans for Freedom in 1960, a diverse group of conservatives built a powerful right-wing coalition that

would triumph in 1980 with the election of Ronald Reagan as president of the United States. To an important extent the New Right, by embracing the ideal of individual liberty as opposed to collectivist government, represented a strong reaction not only against the welfare state policies of the 1960s but even Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal. At the same time, it drew heavily on white resentment of the civil rights movement and of minorities in general. For America's "suburban warriors," to use Lisa McGirr's term, the freedom they so cherished meant freedom from government interference in their lives, in particular government interference to promote the interests of other races at the expense of whites. Personal liberty was therefore, as the popular struggles against school integration showed, to a very important extent racial liberty.[167](#)

During the 1950s and early 1960s the new conservative movement began to come together, focusing on fusing traditional conservatism and libertarianism and emphasizing freedom as the core of their ideology. In 1955 William F. Buckley Jr. founded *The National Review*, which would become the intellectual leader of the [movement](#).[168](#) In 1962 University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman published *Capitalism and Freedom*, which argued that economic freedom and the free market in particular are essential to political freedom and harshly attacked what would soon become

known as “big [government](#).¹⁶⁹ In September 1960, a group of young intellectuals convened at Buckley’s house in Connecticut to found a new conservative organization, the Young Americans for Freedom. [170](#) At this meeting the newly formed YAF adopted a statement of principles, the “Sharon Statement,” which clearly stated its members’ views on the nature and importance of freedom.

We, as young conservatives, believe:

That foremost among the transcendent values is the individual’s use of his God-given free will, whence derives his right to be free from the restrictions of arbitrary force;

That liberty is indivisible, and that political freedom cannot long exist without economic freedom;

That the purpose of government is to protect those freedoms through the preservation of internal order, the provision of national defense, and the administration of justice;

That when government ventures beyond these rightful functions, it accumulates power, which tends to diminish order and liberty....[171](#)

The path from the “Sharon Statement” to the electoral triumph of the New Right a generation later was by no means straightforward; going from a small meeting of conservative young people to a mass-based political

movement took time. The libertarianism that inspired the YAF could look left as well as right, toward either conservatism or anarchism, and the party experienced a major split in 1969. The New Right not only endured but ultimately conquered, and its success derived from two primary factors.

First, starting in the 1950s the new conservatism embraced traditional moral values as well as individual liberty, bringing together two very disparate perspectives in a new doctrine called [fusionism](#).¹⁷² From this perspective government programs like the welfare state were bad not just because they denied individual liberty but equally because as materialist programs they undermined human dignity based in spiritual values. As the leading conservative thinker Frank Meyer argued, American political culture combined “the acceptance of the authority of an organic moral order together with a fierce concern for the freedom of the individual person.” [173](#)

In particular, conservatives emphasized the importance of religion and spirituality; in sharp contrast to Ayn Rand and other atheist libertarians, they argued that freedom without a moral compass and set of values was meaningless.

This last point is crucial, because one of the key factors in the rise of the New Right as a mass political movement was the emergence of the new evangelical Christian right during the late 1970s. Although conservative

Christians had long been active in politics, they had not played a major role in election campaigns for the most part; in 1976 Jimmy Carter, a Democrat but also a southerner and self-proclaimed born-again Christian, won the majority of the evangelical vote. By then, however, conservative white evangelicals had begun mobilizing around two main issues: abortion and the denial of tax-exempt status to Christian schools. In 1979 conservative minister Jerry Falwell founded the Moral Majority political action committee. Fueled by the growth of evangelical mega-churches and a savvy use of televised religious programs, the Christian Right mobilized millions of believers to vote for conservative positions and candidates. [174](#)

Race and racial conflict also contributed to building a mass base for the New Right. To an important extent it played a role in the rise of the Christian Right, which remained an overwhelmingly white movement in spite of the fact that many African Americans followed similar evangelical traditions. The decision by the federal government to strip tax-exempt status from all-white Christian schools enraged white evangelicals and helped turn them to politics. [175](#) More generally, conservatives opposed *Brown* and federal desegregation efforts in general in the name of individual liberty, i.e., the right of all parents to send their children wherever they saw fit. At times conservatives went beyond a defense of individualism; writing in *The*

National Review in 1957, William F. Buckley argued, “The central question that emerges is whether the White community in the South is entitled to take such measures as are necessary to prevail, politically and culturally, in the areas in which it does not predominate numerically. The sobering answer is *Yes* ... because, for the time being, it is the advanced race.... The *National Review* believes that the South’s premises are correct. If the majority wills what is socially atavistic, then to thwart the majority may be, though undemocratic, enlightened.” [176](#) Although in the past conservatives had rejected the racism of organizations like the John Birch Society and the American Nazi Party, right from the beginning the movement opposed the civil rights movement’s campaign for racial equality.

During the 1960s questions of race became a central issue in American politics, and the New Right used this to help transform itself into a mass movement. In 1960 Richard Nixon won the Republican nomination for president as a representative of the party’s moderate faction, and his moderation included strong support for civil rights. This incensed the party’s conservative wing, which after his defeat began organizing to win control of the GOP. Years of effort bore fruit in 1964 when they succeeded winning the nomination for Barry Goldwater, senator from Arizona. [177](#) Goldwater had established a strong reputation as an opponent of civil rights:

in 1962, for example, he had denounced the use of federal troops to enforce the integration of the University of Mississippi. He had concluded by 1964 that Nixon lost to Kennedy in 1960 because he failed to mobilize southern opposition to desegregation, and therefore whatever his personal views on race he was determined not to make the same mistake. In voting against the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Goldwater called it a threat to individual liberty: “To give genuine effect to the prohibitions of this bill will require the creation of a federal police of mammoth proportions.... These ... are the hallmarks of the police state in the destruction of a free society.”¹⁷⁸ Goldwater’s opposition to civil rights led conservatives to flock to his banner, enabling them to take control of the Republican Party and enlist it solidly in the [struggle for white freedom.](#)¹⁷⁹

During the 1964 presidential campaign Goldwater made the famous remark that, given the impossibility of winning a large share of the Black vote, Republicans needed to “go hunting where the ducks are.” This statement was a key moment in the elaboration of what became known as the “Southern Strategy,” the GOP’s political conquest of the South as a route to national power. To understand how revolutionary a moment this was in American politics, one needs to revisit the history of the “Solid South.” Thanks largely to the fact that the Republican Party was born as an

antislavery movement and led the conquest of the Confederacy during the Civil War and Reconstruction, ever since the 1870s Southern voters (which, given the violent disenfranchisement of Blacks meant white southern voters) had cast their ballots overwhelmingly for Democrats. For decades the Democratic Party won large regional majorities in presidential elections and controlled virtually every national and local elected office. [180](#)

Southern loyalty to the Democrats began to erode during the later years of the New Deal as President Roosevelt made some hesitant nods to opposing racial discrimination, and it suffered a major setback during the presidential campaign of 1948, when the Democratic Convention passed a resolution in favor of civil rights. This triggered a walkout by Southern Democrats who went on to form their own party, the “Dixiecrats,” and nominated Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina for president, winning four southern states in the general election that November. [181](#)

Historians disagree about exactly when the Republicans’ Southern Strategy began, but all agree that the civil rights movement played a key role. [182](#) When President Johnson signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act he reportedly commented to an aide, “I think we just delivered the South to the Republican party for a long time to come.” [183](#) Even though Republicans as well as Democrats had supported the Act, the future would prove him right.

Although Barry Goldwater lost the 1964 presidential election in a landslide, he managed to win most of the Deep South. In 1968 Alabama Governor George Wallace ran for president as an Independent. He repeated the success of the Dixiecrats in 1948, winning five southern states. The death knell of Democratic Party influence below the Mason-Dixon Line was sounded in 1964 and 1968; the Solid South was no more. [184](#)

Increasingly, moreover, racial politics was not just a southern phenomenon. Between 1964 and 1968 the growing militancy of the civil rights movement and the birth of Black Power not only gave racial politics a new dimension in America but also took it beyond the South to the North and West, making it a nationwide question. Starting in New York City's Harlem in 1964, northern cities experienced a series of race riots every summer, culminating in the Detroit uprising of 1967. These "long hot summers" testified to Black frustration at the slow march of racial equality, shocking many white onlookers with the spectacle of widespread death and destruction, of urban neighborhoods occupied by uniformed soldiers and armored vehicles. As the furor over busing and school integration in northern cities would soon demonstrate, racial hostility and racialized politics were a national issue.[185](#)

The issue of race played a central role in facilitating the conservative

takeover of the Republican Party, at the same time giving that party a new dominance in American political life more generally. In 1969 Kevin Phillips, a political strategist who had advised Richard Nixon's successful presidential campaign the year earlier, published *The Emerging Republican Majority*. At the heart of Phillips's classic study lay the idea that Republicans could use white backlash against the civil rights movement to win not just the South but the nation as a whole. In a meticulous analysis of the 1968 election results, Phillips argued that the nation was undergoing a political sea-change, fueled largely by racial politics, that would ensure Republican electoral dominance for some time to come. As he observed, The presidential election of 1968 marked a historic first occasion—the Negrophobe Deep South and modern Outer South *simultaneously* abandoned the Democratic Party. And before long, the conservative cycle thus begun ought to witness movement of congressional, state and local Southern Democrats into the ascending Republican Party.

Considerable historical and theoretical evidence supports the thesis that a liberal Democratic era has ended and that a new era of consolidationist Republicanism has begun. [186](#)

The presidential election of 1972 dramatically confirmed the validity of Phillips's analysis. That year the Republican Party won one of the greatest

electoral victories in its history, winning more than sixty percent of the popular vote and carrying every state except Massachusetts. In earlier times Nixon had shown some sympathy for civil rights and the victims of racial oppression; in 1969, for example, he sponsored the Philadelphia Plan, one of the nation's first major affirmative action programs. [187](#) This changed in 1972, as the Republicans successfully campaigned to win over those voters who had supported George Wallace in 1968. In particular, Nixon took a strong stand against busing, opposing the Supreme Court's 1971 *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* decision. As a result, Nixon not only won most of Wallace's former supporters but also performed extremely well with working-class whites in the North. The Southern Strategy had become a reality, producing the Republican majority Phillips had predicted three years earlier.

In many ways Richard Nixon was a transitional figure, one who never completely embraced, let alone won the trust of, the New Right. His resignation in disgrace as a result of the Watergate scandal, and the election of Democrat Jimmy Carter to the presidency in 1976, cast some doubt on the validity of the Southern Strategy. Carter, a white southern born-again Christian, swept the South in 1976, becoming the last Democratic presidential candidate to do so. [188](#) Yet the late 1970s also witnessed

important developments that would enable the New Right to seize power in 1980. One, already mentioned above, was the organization of the religious Right. Another was the new support for conservative thought and politics by corporate America, as reflected in the growth of think tanks such as the American Enterprise Institute. [189](#) The rise of the neoconservative movement,

composed of former liberals including Norman Podhoretz and Jeane Kirkpatrick who rejected the New Left and embraced a strongly anticommunist foreign policy, constituted a third factor. [190](#) At the same time,

the end of postwar prosperity and the prolonged economic downturn of the 1970s weakened the Carter administration, as did the seizure of American hostages by Iran's [revolutionary Islamic regime in 1979.](#)[191](#)

The 1980 presidential election brought the political triumph of the New Right and the Southern Strategy. Republican candidate Ronald Reagan handily defeated sitting president Jimmy Carter and swept the South, with the sole exception of Georgia, Carter's home state. Conservatives were jubilant: Kevin Phillips hailed Reagan's win as "the greatest victory for conservatism since the American [Revolution.](#)"[192](#) Moreover, the remaking of

the Solid South as a Republican fiefdom proved enduring. The GOP swept the region again during the presidential elections of 1984 and 1988, and

even popular southern Democrat Bill Clinton was able to make only partial inroads in the region during the elections of 1992 and 1996. Moreover, the Republican Party increasingly monopolized other elected offices throughout the South, ranging from city councils to senators and governors. Like many other parts of southern life, politics became ever more segregated as local Democrats became more and more dependent on Black support. The part of America that more than any other stood for white racism thus became the center of the new conservative movement for political freedom.

Ronald Reagan became one of the most popular and dynamic American presidents of the twentieth century, and the Reagan Revolution brought the New Right to power.¹⁹³ He also thoroughly represented the movement's emphasis on white freedom. Reagan's own personal views on race were complex: he counted numerous nonwhite friends and allies, for example, and reacted with fury whenever he was (frequently) accused of racism. ¹⁹⁴ Yet he often took positions that opposed the movement for Black equality. Following Barry Goldwater, whom he supported, Reagan rejected the Civil Rights Act of 1964, arguing, "You can't guarantee someone's freedom by opposing someone else's." ¹⁹⁵ He campaigned for governor of California in 1966 pledging to repeal the state's Fair Housing Act, saying individual property owners should have the right to rent to whomever they wanted.

Reagan launched his 1980 campaign for president in Neshoba, Mississippi, a small town a few miles from the place where the civil rights workers Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman had been murdered, and there proclaimed his belief in “states’ rights,” a well-known racist code-phrase in the South. [196](#) As president, Reagan appointed few Blacks to his cabinet, moved to weaken busing and affirmative action, and used racial stereotypes like that of the “cheating welfare queen.” As Black *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert put it, “Reagan may have been blessed with a Hollywood smile and an avuncular delivery, but he was elbow deep in the [same old race-baiting Southern strategy of Goldwater and Nixon.](#)”[197](#)

During the last third of the twentieth century, conservative intellectuals joined forces with political evangelism and opponents of the civil rights movement to create the New Right, a blend of racism and individual liberty. This was not always an easy marriage; some libertarians looked askance at the religious right’s focus on fighting abortion, a focus opposed by liberals who proclaimed a woman’s individual right to choose. Nonetheless, by opposing the struggle for racial equality in the name of individual freedom, traditional conservatism was able to make common cause with those seeking to preserve white privilege in (and well beyond) the South, creating a mass base for the movement and enabling it to dominate American

politics after 1980. American conservatives thus responded to the civil rights movement's challenge to white freedom by blending ideas of white privilege and liberty into a powerful new version of that ideology. The movement's impressive success clearly demonstrated that, in spite of the important gains for racial justice achieved by the civil rights movement, white freedom remained a force to be reckoned with in America.

1989: The Triumph of Freedom in Europe

On Friday, June 12, 1987, President Ronald Reagan arrived in West Berlin for a formal state visit. It was not without controversy: fifty thousand Berliners demonstrated against him and large parts of the city were cordoned off for both political and security reasons, while many of his advisers considered the trip an unfortunate provocation of the Soviets. None of this deterred the American president. That afternoon, standing in front of the Brandenburg Gate at the Berlin Wall, Reagan delivered a direct challenge to the new reformist Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, to make good on his promises of change.

We welcome change and openness; for we believe that freedom and security go together, that the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace. There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the

cause of freedom and peace. General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if



you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall! [198](#)

Less than three years later Reagan's visionary request became a reality. While diplomats and historians have debated whether or not the president's remarks made a difference, it is nonetheless true that, after Gorbachev refused to support repressive policies by the East German authorities, Berliners themselves tore down the wall. By doing so they not only

demolished the great symbol of the postwar division of Europe but set in motion events that would ultimately destroy the Soviet Union itself. [199](#)

FIGURE 31. Ronald Reagan speaking in front of the Brandenburg Gate and the Berlin Wall, June 12,

1987. Ronald Reagan Presidential Library/White House Photographic Office (ID C41244–9).

The year 1989 has gone down in history as not only the year that ended the cold war in Europe but also as one of the great years of freedom in modern world history. The Berlin Wall fell two hundred years after the seizure of the Bastille touched off the French Revolution, and 1989, like 1789, brought unforeseen changes to the world as a [whole.](#)²⁰⁰ Frederik de Klerk assumed the leadership of South Africa and began the process of dismantling apartheid in that country, while a powerful pro-democracy movement arose in China. [201](#) The events of that momentous year would inspire Stanford University Press to establish a book series, *The Making of Modern Freedom*, that would eventually publish fifteen titles.²⁰²

At the heart of this era was the collapse of communism throughout Eastern Europe that toppled regime after regime until it culminated with the overthrow of the Soviet Union two years later. [203](#) The fact that peaceful mass uprisings, not war and destruction, brought about these changes was especially noteworthy. The photos and video images of cheering crowds

tearing down monuments and images of the communist era circulated around the globe, affirming the power of peoples to change their world for the better. For conservatives in particular, including members of America's New Right, the revolutions of 1989–91 illustrated the unity of liberty and capitalism, the idea that economic and political freedom, the free market and democracy, [could not be separated.](#)²⁰⁴

How should one read this history from the perspective of the relationship between freedom and race, and how do the revolutions of 1989–91 express the changing nature of white freedom in the postwar era? In answering these questions, one can start by considering the centrality of Europe to the freedom crusades of the late twentieth century. The overthrow of communist regimes in this period happened in the whitest, most “European” part of the world, one barely touched by the history of European overseas colonialism or non-European immigration. In a modern world where in general whiteness had equaled not only freedom but prosperity, the relative backwardness and authoritarianism of Eastern Europe had stood out as an anomaly. The revolutions of 1989–91 erased this exception and, to a greater extent than ever, highlighted the relationship between liberty and whiteness. One must note that the collapse of communist rule in Eastern Europe was part of a broader historical pattern, one that brought economic

development and political liberty to the continent as a whole. Until the late 1970s, for example, much of Mediterranean Europe had been ruled by authoritarian, illiberal regimes. Dictatorships had governed Spain and Portugal since the interwar years, and Greece experienced a seizure of power by the military in 1967, which lasted until 1974. Like Eastern Europe, the continent's Mediterranean region had been traditionally impoverished and dominated by peasant smallholders. Prosperity after World War II had modernized local and national economies, bolstering those social and political forces in favor of liberal democracy and greater freedom. In April 1974 Portuguese military officers, frustrated by the nation's hapless struggle to suppress anticolonial revolts in its African empire, overthrew the authoritarian regime in Lisbon, then ceded power to a new democratic government headed by moderate socialists. In July of the same year the Greek junta collapsed, fatally weakened by its failed attempts to liberalize the national economy and its mishandling of a crisis with Turkey over Cyprus. Venerable Spanish dictator Francisco Franco died in November 1975, leaving power to King Juan Carlos. The king oversaw Spain's transition to parliamentary democratic rule, the new regime surviving a military coup attempt by discontented officers in 1981. [205](#)

Moreover, liberalization and the challenge to dictatorship went well

beyond Europe during the 1980s. The collapse of apartheid in South Africa was the most dramatic example of this, but not the only one. Latin America, a region dominated by military dictatorships (usually supported and facilitated by the US government) during much of the twentieth century,

witnessed a flowering of democracy during the decade and after. Whereas the region only had three democratic governments in 1978, the next decade and a half brought a massive wave of liberalization, so that by 1995 only Cuba and Haiti remained under authoritarian [rule](#).²⁰⁶ In his comprehensive study *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, eminent political scientist Samuel P. Huntington argued that the collapse of the Portuguese dictatorship in 1974 unleashed a worldwide process of democratization: “During the following fifteen years this democratic wave became global in scope; about thirty countries shifted from authoritarianism to democracy, and at least a score of other countries were affected by the democratic wave.”²⁰⁷

One must therefore view the revolutions of 1989–91 in Eastern Europe as the culmination of a larger movement toward freedom in general on the European continent and well beyond. As the 1990s would show, these new freedoms were not an unmixed blessing. Throughout the region the end of communism brought the collapse of censorship and the police state, and the revival of a free press and freedom of speech. Especially in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, all countries with a long history of resistance to the postwar Soviet order, the transition to liberal democratic capitalism proceeded relatively well. Elsewhere, however, building postcommunist

societies proved more difficult. The end of communism unleashed a massive process of privatization of former state assets, a process often exploited by the old political elites and directed by foreign authorities like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Privatization also meant the abandonment of the social security net provided by the communist regimes. This was especially true of the former Soviet Union, where millions fell into desperate poverty; the lifespan of the average Soviet male declined from sixty-nine in 1991 to fifty-eight in [1996.](#)²⁰⁸ In post-Communist Eastern Europe, all might be free, but some were freer than others. [209](#)

The end of Communism also brought a revival of nationalism and racism to the former Soviet bloc. [210](#) Even one of the most successful post-Soviet states, Czechoslovakia, in 1993 peacefully split into the separate nations of Slovakia and the Czech Republic. The most extreme example of national breakdown came with the collapse of another hybrid state, Yugoslavia, into a brutal civil war in 1991. During the war Yugoslavia, which many had considered a model multiethnic state under the independent Communist rule of Marshall Tito, descended into a frenzy of ethnic cleansing and genocide not seen in Europe since the Nazi [era.](#)²¹¹ The war in Bosnia, pitting ethnic Serbs against Bosnian Muslims, saw the worst horrors; in July 1995 Serb

soldiers massacred several thousand Muslim civilians in the town of

Srebrenica.²¹²

Elsewhere in Eastern Europe nationalist and racial tensions also increased after 1989. The Roma, or “Gypsies,” whose communities had lived in Europe for centuries and had been massacred during the Holocaust, faced pogroms and other forms of racial persecution throughout Europe after the fall of Communism. ²¹³ The reunification of Germany saw a revival of far-right political organizations, some with ties to neo-Nazis, and waves of violence against foreigners. In September 1991, racist riots engulfed the East German city of Hoyerswerda as right-wing mobs attacked foreigners from Vietnam and Mozambique whom the former government had brought to the city as guest workers.²¹⁴ One can hardly argue that no racism existed under the former Communist regimes, but the end of censorship and official antiracist ideologies gave space for the open expression of racism against foreigners. Many in the former Soviet Bloc desired above all to become united with Europe as a whole, and for some that meant conceiving of Europe as a “white” space and therefore rejecting those who were not white.

As we saw in chapter 2 with the pro-democracy movement in China during the same years, mass protests against Communism and for freedom

could spill over into racist social movements. The irony for Eastern Europe, of course, was that their racial images of Europe did not reflect the realities of life in the capitalist West. After reunification, for example, the residents of former East Berlin found themselves part of a city with a huge Turkish minority.²¹⁵ By the 1980s and 1990s, Western Europe was experiencing its own challenges with multiculturalism. Decolonization had not completely separated white metropoles from nonwhite empires, as the postwar economic boom brought increasingly large waves of postcolonial migrants to the former mother countries. By the 1980s large nonwhite communities had taken root in and around European cities, such as Kreuzberg in West Berlin, Brixton and Southall in London, and the *banlieues* (suburbs) surrounding Paris. ²¹⁶ Their growth had been accompanied by the rise of increasingly strident and powerful racist parties, such as the National Fronts of both Britain and France. ²¹⁷ Increased protests by the so-called “second generation immigrants”²¹⁸ often benefited more mainstream politicians, notably Margaret Thatcher in Britain, just as Nixon and Reagan had exploited the reaction against the civil rights movement in America. ²¹⁹ Their challenges to postwar social democracy and the welfare state often went hand in hand with increasing hostility to immigrants, usually seen as nonwhite immigrants. For many Europeans, East and West, at the end of the

twentieth century the preservation of whiteness and of freedom went hand in hand.

The liberalization of Mediterranean Europe and the collapse of the Soviet sphere in the late twentieth century created a new vision of the continent united around liberal democracy and freedom. It was also, to an important extent, a vision of white freedom. Europe, the paradigmatic white continent, was entirely free after 1989 and could claim freedom in ways that no other part of the world could, with the exception of predominantly white North America. The survival of Communist regimes in Asia reinforced that point. Even China, which combined continued Communist rule with spectacularly successful economic liberalization during the 1990s, reinforced the maxim that political freedom existed primarily in white countries. [220](#)

A central irony of this perspective is the fact that, compared to a half century earlier, both parts of Europe, not to mention the United States, were less “white” than ever. Both regions not only possessed growing nonwhite populations but to an unprecedented extent embraced an image of themselves as multicultural and multiracial societies. Such images could not claim universal or even majority acceptance, however, as the history of the New Right in both Europe and America demonstrated. Indeed, I argue that

precisely the threat of demographic change spurred many to claim white identity and to point to events like the collapse of the Soviet Bloc as evidence of the essential whiteness of liberty. Eastern Europe might continue to struggle with creating and maintaining liberal democracy in the decades after 1989, but its embrace of freedom in the revolutions of that year reaffirmed the general observation that to be white was to be free, and to be free was to be white.

Conclusion

The Second World War challenged racism and white freedom to an unprecedented degree in modern history, and to a very important extent that challenge succeeded in crafting and implementing a vision of liberty that applied to all men and women. The roughly forty-five years of the cold war era brought dramatic changes to the relationship between freedom and racial difference, changes that promised a new era of universal liberty. A generation after the conquest of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, the era of formal European empire had essentially come to an end, thanks both to the efforts of the colonized themselves as well as to the increasing inability and reluctance of the imperial powers to maintain their rule. In the United States African Americans built upon the lessons of wartime's Double V campaign to organize a powerful movement for racial justice. The civil

rights movement transformed America, making the equality of all peoples a central national principle as never before. The challenge to white freedom reached a crescendo in these years, one that fundamentally changed the nature of race and liberty in the contemporary world.

Yet as the second half of the cold war era showed, it was one thing to proclaim freedom, another to make it a reality. In the former colonial world, it gradually became clear that national independence did not necessarily bring individual freedom, and that all too often relationships of economic and military dependence on former colonial powers survived the hoisting of the national flag. In America, the civil rights movement gave way to a powerful New Right that blended an emphasis on individual freedom with white racial backlash. Postcolonial migration into Western Europe brought new racial tensions to Britain and France, as well as new right-wing political movements that embraced ideologies of white freedom. The collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe, and ultimately the Soviet Union itself, marked the culmination of freedom in the European continent as a whole. A general overview of the state of the world in the early 1990s revealed free white nations struggling to integrate their nonwhite minorities while nonwhite former colonies still struggled to free themselves from poverty and dependence.

None of this contradicts the argument that white freedom was never the same after 1945, that the emphasis on liberty as a universal right became and remained dominant in the contemporary world. It shows, however, how difficult it was and has remained to put that ideal into practice. The tremendous historical legacy of white freedom could not be shaken off easily; going beyond it remains a key task for the twenty-first century.

CONCLUSION

White Freedom and Freedom from Whiteness

Americans are asking “Why do they hate us?” … They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.

—PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH, AFTER THE ATTACKS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001¹

In 1987, as noted in [chapter 6](#), President Ronald Reagan called upon the leaders of the Soviet Union to tear down the Berlin Wall, an appeal that became reality two years later. Roughly thirty years after Reagan’s famous speech, another American Republican president, Donald Trump, called on the leaders of Mexico to pay for the construction of a wall along the border between the US and Mexico. During his successful 2016 presidential

campaign, Trump repeatedly announced his intentions to build a wall, and five days after he assumed office in January 2017 he signed Executive Order 13767 to begin its construction. To reinforce his determination to build the wall, at the end of 2018 President Trump triggered a partial government shutdown, lasting more than a month, because he refused to sign any federal spending bill that did not include funding for the wall.²

During the struggle over the wall on the US–Mexico border, some of Trump’s strongest support came from the House Freedom Caucus. Founded in 2015 by nine mostly white and male right-wing Republican members of the House of Representatives, the Freedom Caucus organized opposition against not only America’s first Black president³ but also against moderate Republican leaders like John Boehner.⁴ Freedom Caucus members soon came to see President Trump as an ally, enthusiastically backing his promise to build a wall on America’s border with Mexico. During the crisis caused by the government shutdown in December 2018 Caucus Chairman Mark Meadows made this support explicit, declaring, “I’m here with a number of my colleagues tonight to say we’re ready to fight on behalf of all the freedom-loving Americans to make sure we have secure borders and that never again do we have to worry about terrorist and drug traffickers coming across our southern border.”⁵

Two Republican American presidents, two walls, two visions of liberty. One proposed destroying a wall in the name of freedom, the other demanded building a wall in the name of freedom. Of course, the point of a wall is not the edifice itself, but rather what it seeks to keep out, or keep in. Reagan and other conservatives condemned the Berlin Wall because it prevented East Germans and other Eastern Europeans from moving to a free society, and ultimately from emulating at home the freedom they sought. That wall was thus offensive not only because it restricted freedom of mobility but equally because it divided the white peoples of Europe from each other. Trump's border wall, in contrast, sought to preserve American freedom by keeping out those racial Others whose very presence on the soil of the United States would endanger it. As one conservative commentator put it, "The communists built the Berlin Wall to limit freedom by trapping good people in. President Trump wants to expand America's border wall to protect our freedom by keeping bad people out. The difference between the two walls couldn't be greater."⁶ For both presidents, therefore, walls brought together the free and divided them from those not free, perceiving both categories in racialized terms. One had to destroy the Berlin Wall to promote white freedom, just as one had to build the US–Mexico border wall to preserve and protect it.

This example illustrates the idea that, where white freedom is concerned, William Faulkner's aphorism, "The past is never dead. It's not even past," is very much to the [point.7](#) In this conclusion to *White Freedom* I would like to

sum up some of its major arguments and findings, then explore some of its broader implications for the study of modern history as well as the present condition and future prospects of the relationship between race and liberty.

This is a work of history, certainly not one of contemporary political analysis and most definitely not an attempt to predict the future.

Nonetheless, a history that does not address Faulkner's point stated above has not completely fulfilled its mission and its obligations to its readers. To what extent, therefore, does the racialized character of liberty analyzed in *White Freedom*, and the conditions that produced it, offer us lessons for the present day and for the generations that will follow us? Hopefully, a final review and summary of the history contained in these pages will offer some insights into this question.

White Freedom Past (with apologies to Charles Dickens)

The central argument in this study, as stated in the introduction, is the idea that during much of the modern world both popular and theoretical concepts of liberty have had an important racial dimension; so much so that in many ways to be white meant to be free, and to be free meant to be white. In

approaching the topic, the two chapters in [part 1](#) provided a general thematic approach to the topic, both general and specific. [Parts 2](#) and [3](#) proceeded chronologically, starting with the discussion of the Enlightenment and the Age of Revolution in [chapter 3](#) and ending with the analysis of the late twentieth century in [chapter 6](#). As noted in the introduction, while the book has a certain focus on the histories of France and the United States, it takes a generally global approach to the rise of white freedom in the modern era.

And what have we learned from this history? In general, *White Freedom* shows how since the eighteenth century the importance of freedom has grown in the world, that struggles for freedom have transformed the political landscape of entire nations and ultimately continents. At the same time, the expansion of freedom has coincided with a growth of racial distinctions and racialized consciousness; in short, liberty and whiteness have grown not only at the same time but in a manner that has frequently been mutually reinforcing. The great revolutions of the late eighteenth century, for example, took place in a context of white privilege and also reinforced and expanded that context. The rise of liberal democracy took place at the same time, and in intimate relation to, the expansion of national and imperial polities with white citizens and nonwhite subjects. As I have

argued throughout this study, the paradox between liberty and racism was no paradox at all; instead, racial distinctions played a key role in the rise of modern ideas of freedom and cannot be separated from those ideas.

Although the book focuses primarily on this theoretical and historical relationship, it also considers the resistance to white freedom, the attempts to make liberty a truly universal value and practice. [Chapter 6](#) in particular considers this issue, exploring how anticolonial movements in European empires and the struggle for civil rights in America posed a frontal challenge to the racialization of liberty. It shows how formidable coalitions arose to fight for universal freedom, and it details both the nature and the limitations of their successes. In the end, it argues that white freedom remained a powerful political and ideological force in the world on the eve of the twenty-first century. I will consider what this means for the future later in this conclusion.

Ultimately, *White Freedom* represents an exploration of the possibilities and results from placing race at the center of modern history. Most recent general studies and textbooks about American and world history discuss slavery, colonialism, and racial discrimination, often in great detail. Many tend, however, to portray them as either relatively peripheral to a dominant narrative of progress and liberation, or see them as key examples of the

barriers to liberation, barriers ultimately overthrown or at least fundamentally challenged by the forward march of humanity. I have argued, in contrast, that racism was part and parcel of this forward march, that it played a central role in shaping our ideas of and movements for freedom. Such a narrative is inspired by and hopefully contributes to other attempts by historians to question standard representations of the center and the margins of history, ranging from the new colonial historiography that contends colonialism lies at the center of European history to the work of scholars of slavery who show how it was central to the economic and social history of modern America.⁸ To conflate a seemingly universal value such as liberty with such a generally suspect idea as race is to call into question the moral dimensions of modern history, to explore how our notions of good and evil, and the relationship between them, changed over the course of centuries.

White Freedom Present

If, as some historians contend, the short twentieth century ended with the collapse of state communism in Eastern Europe, the twenty-first began with Al Qaeda's destruction of New York's World Trade Center on September 11, ^{2001.}⁹ Both of these epochal events spoke to the relationship between freedom and whiteness in the contemporary era. The end of the Soviet

Union seemed to usher in an unprecedented new era of peace and prosperity in the West and beyond during the 1990s: 1989 brought not only the fall of the Berlin Wall but also the invention of the World Wide Web and the birth of the popular Internet, and during the 1990s the number of free countries, as measured by Freedom House, rose from sixty-five to eighty-five. [10](#)

For a while sub-Saharan Africa seemed to exemplify new hopes for democratization. As we have seen, military strongmen ruled most African nations during the postcolonial era, but this began to change in the early 1990s, in part sparked by the democratization of South Africa. In February 1990 popular protests in Benin ousted the dictatorial government and led to its replacement by a democratic regime. Ghana embraced democratization more gradually: strongman Jerry Rawlings accepted multiparty elections in 1992, but not until 2000 did a democratic regime take power. [11](#) New parliamentary structures remained imperfect, not always fully corresponding to popular rule, but nonetheless led many to believe that the world would only grow more free in the new century.[12](#) In general, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the increasing democratization of Black Africa and Latin America, part of what Samuel Huntington characterized in 1991 as the “third wave” of democratization, made liberal democracy the global norm of politics as never [before](#).[13](#) The new levels of freedom as well

as the impressive economic prosperity of the 1990s seemed poised to complete the work of the anticolonial and civil rights movements in making liberty the property of all peoples.

September 11 shattered this fond hope. If many had hoped that the end of the cold war would bring a new era of global peace and cooperation, that belief collapsed in the ashes of the World Trade Center. As Americans in particular struggled to understand how such an horrendous attack could happen, and what motivated such hatred of their country, many took some comfort in a simple answer; paraphrasing George Bush above, “they hate us for our freedom.” Increasingly, the “they” in this response became racialized. The fact that Bush’s address to Congress specifically and forcefully rejected blaming Muslims or Arabs in general for the terrorist attack tended to get lost in the shuffle as many Americans and Europeans focused on Islamic fundamentalism as the enemy, the equivalent of the Soviet Union during the cold war. The crusade against the Red peril gave way in the early twentieth century to the crusade against the Green menace. This new crusade had an important racial dimension. Prejudice against Muslims has a long history in Europe and America, but the events of September 11, widely seen as an unprovoked attack against a free people, gave it a major new impetus. Scholars and journalists described the rise of

Islamophobia in the United States as the number of attacks against Muslim and Arab Americans skyrocketed after 2001. Islamophobia targeted a particular religion, but it also had a strong racist component, frequently portraying Arabs and Muslims in identically negative terms. Like anti-Semitism, Islamophobia had both racial and religious dimensions, and during the first decade of the twenty-first century constituted a logical corollary to the idea that the white Christian West was engaged in a death struggle with the Muslim world. The war on terror that has in effect become a permanent feature of global politics ever since 9/11 has been a war against radical Islam and for freedom, but it has also been a race war.[14](#)

The Islamophobia that has arisen in Europe has roots that go back far beyond 2001, all the way to the Crusades, the Spanish *Reconquista*, and the Ottoman conquest of the Balkans. But it also became commingled, to a much greater extent than in America, with the question of immigration.

Many of the immigrants into Western Europe after World War II had come from Muslim countries, such as North Africans in France, Pakistanis in Britain, and Turks in Germany. The sharp economic downturn of the 1970s had led to sharp anti-immigrant hostility as conservatives blamed them for high unemployment among European workers. Increasingly, however, anti-immigrant prejudice focused not just on economic but also cultural

differences, on the idea that entire areas in European cities and towns had been taken over by “foreigners.” Far from diminishing, this sense of cultural difference and estrangement only grew with the rise of new generations born in Europe to immigrant parents: in France people labeled them “second-generation immigrants,” implying they were not really French. Meanwhile, 9/11 and the American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq increased not only the general antagonism to Islam but also the suspicion that Muslim neighborhoods in Europe constituted a kind of fifth column in the war against terror, leading one conservative American newspaper to label the polyglot Paris suburbs “Falluja-sur-Seine.” [15](#)

The rise of the National Front in France provided a powerful example of the new hostility to immigrants. Founded in 1972 by Jean-Marie LePen, a veteran of France’s war in Algeria, the party has grown from a small right-wing sect to one of the most popular in France. From the beginning it emphasized hostility to immigrants, especially Muslim immigrants, rejecting their right to French citizenship and frequently calling for their deportation, as well as limits to immigration from former colonies like Algeria and Tunisia. Currently, under the leadership of LePen’s daughter Marine LePen, the party (considered neofascist by many on the Left) has moderated its image somewhat but still frequently links Muslim

immigration to Islamic terrorism and considers Islam a danger to the national character of France. As Marine LePen declared in a newspaper interview in 2010, “The progressive Islamisation of our country and the increase in political-religious demands are calling into question the survival of our civilisation.” [16](#) Today the National Front (in 2018 renamed the Rassemblement National, the National Rally) is one of the largest political parties in France, and it is not inconceivable that it could win the presidency in the near future. [17](#)

The recent growth of the National Front in France highlights one of the most remarkable global political developments of the twenty-first century, the rise of authoritarian populism. This is in many ways a global phenomenon, as the electoral victories of Narendra Modi in India, Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil in one twelve-month span, 2018–19, illustrate. But it has had a particular impact in Europe and America. Since 2000 a number of charismatic right-wing leaders, for example, Viktor Orban in Hungary, Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, and Vladimir Putin in Russia, have taken power. The populist Right has overwhelmed the Far Left and is increasingly drawing support from the Center Right. In 2016 a small right-wing British political party pushed the country into the Brexit referendum, in which a popular majority approved

the secession of the United Kingdom from the European Union. A few months later Donald Trump overpowered both the establishment in his own Republican Party and the Democratic opposition to win election as [president of the United States.](#)¹⁸

The new authoritarian populism is a complex affair, blending hostility to global elites, resentment at cultural change, and anger at working-class economic stagnation. But there can be no doubt that covert and overt appeals to racism and anti-immigrant hostility form a major part of its appeal. Trump himself has been especially outrageous in this regard, from characterizing Mexicans as “drug dealers, criminals, and rapists” to saying that there were fine people on both sides of a battle in Charlottesville, Virginia, between neo-Nazis and their opponents, but he is not alone in this regard. As a report noted in 2018, “Both Donald Trump’s campaign and right-wing authoritarian populists in Europe have tended to exploit anxieties related to such demographic change. Trump’s electoral base—as well as the base of the Republican Party—is overwhelmingly white. The Trump campaign took advantage of anxieties around immigration, race, and Islam, leaning into white identity politics with explicitly racist appeals.” [19](#)

Hostility to immigrants, foreigners, Muslims, and racially defined Others in general has thus been a key driver of contemporary authoritarian populism.

At the same time, many populists see themselves as engaged in a movement for freedom, in particular a movement to defend their nations against oppression by an alliance of global elites and the racial minorities and immigrants they exploit for their own ends. In a London pro-Brexit protest a demonstrator costumed as a hoplite of ancient Greece claimed, “I am here fighting for freedom.... The Brexit vote is a mass rebellion by the working class of this country, and I don’t frigging blame them, because they have not been listened to by any of the parties for years.” [20](#) As noted earlier in this study, freedom in the modern era has been closely identified with the defense of the nation-state; today’s authoritarian populists see national cultures as threatened by globalization. In June 2015 representatives of several Far Right parties, including the French National Front, formed a rightist bloc in the European Parliament with the name of Europe of Nations and Freedom. Geert Wilders, head of the Dutch Freedom party, hailed it as an historic occasion, saying “Today is the beginning of our liberation, our D-Day,” and arguing that the new bloc would defend national sovereignty against the European Union and the threat of Islamization. [21](#)

The dynamism of authoritarian populism in today’s world shows that white freedom remains alive and well in the twenty-first century. As with

the New Right in the late twentieth century, the movement blends a rejection of liberal democratic orthodoxies with appeals to white identity. I will conclude this study by considering what this portends for the times ahead.

White Freedom Yet to Come

As I noted earlier in this chapter, historians are not seers, and I certainly have neither the obligation nor the ability to predict the future. Rather, in this final section I would like to speculate on possible implications of *White Freedom* for the world we live in today and tomorrow. This book has addressed and explored a major question in the modern world, the relationship between liberty and race, and I wish to conclude with some thoughts about how people might continue to approach (or not) this relationship. The fact that this question has come up time and time again over the last two hundred years suggests, to me at least, that it will continue to do so for some time to come.

We inhabit a world that is, at least formally, committed to racial equality as part of the democratic ideal. One should immediately note that modern societies frequently betray or fail to meet this standard, and the continued existence of white freedom as a social and political reality is an important part of that failure. Nonetheless, the idea that freedom is a universal value

transcending race is now the default standard in modern societies, and it is hard to imagine that changing anytime soon. The powerful movements described in [chapter 6](#) against white freedom did not succeed completely, and they provoked a powerful counterreaction that is still in evidence today. They did, however, permanently shift the goalposts of the game, a great accomplishment that we must never forget. Thanks to them, and to many others over the years who have struggled for racial equality, the primary question surrounding the relationship between race and freedom today is not so much how to challenge white freedom as how to make the reality of universal liberty live up to the ideal.

I would also observe that, except perhaps for some believers in libertarianism and anarchism, freedom has generally not been an end in and of itself. Rather, freedom enables us to do and enjoy things that all peoples value: live in security and peace, have adequate food and shelter, enjoy our friends and families, raise our children with confidence for their futures. I say this to make the point that the politics of white freedom has never been just about race, but it advocates racial distinction and white privilege as a way of achieving those ends. The rise of the New Right in the late twentieth century and of authoritarian populism today certainly has a major racial dimension, but is not just about race: many supporters of Trump and Brexit

(including many nonwhite supporters) did not cast their votes in favor of bigotry. Today the push for white freedom is in many ways a response to the inability of modern societies to provide those achievements listed above that freedom was supposed to ensure, and as long as that remains the case, racialized visions of liberty will retain their ability to inspire and motivate those searching for a better life.

For me, therefore, the ultimate question is not so much whether racism will disappear and the universal vision of freedom triumph. Rather, it is whether future societies will overcome the need for white freedom by assuring a good life for all their members. Will the conditions that drive many to embrace a racialized vision of liberty melt away as a result? In a world that embraces racial equality in theory, whiteness is ultimately untenable, a burden as well as a privilege. In the last analysis, will we find a way to free our societies from the need for whiteness? A utopian vision, perhaps, but so much that has been considered utopian in the present has become reality in the future. The clarion call of the French Revolution for liberty, equality, and fraternity still rings true, especially if we consider not just these values in general but the relationship between them in particular. I hope that historians of the future will be able to answer these questions, but it won't be until long after we are gone. At that point, they will then

doubtless come up with new questions that we can't imagine. In the present, we must therefore content ourselves with posing them, with measuring how far we have come and considering the possible shapes of the road ahead.

The history of white freedom considers the best and the worst of the human experience, its highs and lows, and the relationship between them. It is both a sobering tale and one full of hope, and if the past is a guide I consider myself justified in believing that hope will prevail in the future.

NOTES

Introduction

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Chapter 1

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What do they want this horde of slaves

Of traitors and conspiratorial kings?

For whom these vile chains

These long-prepared irons?

Frenchmen, for us, ah! What outrage

What methods must be taken?

It is us they dare plan

To return to the old slavery!

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36. “She is not liberty with a red cap on her head and a pike in her hand, stepping over corpses.”

Laboulaye, cited in Don H. Doyle, *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the Civil War* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 311.

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93. Rudolph J. Vecoli, “The Lady and the Huddled Masses: The Statue of Liberty as a Symbol of

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[100](#). *Detroit Free Press*, June 19, 1941. Ironically, the cartoon appeared on Juneteenth, the African

American holiday celebrating the end of slavery.

[101](#). That museum opened on Liberty Island in 1972, then closed in 1991 following the opening of

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[102](#). Richard Stengl, “The Party of the Century,” *Time*, July 7, 1986. See the discussion of Liberty

Weekend in Berenson, *The Statue of Liberty*, 181–93.

[103](#). In this context it is worth noting that New York City itself was one of America’s great slave

ports, at times second only to Charleston South Carolina, a history that the Statue of Liberty helps to

obscure. Lisa Sturm-Lind, *Actors of Globalization: New York Merchants in the Global Trade, 1784–*

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[105](#). Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Elizabeth J. Perry, eds., *Popular Protest and Political Culture in*

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106. The statue was modeled on a famous socialist realist sculpture, “A Worker and Collective

Farm Woman,” created by Soviet sculptor Vera Mukhina in 1937. See Tsao Hsingyan, “A Beijing

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108. Timothy Brook, *Quelling the People: The Military Suppression of the Beijing Democracy*

Movement (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

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Democracy,” in Wasserstrom and Perry, *Popular Protest and Political Culture*.

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(June 1994): 426.

Chapter 3

1. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *The Magic Flute*, libretto (G. Schirmer, 1986); see also Malcolm S.

Cole, “Monostatos and His ‘Sister’: Racial Stereotype in *Die Zauberflöte* and Its Sequel” in *Opera*

Quarterly 21, no. 1 (2005): 2–26.

2. “It is certain that the *nègres* armed themselves in the name of the king: that they had a flag soiled by the fleur-de-lis, and by the motto ‘Long live Louis XVI.’” Cited in Laurent Dubois,

Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution (Cambridge, MA, and London: The

Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 106.

3. *Ibid.*, 96–97, 154–59.

4. The classic studies remain Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848* (New York:

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Europe and America, 1760–1800 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014). See also David

Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c 1760–1840*

(London: Palgrave, 2009); and Ben Marsh and Mike Rapport, *Understanding and Teaching the Age*

of Revolutions (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017).

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7. Black slavery was by no means the only issue that underscored the relationship between

universal ideas of freedom and the continued subjugation of different social groups, of course.

Historians have written extensively about the relationship of the Enlightenment universalist project to

gender discrimination, anti-Semitism and changing perspectives on the Jews, the expropriation of

Native Americans, and other issues. These are very important, but given that this is just one chapter

in one book, I could only cover so much, and African slavery and the slave trade occupied a central

place in discussions of freedom at the time and since.

8. Among the numerous histories of the Enlightenment, classics include Ernst Cassirer, *The*

Philosophy of the Enlightenment (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Peter Gay, *The*

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contemporary scholars of the movement is Jonathan I. Israel. See his *Radical Enlightenment*:

Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Anthony Pagden's *The Enlightenment: And Why It Still Matters* (New York: Random House, 2013) is

a wonderful overview.

9. On Enlightenment views of freedom, see Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, v ol.

2, *The Science of Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 2013); Mary Efrosini Gregory, *Freedom in French*

Enlightenment Thought (New York: Peter Lang, 2010); Jonathan I. Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind:*

Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy (Princeton: Princeton

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A History (New York: Modern Library, 2011).

11. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford

University Press, 2007).

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Thought and Historical Difference (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). See also Daniel

Gordon, ed., *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: New Perspectives in Eighteenth-Century French*

Intellectual History (New York and London: Routledge, 2000).

14. On the Enlightenment and political liberalism, see Dennis C. Rasmussen, *The Pragmatic*

Enlightenment: Recovering the Liberalism of Hume, Smith, Montesquieu, and Voltaire (Cambridge,

UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

15. Denis Diderot, *The Encyclopedia*, cited in Mary Efrosini Gregory, *Freedom in French*

Enlightenment Thought, 82.

16. See, for example, Christie M. Donald and Stanley Hoffman, eds., *Rousseau and Freedom*

(Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Peter A. Shoults, *Reasoned Freedom: John*

Locke and Enlightenment (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

17. Jonathan I. Israel, *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights*,

1750–1790 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

18. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* and *The First and Second Discourses*, edited by

Susan Dunn (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

19. Ibid., 157. Such a condemnation of slavery also left open the door to excusing African slavery

on the grounds that Africans were not human; as Rousseau puts it, “To conclude that the son of a

slave is born a slave is to conclude that he is not born a man” (229).

20. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770–1823* (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 1999), 263.

21. On slavery and the Enlightenment, see Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2005), chapter 5; Louis Sala-Molins, *Dark Side of the Light: Slavery*

and the French Enlightenment (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006);

Andrew S. Curran, *The Anatomy of Blackness: Science and Slavery in an Age of Enlightenment*

(Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Justin Roberts, *Slavery and the*

Enlightenment in the British Atlantic, 1750–1807 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press,

2013); Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical*

Enlightenment (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2008).

22. Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,

1994); Barbara Lewis Solow and Stanley L. Engerman, *British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery*:

The Legacy of Eric Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); S.H.H. Carrington and

Heather Cateau, eds., *Capitalism and Slavery Fifty Years Later: Eric Eustace Williams—A*

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23. Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American*

Capitalism (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New

York: Vintage, 2014).

24. David Richardson, Susan Schwarz, and Anthony Tibbles, eds., *Liverpool and Transatlantic*

Slavery (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008); Madge Dresser, *Slavery Obscured: The Social*

History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016);

Robert Stein, “The Profitability of the Nantes Slave Trade, 1783–1792,” *The Journal of Economic*

History 35, no. 2 (1975). See also Catherine A. Reinhardt, *Claims to Memory: Beyond Slavery and Emancipation in the French Caribbean* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006).

25. Louis Sala-Molins, *Le Code Noir, ou le Calvaire de Canaan* (Paris, 1987), 244. Historical

estimates vary widely on this point, but most modern historians agree that slavery and the slave trade

played a major role in the economy of eighteenth-century France.

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27. Louis Sala-Molins, *Le Code Noir*, 239–41.

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Chapter 4

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soldiers of the armies of ancient Greece.

21. “[France’s LePen Announces Far-Right Bloc of Anti-EU MEPs](#),” *BBC News*, June 16, 2015.

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For more information, the

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