WELCOMING REMARKS

Richard Herrmann, Director, The Mershon Center
Carole Fink, The Ohio State University and Mershon Center

Professor Richard Herrmann welcomed the participants to The Mershon Center, and then Professor Carole Fink remarked on the significance of the conference. She reminded the participants of the historians’ fascination with commemoration and anniversaries, as they provide a wonderful opportunity to examine distance, difference, and continuity from a specific point in time to our own and to stir new work. Remembering, commemorating, measuring, revising can be useful scholarly deeds since they allow historians to test myths and rituals, testimony and memories against the newest documentary evidence and theoretical insights, to revise the historical record, and to broaden our understanding of turning points in history. Professor Fink then commented on the unique aspects of the 1956 conference at The Ohio State University. First, this was a gathering of junior and senior scholars from different institutions and with different backgrounds who shared their current research; second, our intention was to address the broad issues of race, neutralism, and national liberation with specific case studies but within a comparative and global perspective; and third, we also invited our participants and guests not only to focus on these three issues but also to tackle the larger issues of peace, justice, and human freedom that hovered over the world in 1956 – eleven years after Auschwitz and Hiroshima, eight years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – that transcend the Cold War and remain today.

PANEL 1: RACE

MODERATOR: Carol Anderson, University of Missouri-Columbia.

PANELISTS: Alice Conklin, The Ohio State University
The UNESCO Resolution on Race, 1950
John Munro, University of California, Santa Barbara
Anti-Colonialism and Civil Rights: Rethinking Cold War Black Internationalism in the United States
Ryan Irwin, The Ohio State University
The International Response to Apartheid in the 1960s
The opening panel of the conference focused on race and its implications in 1956. Three dominant themes that emerged from the discussion were the ways in which the early Cold War and decolonization highlighted the racial injustices within the United States, the relationship between Communism and race, and the role of the United Nations and UNESCO in redefining racial paradigms in light of the Holocaust and decolonization. Professor Carol Anderson opened the panel by pointing out that race and nationalism are used for both inclusivity and exclusivity and then offered the Soviet Union as an example. Civil rights leaders in the United States watched as nations in Africa and Asia gained their independence and sought to assert their sovereignty in the international community.

With recognition of the status of these new nations came a sense that racial hierarchies were no longer appropriate. This realization took hold not only on the international level, but the local as well. Professor Alice Conklin noted that while there was a sense that science could be neutral, there was also recognition of the diversity of the human race and that education about difference was important. While the United States confronted its racial issues, the Soviet Union became a victim of its own rhetoric. Espousing an anti-colonial message that encouraged Communism around the world, the Soviets received harsh criticism from the Third World over the invasion of Hungary. As John Munro commented, African-American communists did not generally identify with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Hermann further noted that Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru questioned the world wide communist movement.

The United Nations provided a forum for these debates over race and decolonization. UNESCO’s statement on race signaled a movement away from racial hierarchy and toward the celebration of diversity. However, Fink pointed out, the UNESCO representatives were from colonial powers where racist rhetoric had driven expansion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Race would continue to be a divisive issue in the UN as Third World leaders struggled to find a middle ground to establish their own path between the two superpowers.

**PANEL 2: NEUTRALISM**

**MODERATOR:** Robert McMahon, The Ohio State University

**PANELISTS:**
- Rinna Kullaa, University of Maryland, College Park
- Margaret Manchester, Providence College
- Rajiv Khanna, The Ohio State University
- Jason Parker, Mershon Center and Texas A&M University

Tito and Non-alignment in the 1950s
Nasser and Non-alignment
Nehru and the Aftermath of Suez
Neutralism and Race in U.S. Foreign Policy
The discussion opened with Professor Robert McMahon’s comments on the definition of the term “neutralism” and the criterion for being categorized as a neutral state. After all, states such as Sweden, Switzerland, and Ireland had longer histories of neutrality, but at the Bandung Conference in 1955, almost all the invitees were from newly decolonized “Third World” nations in Asia and Africa. The Hungarians too attempted to be neutral in 1956. Terming the Ukrainian dissident student movements in the 1950s as “unrealized neutralism,” Professor William Risch highlighted the independent and anti-imperialist nature of the Ukrainian protest movement. Perhaps, in future discussions on this topic, historians would be well advised to consider the European component of neutralism as well.

In the global Cold War neutralism also became increasingly racialized. Conklin raised the issue of the race politics of neutralism and if the neutral countries articulated any antiracist policies. Closely tied to the racial component of nonalignment, was the anti-colonial stance of neutral nations. As Ryan Irwin indicated, neutral nations had to deal not only with the “old” colonialism of Britain and France, which was still active in many parts of the world, but also the “new” emerging colonialism of the U.S. and U.S.S.R. Professor Jason Parker emphasized the racial undertones of the nonaligned movement, especially in the Bandung Conference in 1955.

Fink raised the question of the politics, practice, and benefits of neutrality. She asked if the neutral nations could indeed opt out of the bipolar struggle in light of the incredible pressure applied by the superpowers. Rajiv Khanna highlighted the nuances of neutralism and indicated that there was no clearly defined path to nonalignment. In the case of India, Nehru, with his deeply felt Gandhian convictions of nonviolence, used neutralism as an end in itself. However, Nasser’s Egypt practiced a different variant of the same policy. The Egyptian leader used neutralism as a means to play off the West against the East in order to extract maximum benefits. Neutralism also had a domestic component, as all leaders discussed in the presentations used it as a tool to build nationalism. In the case of Nasser, especially, there was an intimate link between Arab nationalism and involvement with the Pan-African movement. Professor Ahmad Sikainga referred to this idea. And the Soviets became increasingly involved in the African movement as well. As McMahon argued, neutralism was also a grassroots level policy. There was broad sentiment among the people of the “Third World” for an alternative in the bipolar confrontation. If given a choice, the people in Thailand and Pakistan would have chosen to be neutrals in the Cold War. Indonesia, from the outset, had categorically stated its neutralist stance, meanwhile nations such as Thailand, South Korea, and South Vietnam chose alignment to become militarized. On the flip side, Rinna Kullaa reminded us that the Yugoslav people perceived Tito’s foreign policy as a sign of weakness, and recent literature in Serbia cast neutralism in a negative light due to the missed economic opportunities. Parker pointed to the realpolitik component of neutralism. The newly liberated nations had considerable economic needs for which they needed assistance from both superpowers. Moreover, they simply could not afford to become involved in an expensive arms race. Even the Americans were reluctant to squander resources on maintaining large armies to protect their allies.
Neutrality in practice was not always fair and balanced, as demonstrated by Nehru’s vacillation in the Suez and Hungary crises, and Tito’s “cautious neutralism,” as indicated by Kullaa. Professor Margaret Manchester revealed that for Nasser neutralism was a difficult policy to follow in wake of serious threats to his regime by the Americans, and opposition to Arab nationalism. Neutralism also had a geopolitical element. Srđan Vujtić asked how Nehru reconciled the discourse of a large democracy being partners with other nonaligned nations that were not democratic. Khanna replied that strategic international calculations outweighed the ideological underpinnings of neutralism. Hence, democratic India had lesser problems allying with a dictator such as Nasser rather than a democracy such as Britain, which was firmly rooted in the Western camp. Anderson inquired about the gendered connotations of neutralism. McMahon commented that American officials feminized those leaders that advocated policies that were at odds with U.S. experts. For instance, American policymakers feminized Nehru, especially since he did not drink and eat meat, but spoke of Pakistani leaders in masculine terms. The discussion closed with Fink adding that neutral states could also act as intermediaries in the global struggle. Finally, the Cold War in the 1960s assumed a more multipolar component, especially with the rise of China as a player in the international balance of power. McMahon added that the Sino-Soviet split made Indian nonalignment untenable.

PANEL 3: NATIONAL LIBERATION

MODERATOR: Ahmad Sikainga, The Ohio State University

PANELISTS: Daniel Branch, University of Exeter

Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Kenya: Building the Fractured Nation

William Risch, Georgia College and State University

Dissent within the Soviet Empire: Ukrainian Student Movements in the 1950s

Both papers provoked lively discussion. Anderson questioned the role of resources in national liberation movements. The importance of access and controlling resources is a significant factor, Anderson claimed, which provoked national liberation movements during the era of 1956. Control of resources also played a significant role in the formation of identity and in modernization efforts in colonial countries. Daniel Branch expanded upon this comment by asserting that resources connect daily life these peripheral regions to the events of the larger world. He also noted that many liberation groups tried to be more modern than their opponents in order to win the liberation battle. McMahon noted that the Vietnam War began as a struggle over resources until the region was affected by the Cold War. The Ukraine was no exception during this period, Risch added. The Ukrainians were displeased that the Russians dominated and profited from the resources, such as grain, in the region. The Ukrainians also opposed land collectivization.
The debate over resources and national liberation movements transitioned into a discussion concerning stability and the Cold War. Fink remarked that the Cold War was about maintaining stability. Professor Jennifer Siegel expanded upon Fink’s point by noting that the Cold War was similar to the nineteenth century in that there was a perception of stability rather than actual stability. Fink and McMahon both noted the number of deaths in proxy wars during the Cold War highlights the lack of peace and stability. Fink then proceeded to point out that 1956 was one of the most destabilizing years of the Cold War, a turning point in Cold War history. The lack of stability found on the periphery as a result of liberation movements, McMahon pointed out, caused a tension between social justice and stability. The late 1950s and early 1960s is a model for a peaceful transfer of power while maintaining stable institutions.

DINNER ADDRESS

Donna Guy, The Ohio State University
1956 in Latin America: From Castro to the Pill

A lack of vision characteristic of US-Latin American relations in the twentieth century has been accompanied by the US desire to maintain hegemony in Latin America through traditional ties to often undemocratic leaders. This became clear in 1956 as the U.S. government had to deal with two significant events: the return of Fidel Castro to Cuba and the decision to conduct massive trials of the first oral contraceptive in Puerto Rico. Efforts at containing European and Middle Eastern events in the Americas overshadowed all premonitions of Castro’s potential in Cuba and the future potential for internal political opposition to women’s reproductive rights, as well as the pill’s ultimate impact on demography worldwide.

WRAP UP SESSION

Carole Fink, Rajiv Khanna, Amanda Rothey

The aim of this session was to discuss the interconnections between the three themes of the conference, and place them in the broader international context. Fink opened the discussion by proposing some issues for consideration. More specifically, she asked about the role of religion, the generation of leaders in 1956, the heavily Eurocentered discourse, the impetus for change, and the idea of global stability and order, and structural forces such as nationalism and racism.

This sparked an energetic dialogue between participants. McMahon picked up on the theme of religion and stated that the Americans viewed Islam as a bulwark against communism and a source of stability. Hence, the U.S. was keenly supporting Islamic parties in the 1955 general elections in Indonesia. Islam, as Professor Manchester concluded, received a boost in the 1950s.
Siegel questioned the perceived sense of order and stability in the world in 1956. McMahon called the years between 1956 and 1962 as the least stable and most fraught years of the international Cold War. From the perspective of the actors of 1956, there was a real fear of extinction and danger, especially in light of nuclear weapons and divisions in the world due to defensive pacts. However, the superpowers shared an interest with the post-colonial elites who wanted to maintain order even if this meant preserving the borders of the colonial states. There was no support for the Wilsonian notion of nation building as this would lead to an unstable world. Kashmir was a good example. Fink presented the example of divided Germany and its acceptance by the superpowers. She drew attention to how the East German leader Walter Ulbricht obstructed the process of détente and allowed the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Anderson mentioned how the push for human rights was perhaps a way to create stability in the volatile Cold War atmosphere. Khanna added that many new decolonized nations looked to the UN for justice and order.

Khanna brought up the larger structural forces operating in 1956. As discussed earlier, there was a close link between nationalism and nonalignment, but historians also consider this era the apogee of nationalism. Manchester stated that nonalignment was just as much a response to domestic pressure. Irwin pointed to the shift in the organization of power in 1956. Both superpowers were engaged in empire building, but this was age also witnessed the rise of the nation-state. At the same time Bandung a parallel thrust of internationalism was emerging in Bandung. Irwin asked, “Where are the points of nation-state and new empire intersecting?” McMahon pointed to the economic structures, and the emerging global capitalist system, with the newly liberated colonies being integrated into the international economy. Most of the colonies did not opt out of this economic structure, but those that did were not successful.

Anderson referred to how the Atlantic Charter of 1941 set the process of change in motion. Fink reminded us that that the Charter and the Declaration of Human Rights mirrored the European experience, especially the Holocaust. Anderson recounted the influence of the Charter for those under subjugation. There was certainly a sense of progress with the founding of the United Nations and the subsequent declarations that filled the racially oppressed with hope. Fink pointed out that the seeds of decolonization were sown in the trenches of the First World War, just as the French defeat in 1940 had an enormous impact on the colonial world. Siegel discussed the feeling of empowerment felt by the colonized people as they fought alongside their colonial masters in both the world wars. Professor Anderson also emphasized the international nature of the racial struggle – Nehru was a lifelong member of NAACP, and Martin Luther King Jr. was deeply influenced by Gandhi. In 1956 the leaders and people feel the international connections.

Sikainga wished to discuss the issue of Pan-Africanism. He identified this movement as being influential for African nationalism, but also as having more territorial than racial connotations. Munro said that Ethiopia’s defeat of Italy had important consequences for Pan-Africanism. In this context, Fink raised the issue of collaboration, as discussed in
Daniel Branch’s presentation on the Mau Mau insurgency in Kenya. She asked: What does a collaborationist government have to deliver to retain power? In response, McMahon answered that they certainly have to appeal to peasants and undertake land reform. The Americans had realized that factor and used it to their advantage in the Cold War. But collaboration had not only political, but also economic and material dimensions. The British adopted similar tactics in Libya, Anderson explained, where they promised self-rule in exchange for access to military bases to protect the Mediterranean pipeline.

The organizers thanked the participants for their presentations and invigorating questions that helped us cast the events of the year 1956 in an international and comparative perspective.