

BOOK REVIEW

Jeffrey S. Ahlman. *Kwame Nkrumah: Visions of Liberation*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2021. 240 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$ 16.95. Paper. ISBN: 9780821424520.

Fifty years after his death, Kwame Nkrumah remains one of the most influential figures in Africa's colonial and post-colonial history. The main reason for this, as evidenced by numerous scholars, activists, and politicians throughout the decades, is his relevance not only for the history of his homeland, Ghana, but also for the entirety of the African continent and possibly beyond. He is also one of the most controversial African leaders ever, sparking quite divergent and Manichean readings about his role in Ghanaian and African politics. Sometimes portrayed as a revolutionary genius, sometimes as a tyrant, his life is still very much debated both within and outside of academia.

Quite a few biographies already exist on the Ghanaian statesman and Pan-Africanist, written by journalists, historians, and politicians. Why, then, the reader may ask, should we need another biography, such as Jeffrey S. Ahlman's *Kwame Nkrumah: Visions of Liberation*?


The first reason that justifies Ahlman's endeavor is his skilful work in providing the reader with a very concise biography of Nkrumah, probably the most concise to date, in line with the Ohio University Press's Short Histories of Africa series in which it is published. This is not an easy feat, given the abundance of topics surrounding Nkrumah and his political vision(s). Many details are obviously left behind. Not much, for instance, is said about Nkrumah's personal life, his government's involvement with the USSR, or the troubled relationship between Ghana and Togo during his tenure as Prime Minister/President. Perhaps more could also have been included regarding Nkrumah's pan-African legacy, especially in the transformation of OAU into AU. Nonetheless, the seven chapters that form this book offer the reader all the essential information about Nkrumah's life and deeds, especially the role he played in shaping African history and politics.

This brings us to the second and most important element which makes this book stand out from other biographies of Nkrumah. Ahlman draws the most detailed historical context onto many of Nkrumah's key life events much more effectively than other biographers ever have. As noted by Ahlman, scholars, journalists, and other types of commentators "tend to strip from the African political and social context its specificity." "The result," Ahlman continues, "has often been a set of flattened pictures of Nkrumah, Gold Coast/Ghanaian politics, and the transnational political, social, and cultural networks that came to shape them as well as twentieth-century Africa more broadly" (24). The aim of the book

is, then, “to position Nkrumah as part of a rotating array of interrelated historical contexts” (25). The author indeed delivers what he promises. For instance, in Chapter Two, Ahlman examines in detail the subject of schooling in colonial Gold Coast while positioning Nkrumah’s own experience within that context. Another example, in Chapter Three, is the author’s examination of black politics in the US at the time when Nkrumah witnessed and actively participated in them. Throughout the book, the historical context is reconstructed through an excellent use of contemporary literature (for example, parliamentary debates and newspaper articles) and primary sources.

The third reason why I think this book is needed is that it offers one of the most impartial analyses of Nkrumah’s life to date. As mentioned above, Nkrumah’s historical figure is quite controversial. As evidenced by the author, “Nkrumah means many things to many different people. [...] from hope, joy, and African self-determination and dignity [...] to [...] corruption and decline” (20). It is thus important to allow the reader to make up his own mind without guiding him/her toward a biased reading of Nkrumah and his worldview. Ahlman once again achieves his objective.

In conclusion, Ahlman offers a remarkably complete and impartial introductory work on Nkrumah’s life and ideas. This book is an excellent contribution to the bibliography on Nkrumah and is a useful instrument for students, academics, and non-academics alike.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2024.12