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OBITUARY

Marika Sherwood (1937–2025)

Hakim Adi

Senior Research Fellow, Department of International History, London School of Economics
Email: H.Adi@lse.ac.uk

In the early 1980s there were very few people researching and writing about the histories of African, Caribbean and South Asian people in Britain, and fewer still, if any, who were studying this history at school or university. The historian and campaigner Marika Sherwood, who died in February at the age of eighty-seven, played a significant part in changing this situation, although she would protest that much more still needs to be done.

It was while she was teaching in London schools, shocked by the racism her pupils faced, that she first became interested in knowing more about the history relating to the children of Caribbean heritage in her classroom. When she discovered that black children were bullied because it was alleged that their families had not contributed to the Second World War, she decided she must discover more. Later, while working at North London Polytechnic as a student counsellor, and with no academic background or training in history, she was encouraged to begin conducting historical research herself.

One of her early books on the subject was *Many Struggles: West Indian workers and service personnel in Britain (1939–1945),* published in 1985. It was one of the first publications to highlight the struggle against 'the racism meted out to Black people by the British state' during the Second World War, and to demonstrate that those from the Caribbean were an integral part of the war effort. Over the next forty years she would produce over twenty books and almost a hundred articles, some of these published in academic journals, but many others written for a wider readership.

Her books covered a vast variety of topics. In *After Abolition: Britain and the slave trade since 1807* (2007), she presented a reminder, during the bicentennial commemoration of the Abolition Act, that Britain's involvement in human trafficking continued long after 1807. In much of her work she provided in-depth histories centred on key figures, and largely unknown political activities and organizations in Britain, including *Kwame Nkrumah: the years abroad 1935–1947* (1996); *Claudia Jones: a life in exile* (1999); *Origins of Pan-Africanism: Henry Sylvester Williams, Africa and the African diaspora* (2011); *Malcolm X: visits abroad April 1964–February 1965* (2011); and most recently *Kwame Nkrumah and the Dawn of the Cold War – the West African National Secretariat 1945-48* (2019).

To bring her pioneering work to a wider readership, from the early 1990s she self-published seven of her shorter books under the imprint of Savannah Press, including

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work on slavery, Pan-Africanism and Caribbean history. The most recent publication was *World War II – colonies and colonials* (2013), a return to her initial concern that histories of the war too frequently excluded Britain's colonial subjects. She was particularly passionate about the need for changes to the national history curriculum and wrote for both students and teachers, including designing, with her Black and Asian Studies Association (BASA) colleagues, a GCSE module and textbook on migration to Britain (2016).

In addition to her writing, in 1991 Marika Sherwood co-founded and became the secretary of BASA. It produced a quarterly *Newsletter*, which she edited until 2007, and became the vehicle for her unrelenting campaigning. She lobbied the Department of Education, including government minsters, demanding a more inclusive national history curriculum, and the Home Office over files withheld from the National Archives relating to prominent Black political activists – as well as encouraging and cajoling archives, libraries and museums to be more sensitive to everything relating to diversity, from collections to cataloguing. She organized conferences on history and archives, workshops for teachers, and a host of other activities designed to encourage a wider appreciation of the importance of what has more recently been termed Black British History.

In 1991 she began organizing regular history seminars at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies in London, where in 1990 she had been appointed a Research Fellow. The seminars, which continued for some thirty years, and her other activities with BASA connected everyone who had an interest in a history of Britain that included those of African, Caribbean and South Asian heritage. With her extensive knowledge, rich archival sources, and key contacts in many countries, she became a resource for everyone interested in this history. Always generous with her time, research material and advice she was widely recognized for her expertise not only in Britain, but also in the United States, the Caribbean and Africa.

In 2022 she was belatedly awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Chichester.

In her later years she devoted some of her generosity and time to Zuarungu-Moshi, a small village in northern Ghana, which she had first been invited to visit in 2006. Appalled by the lack of facilities, and what she perceived as neglect by the Ghanaian government, she returned regularly, began working with local women and subsequently raised money for a well, several boreholes, a refrigerator for the local health centre, even a village school, as well as books and other material for local schoolchildren.[1]

Marika Sherwood was born in Budapest, Hungary on 8 November 1937 to Hungarian-Jewish parents, Laszlo (Laci) Fenyő and Magda Fenyő (née Langer). Laci survived Hungary's forced labour system, but many relatives died in the Holocaust, including Marika's uncle. Magda managed to secure false Christian identity papers, saving her and Marika and they survived the Nazi occupation. She later spoke of the impact of these wartime experiences in shaping her very public support of the Palestinian cause.[2]

[1] See https://pambazuka.org/visiting-zuarungu-moshi-northern-ghana

[2] See https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171102-i-am-not-anti-semitic-but-i-am-anti-zionism/

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In 1948, after emigrating as a refugee to Australia with her surviving family, Marika attended school and went on to study anthropology at the University of Sydney, becoming the first single mother to graduate in Australia. She then briefly worked in New Guinea, explaining later that what she remembered most was the racism experienced by the local population, before arriving in Britain in 1965.

She is survived by her granddaughters, Rosie and Kim Sherwood.

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