Enterprise & Society (2024), 25: 4, 979–991
doi:10.1017/eso.2024.37

KROOSS PRIZE DISSERTATION SUMMARIES

Imperial Crucible: Alcoa and the Transimperial History of American Capitalism, 1888–1953

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"Imperial Crucible" tells the story of the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa) from the company's founding in Pittsburgh in 1888 through the 1950s. Although scholars have long contended that American multinational corporations played a pivotal role in the industrialization of the United States, the building of a global working class, and the transformation of European empires, they have tended to see these stories as distinct, rather than interconnected. In contrast, Imperial Crucible focuses on a single firm to draw together the political-economic, working-class, and imperial history of American business. What the industrialists behind Alcoa built, I argue, was not a multinational but a transimperial corporation.

Keywords: United States; corporations; imperialism; labor

Multinational corporations have always fit uneasily into the history of American capitalism. Their emergence in the Gilded Age raised an unsettling question: Where does the American economy begin and end? My project is about the people within and beyond the United States who built—and fought—the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa). While Alcoa is often thought of as one of the first American multinationals, I argue that the company was not a multinational but a transimperial corporation. Alcoa and other border-crossing firms were built in a world of empires, not nations. Only in hindsight—in an age of decolonization and the end of Jim Crow—was the idea of the "multinational" read back into the origin story of big business.[1]

When Alcoa was founded in Pittsburgh in 1888, it was not a transimperial corporation. But the Pittsburgh Reduction Company, as the firm was first called, came of age in a city remade by

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1. For an illuminating discussion of transimperial approaches, Hoganson and Sexton, *Crossing Empires*; the Jamaican economist Norman Girvan was perhaps the first to think of the American firm in transimperial terms. See Girvan, "Multinational Corporations."

Published online November 22, 2024

steel and a nation remade by empire. Alfred Hunt, the firm's first president, tied the company to this wider world. As an engineer, he helped industrialists replace skilled puddlers with the Bessemer process, a new technology essential to the mass production of steel. And as a captain, when these workers rebelled at Homestead in 1892, he led a company of bayonetted soldiers to crush the strike. Although Hunt died of malaria in 1899, which he contracted fighting America's colonial war in Puerto Rico, the martial, masculine, and imperial virtues he embodied marked the company for the next century.

How, then, did this Pittsburgh startup become a transimperial corporation? Before his untimely death, Hunt leveraged his experience as an industrial captain, if not quite a captain of industry, to court the Mellon family. Ties to Andrew and Richard Mellon, who together were becoming the most important venture capitalists in Pittsburgh, enabled the company's founders to look beyond Western Pennsylvania—to build Alcoa. While aluminum was new, bigness was not. A wider set of legal, political, and technological changes had encouraged the "corporate reconstruction" of American capitalism. Among them were the passage of the Sherman Antitrust Act (1890), which encouraged business mergers by forbidding cartel arrangements; the rise of a protectionist regime that sheltered infant industries like aluminum (Andrew Mellon tapped his friends in the Pennsylvania Republican Party to put aluminum on the 1890 McKinley Tariff); and the advent of more liberal rules governing incorporation, established first in New Jersey in 1888 and then elsewhere.[2] Combined with new technologies, like railroads, steamships, and telegraphs, these political and legal changes let financiers and industrialists join hands and build firms that crossed vast expanses of land and water.[3] Hunt saw big steel as a blueprint for big aluminum. Just as steel producers had invested in iron ore and coal, Hunt argued that Alcoa needed to mine aluminum ore and generate the power needed to refine and smelt it.

However important capital, new technologies, and laws were to the making of the modern firm, they do not explain how the industrial corporation was built. The abstractions scholars have used to explain the corporation's history, from "vertical integration" to "market internalization," suggested a smooth and almost automatic process.[4] They implied that the rise of the industrial corporation could be explained as part of a wider process of modernization.[5] Yet if we consider the factory, not the office, as the heart of the industrial corporation, a different story presents itself. Far from headquarters, white collar managers had to roll up their sleeves to tackle problems as old as capitalism. They had to secure hands to fell trees, erect homes, build roads, and make metal. And they needed to decide what to do when these hands rebelled. When they confronted these questions about labor, they seldom did so apart from questions about property. After all, they had to acquire and secure the land that needed to be worked and the plant that needed to be run. While the history of property may have begun with plans hatched in boardrooms, it unfolded in the field, where surveyors and prospectors bought

2. For a recent compelling interpretation of the corporate reconstruction thesis, see Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders*; on mergers, the Sherman Act, and new rules of incorporation, Lamoreaux, *The Great Merger Movement*; on the tariff, Cannadine, *Mellon*, 33.

3. The classic works on American multinational remains Wilkins, *Emergence of Multinational Enterprise* and *The Maturing of Multinational Enterprise*, and Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream.*

4. Chandler, *Visible Hand.*

5. Link and Maggor, "The United States as a Developing Nation."

https://doi.org/10.1017/eso.2024.37 Published online by Cambridge University Press

land and mapped minerals, and in the houses of political power, where corporate agents and statesmen drew up and contested property rights.[6] New technologies and organizational forms gave the corporation a facelift. But the building of these institutions called to mind an older history of enclosure and colonial venture. Alcoa's history was not so much a story of integration and internalization, but of expropriation and exploitation.[7]

Where did it all begin? In the 1890s, company men came to believe that to make profits making aluminum you needed a river. Part of the explanation was chemistry. The huge quantities of electricity needed to split the bond between aluminum and oxygen in nature made the metal a child of the second industrial revolution. It was thus imagined that only the endless amounts of electricity produced by the flow of rivers through dams permitted economies of scale in aluminum production. With cheap aluminum in hand, Alcoa could then sell the metal as a substitute for copper and steel.[8] The other reason had to do with competition. While Alcoa had a legal monopoly in the United States until its patents expired in 1909, it was not the only upstart. It mattered that Alcoa's most important competitor, the Aluminium-Industrie Aktiengesellschaft, was already producing aluminum with hydropower on the Rhine in the Swiss Alps. Captain Hunt was familiar with this Swiss development, which he visited at least twice. To compete with Aluminium and to mass produce aluminum, Alcoa needed cheap power. It needed to dam its own river.

By the turn of the twentieth century, Alcoa men believed that the St. Lawrence would be their Rhine. While hydroelectric dams have often been thought of as triumphs or catastrophes of state building, the early history of big dams was a story of industrial enclosure.[9] Alcoa men hunted for distressed firms that possessed, through special acts of state legislatures, exclusive rights to develop waterpower. The first was the St. Lawrence Power Company, which Alcoa acquired in 1902. Owning St. Lawrence Power gave the company the rights to build a canal and dam that drew water from the St. Lawrence and dumped it into the Grasse River near Massena, NY. The monopoly rights contained in this charter harkened back to an earlier era, when corporations blurred public and private power. It resembled the charters that had been commonplace, if not uncontroversial, in British North America, particularly when the state needed private individuals to build roads, canals, and bridges.[10]

But brass hats in the company soon found out that politics, while often a useful tool, could also be an obstacle. Once Alcoa had a smelter churning out aluminum on the banks of the St. Lawrence, the company worked to expand its property rights beyond the terms of the original charter. They did so by proposing the Long Sault Development Company, a carbon copy of St. Lawrence Power, with a much broader mandate. They hoped to make a slice of the

6. On prospecting, see Black, *The Global Interior.*

7. On this earlier history, Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra.* My approach draws on recent scholarship that has begun to think differently about the corporation. Among the most important works are Cowie, *Capital Moves*; Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*; White, *Railroaded*; Hudson, *Bankers and Empire*; Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*; Enstad, *Cigarettes, Inc*; Baker, *Make Your Own Job.*

8. Smith, *From Monopoly to Competition*, 78–79.

9. On industrial enclosure after the American Civil War, see Teitelman, "The Properties of Capitalism."

10. Lamoreaux and Novak, "Corporations and American Democracy."

https://doi.org/10.1017/eso.2024.37 Published online by Cambridge University Press

river their own. While the company mapped and acquired land on the St. Lawrence, it planted friends in Washington and Ottawa to get the ball rolling. But the firm faced stiff and ultimately decisive resistance on both sides of the border. One Congressmen from Illinois asked whether "it was usual for States to turn over to private corporations their properties of this sort." This was the kind of question that contained its own answer.[11] In the Dominion of Canada, the mood was less inquisitive: "in no event and in no degree should control of the St. Lawrence be allowed to pass into the hands of private interests."[12]

Left unsaid in Ottawa and Washington were the stakes of Alcoa's schemes for Mohawks, who called their sovereign land straddling the St. Lawrence Akwesasne. In 1925, Laura Cornelius Kellogg, an Oneida leader from Wisconsin, and James Deere, a Mohawk man from the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation, formalized a suit to take back the land that the State of New York had ceded to the St. Lawrence Power Company. "These people have no title to the territory," explained Louis Oak, a Mohawk chief. "The Mohawk Nation never sold it." Drawing on a recent legal precedent in New York, Kellogg contended that the sale of Mohawk land to the State of New York in the nineteenth century was illegal. This was because prior treaties with the United States held that only the federal government had the power to cede land from the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. While the argument was sound, the deck was stacked against Kellogg and the Mohawks. Before the final ruling, the lawyer representing John Deere and the Mohawk Nation told Kellogg that there were "too many powerful, political, and financial interests involved in this matter."[13] Not incidentally, Alcoa was represented by Charles Hughes, New York's former governor, Coolidge's former secretary of state, and the supreme court's future chief justice. Even in the twentieth century, the imperial history of American business had domestic roots.[14]

While Alcoa maintained its small operations on the St. Lawrence, a stone's throw from the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation, Ottawa and Washington aborted the company's wider plans for the river. Not all was in vain, however. Hours of congressional hearings, hundreds of surveys, and meetings with political friends gave the company something almost as valuable as electrical power—knowledge of dam building and the ins and outs of water politics. They packaged up this knowledge and took it South, where they dammed the Little Tennessee and Yadkin Rivers. The company's earth-moving projects faced little political opposition in North Carolina or Tennessee until the spring of 1933, when President Roosevelt chartered the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA).

Given all that has been said about public power and aluminum production in the South and West during the New Deal, and how little has been said about Alcoa in this history, one is left with the impression that the company must have flamed out during the Great Depression.[15]

11. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Rivers and Harbors, *Relating to the Improvement of Navigation of the St. Lawrence*, 631.

12. White, "Long Sault Rapids."

13. Carl Whitney to Mrs. Kellog. 31 March 1927. Quoted in Helen M. Upton, *Everett Report*, 127.

14. Ackley and Stanciu, eds. *Laura Cornelius Kellogg*, 226; Hauptman, *Seven Generations of Iroquois Leadership*, 159–162; on settler property and Haudenosaunee sovereignty, Palmer, "Rendering Settler Sovereign Landscapes."

15. This is part of the wider erasure of private hydroelectric development in the economic history of the US South. See Manganiello, "Hitching the New South to 'White Coal'."

The truth, however, was that the liaison that formed between Alcoa and public utilities during World War II was inconvenient for both the champions and critics of public power. By the late 1930s, Alcoa was one of the largest private utilities in the South. It was one of the most important competitors and critics of the TVA. This was why, when Arthur Davis—Alfred Hunt's third cousin and successor—was asked what he thought about the TVA, he had to tell a joke. "I must like it," he said. "They are trying to do what we have been trying to do and have been doing for 25 years."[16]

One of the mandates of both the TVA and its diminutive twin, the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA), was to plan industrial investment. A big part of this was figuring out what to do with Alcoa—an industrial monopoly and private utility that controlled the one industry capable of consuming all the megawatts that public dams generated. When those at the helm of public power agencies drew on an older populist language to interpret their mission in anticolonial terms, Alcoa could not have been far from their minds. "The Northwest, like the South, has been a colonial empire of the East and Middle West," argued Paul Raver, the first head of the BPA.[17] Yet if the aim of building big dams was decolonization, the result might be better described as neocolonialism. Demand for aluminum during World War II cemented a mixed economy of public power generation for private aluminum production. This public-private partnership blossomed after the war, as Alcoa remained one of the biggest consumers of public power in the South and Northwest.[18]

While power from dams made aluminum cheap, it could not do so without aluminum ore (bauxite). In the 1890s, Alcoa acquired a series of small firms that had mined bauxite in Georgia and Alabama, consolidated them into the American Bauxite Company, and headquartered the new subsidiary west of Little Rock, where the lion's share of bauxite in the United States had been found. With John Gibbons, a Confederate veteran, on the payroll and letterhead, Alcoa acquired as much bauxite-rich land in Arkansas as it could.[19]

These domestic reserves seemed sufficient to Alcoa men until World War I. Skyrocketing demand for aluminum suddenly forced the company to shred their most sanguine projections. Overnight a metal they had fought tooth and nail to sell as cookware, cable, and auto fuselage had become indispensable to building soldiers' equipment, tanks, ships, aircraft, and bombs. Comfort in abundance thus gave way to fears of scarcity, as the mineral wealth of the United States no longer appeared sufficient to meet American demand for aluminum.[20] Where would they turn?

In London, the world's imperial capital, Alcoa engineers set themselves to building a transimperial corporation. It was there that one of the company's chief engineers met Evan Wong, a wealthy Chinese merchant who claimed to own bauxite-rich land in British Guiana's interior. Wong, whose family had freely traveled to Georgetown from Hong Kong on the *Dartmouth* in 1879, was a member of the colony's urban middle class. This class had sprouted not just through merchant activity but also managing the extraction of timber, rubber, and

16. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Military Affairs, *Tennessee Valley Authority*, 662.

17. Raver, "Regional Industrial Trends and the Pacific Northwest" Speech (1940). BPA.

18. On reassessing the political economy of the New Deal and the TVA, see Offner, *Sorting Out the Mixed Economy*; and Cebul, "Creative Competition."

19. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South*.

20. Storli, "The Global Race for Bauxite."

other commodities.[21] They not only had the land but also the supplies of cheap labor needed to lay the foundations for Alcoa's first investments in the British Caribbean. In neighboring Paramaribo, the middle classes would play a similar role in facilitating the acquisition of land and industrial investment.[22]

But Alcoa's history in Suriname and Guiana diverged at the level of imperial policy. While officials in the Hague welcomed Alcoa with open arms, their counterparts at Whitehall sought to bend American capital to the imperatives of Britain's postwar imperial political economy.[23] Fearful of the material shortages that had hampered the British war effort, officials took a protectionist turn.[24] They made mineral concessions in the Caribbean contingent on refining and smelting bauxite in the British empire. While Alcoa successfully deferred this provision for a decade, sending ship after ship of bauxite from British Guiana to the United States, this ruling about property would soon alter the company's basic organization.

In 1928, what had been one company became two. Moving forward there would be an American firm, Alcoa, that drew its ore from Arkansas and Suriname, refined it in East St. Louis, and smelted it in the South and Northeast for American markets. And there would be a British imperial twin, Alcan, that drew its ore from British Guiana and refined and smelted it in Quebec, where the company had acquired the rights to build a vast hydroelectric dam on the Saguenay River from James B. Duke.[25] Too much emphasis on difference would be deceptive, however. Alcan's first president, Edward, was Arthur Davis' brother. And more important, the largest shareholders in both companies remained the same well after World War II.

While both corporations suffered through the Great Depression, their supply chains were sent into overdrive after 1940, the year Roosevelt committed the United States to building tens of thousands of aircraft to confront the Axis powers. During the war, smelting aluminum to build B-52s, Halifaxes, and Spitfires swallowed up much of the hydroelectric capacity of the United States and Canada, while pushing mineworkers in British Guiana, Suriname, and Arkansas to their physiological limits.[26] When the dust settled on the conflict, Alcoa and Alcan's wartime growth became a political problem in Washington. This was true for antitrusters, who had been investigating the company on and off for three decades. But it was also true for the Surplus Property Board, which had to discharge the aluminum smelters and refineries built, financed, and owned by the federal government but operated by Alcoa during the war. If all this property went to Alcoa, the federal government would have to take credit for spawning a new Standard Oil.

In piecemeal fashion, a coterie of policymakers from Oregon to Washington leveraged public property in dams and plants to reconstruct the aluminum industry. To compete with Alcoa, firms needed cheap power and ore. Thanks to the big dams operated by the TVA and

21. Look Lai, *Indentured Labor*, 49, 196–201.

22. On British Guiana, Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People*; Josiah, *Migration, Mining, and the African Diaspora*; on Suriname, Hoefte, *Suriname in the Long Twentieth Century*; on global middle classes and empire, Drayton, "Race, Culture, & Class."

23. Lamur, *American Takeover.*

24. Cain and Hopkins, *British Imperialism*, 48.

25. Massell, *Amassing Power*, 171–174.

26. On Alcoa and World War II, Wilson, *Destructive Creation*; on Alcan and World War II, Evenden, *Allied Power.*

BPA, it was easy to channel cheap public power to Reynolds and Kaiser, two upstarts in the industry. Ore was a more difficult question. The problem was not so much scarcity in the United States but cost. Alcoa estimated that, even including transportation, the ore the company mined in Suriname was four times cheaper than the ore it mined in Arkansas. To compete with Alcoa, these firms needed cheap bauxite. This meant looking beyond the United States.

It was in part for this reason that, in the 1950s, Marshall Plan money began trickling down into the Jamaican countryside, where corporate prospectors used public dollars to option plantation lands.[27] Unlike in the 1920s, British officials were in no position to make demands on American capitalists. They needed American capital. But they were fortunate that, this time around, American investment advanced two of the most important postwar imperial policy objectives. Officials in Jamaica could point to craters and smokestacks as evidence of colonial development, while reminding their superiors that every ship leaving Jamaica with bauxite was a shot of dollars into the sterling area.

From Massena to Suriname, Arkansas to Jamaica, Alcoa's history was a long series of expropriations and contestations over property. But this was not, and could not have been, the whole story. This empire of property was worth little without a complementary and simultaneous undertaking: making and exploiting a transimperial working class.[28] Alcoa's dependence on rural outposts meant that the company had to think not only about production but also about social reproduction.[29] Not just mines, refineries, and smelters but also the social words that surrounded them had to be imagined and built. It was not an accident that company engineers tossed around words like "colonization" when discussing these projects in private. Until well into the 1920s, the company's blind faith in cheap wages, the moral economy of the poorhouse, and the foreman's empire meant that the people who did live at Alcoa's doorstep did what they could to avoid working for the company. The company's task, then, became not just exploiting workers but also settling immigrant and migrant workers.

The history of how Alcoa built and managed a transimperial working class suggests that, alongside new technologies and organizational forms, coercion should be counted as central to the origins of the American industrial corporation. The tendency to think of labor in binary terms, as free or unfree, and to think of the industrial corporation as a modern institution, has largely obscured this history.[30] Yet if we understand labor regimes on a spectrum, it becomes easier to see how and where coercion mattered to the history of big business. Scholars of global capitalism have, of course, long pointed to the importance of coercive labor practices – whether managed through public or private means – to the global movement of people to colonial commodity frontiers and their exploitation. The history of work at Alcoa suggests that American business did not stand outside these wider patterns.[31]

While coercion could be found at all of Alcoa's outposts, it did not look the same everywhere. The incarcerated and indentured men and women who toiled for the company in North

27. Howell, "Capital Prospects."

28. On business, empire, and labor, Greene, "The Wages of Empire," and "Movable Empire."

29. On social reproduction, Vogel, *Marxism.*

30. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 212–213, 242–253; Stanley, *Bondage to Contract;* Steinfeld, *Coercion.*

31. On the global context, van der Linden and Rodríguez García, eds. *On Coerced Labor*; on the American context, Hahn, "Emancipation."

Carolina and Suriname represented one extreme. In the postbellum American South, penal labor had long been a staple of capitalist development. Incarcerating Black people and forcing them to work created the cheap and immovable labor force that made the region a magnet for capital, while generating revenue for southern states.[32] The advantages of penal labor to the company were clear enough. As one man overseeing convicts building Alcoa's dam on the Yadkin River put it: "We always know where to find them and that they will stay on the job until it is finished."[33] Body count serves as a crude proxy for the violence bound up with penal labor. TJ Cotton, who was tasked with moving dead workers from the dam site, recalled burying hundreds.[34] Much like penal labor in the American South, indentured labor in the Dutch empire was organized by the state. In Suriname, the 251 indentured men and women from Java who cut down trees, built homes, and dug up bauxite tied Alcoa to wider circuits of forced Javanese migration, which had undergirded the vast expansion of sugar plantations in Java and rubber plantations in Sumatra.[35] Indentured workers faced harsh penalties, including imprisonment, if they decided to strike or flee the plantations or mines to which they were attached. The last indentured laborers acquired their freedom from Alcoa in 1925.

While most people who built Alcoa were neither indentured nor imprisoned, they still confronted coercion on and off the shop floor. The company's dependence in the United States on migrant hands from Southern and Eastern Europe meant that the coercive tools used to acquire and exploit these people became the company's own. Padronism was the most important. It was a form of labor intermediation that enabled industrialists to contract out the acquisition and exploitation of hands. While industrialists often extolled the virtues of European migrant workers in racialized, quasi-biological terms, mine managers understood that many of these migrants "[were] as much trouble to get work done as the work is worth."[36] Thus it was coercion, the heavy hand of the padrone, that brought people to the commodity frontier and made them work.[37]

But the upheaval of World War I, which promised a windfall for Alcoa, disrupted the migration patterns and coercive tools through which the company had been built. It was in this context that Alcoa began to hire thousands of African American workers, first as strikebreakers, and later as workers, in its plant from East St. Louis to Badin. Managers like Arthur Davis presented this workplace transformation in whiggish terms. Davis told his mine manager in Arkansas that he was "glad to hear" the company was "getting in some negroes." While Davis clarified that he was "not a 'n---– lover'," it was high time that Alcoa "proceed along natural lines or along the lines of least resistance." In the South, or "that country," as Davis called it, "colored labor is the natural labor."[38] The inclusionary racism of paternalism had supplanted the exclusionary racism of the white man's town.

In African American migrants, Alcoa had found new hands. And it took them little time to draw on past practices to develop new tools for their exploitation. Whereas Southern and

32. Lichtenstein, *Twice the Work of Free Labor.*
33. "The Story of a Dam," *Earth Mover* 1, no. 2 (April 1916), 7.
34. Oral History Interview with TJ Cotton, June 17, 1977. SOHPC.
35. Among the many works, see Bosma, *The Making of a Periphery.*
36. E. C. Darling to John R. Gibbons, June 11, 1907, Box 3, Folder 8. ALCOA.
37. On padronism, Hahamovitch, *The Fruits of Their Labor*; Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor.*
38. Arthur V. Davis to J. T. Fuller, March 31, 1920, Box 79, Folder 5. ALCOA.

https://doi.org/10.1017/eso.2024.37 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Eastern Europeans were often supervised by padrones who shared their background, mirroring intermediation practices elsewhere around the world, Alcoa did not let black people supervise black workers.[39] Only whites could be bosses. The company's creation of a private, all-white police force in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas blurred the lines between convicts and workers. One observer noted that these cops "[made] themselves felt mainly in petty acts of tyranny."[40] They dragged people out of their homes, beat up workers, and patrolled the color line. But hard power was only part of the strategy. Local bosses hand-picked a crew of teachers and pastors who lectured, in the industrial school idiom of the day, about black backwardness and the uplifting consequences of perpetual toil. These were the tools that made it possible for men like Davis to talk about a racialized labor hierarchy as if it were natural.

Ultimately, in an era of boom, bust, and labor turnover, coercion mattered because it turned mobile people into immobile workers. But this violence was a double-edged sword. During World War I, strikes broke out at the company's plant from New York to Arkansas, Illinois to Suriname.[41] Workers demanded not only higher wages but also an end to the archaic practices of abuse and domination that marked life on and off the shop floor. In Massena, striking Jewish, Polish, Hungarian, and Italian workers called for the head of Fred Gillard, a tyrant from Quebec who had been "driving them like cattle."[42] Demands for industrial unions that drew together black, white, and immigrant workers—especially in East St. Louis and Arkansas—showed that workers rejected the old regime.[43]

Nowhere was this history of violence and its contestation more explosive than in East St. Louis, the hinge between the company's empire of mines and smelters. The stakes of a strike at the company's refinery were lost on nobody, especially Alcoa managers, who had stockpiled rifles and thousands of rounds of ammunition to protect their property. After a long standoff that began in the fall of 1916, the strike was ultimately broken in the spring of 1917. The city's residents wanted an explanation: Why had industrial unrest stalked the city? Instead of looking upward at the city's political and business elites, they joined American Federation of Labor leaders in scapegoating black migrants.

What followed on July 2 was a racist massacre. That day, white men and women murdered black men, women, and children in a pogrom. Although historians have long anatomized the local conditions that led to this violence, they have tended to flatten the wider corporate context in which it unfolded.[44] For Alcoa, East St. Louis was the most important front in a wider fight for control over its hands and its property. The company's victory depended on a spectacular display of public and private military force, underpinned by a court injunction against the strikers. Property's archaic dominance over people was made to appear ordinary, lawful, and permanent. The counterrevolution had succeeded. And on the streets of East St. Louis, black people paid the price.

What, then, are we to make of the conflicts over labor and property that made modern industrial corporations like Alcoa? How should we understand the wider world of coercion,

39. Bosma, van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Sarkar, "Mediating Labour."
40. W. T. B. Williams, "Report on Badin," Box 87, Folder 7. ALCOA.
41. On Suriname, see de Koning, "Moengo on Strike."
42. "Militia Controls Massena" *New York Times* (August 3, 1915).
43. Orren, *Belated Feudalism.*
44. Most recently, Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America.*

migration, and empire that shaped America's industrial ascendency? These are the questions that animate my work on Alcoa. To piece together the many fragments of the company's history, I have leaned on the idea of the crucible. Long a metaphor for historical transformation, the crucible reminds us that events like wars, revolutions, and famines have drawn together disparate events and processes and turned them into something new. The emergence of the industrial corporation was a crucible in this sense. But it is worth remembering that, for the workers who built Alcoa, the crucible was a thing before it was a metaphor. It was an imposing container filled with molten metal. Once this metal had cooled, it was easy to forget that it embodied the wealth of nature and the labor of workers. Each emptied crucible seemed on its own to set the entire process in motion again, such that—over time—this movement acquired a law-like character, subjecting people and nature to its rule. But the crucible, forged in steel as it was, bore the mark of human hands, ideas, and conflicts. It had to be built. And this meant it could be destroyed, melted down, and recast.

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Cite this article: Howell, Jordan. "Imperial Crucible: Alcoa and the Transimperial History of American Capitalism, 1888–1953." *Enterprise & Society* 25, no. 4 (2024): 979–991.