

# Editorial: Transnational communism and anti-colonialism

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**T**he relationship between international communism, the national communist parties, and anti-colonial political movements is a subject which has drawn heated debates both amongst activists and historians. At the Comintern's second world congress in 1920, it took a stance against the very existence of the colonial order, in a move unprecedented amongst its political contemporaries.<sup>1</sup>

This professed anti-imperialism attracted new recruits in the non-European world, enabling the organisation to begin to break out of the European and North American strongholds which had been basis of prior social-democratic internationalism. Within the metropolises, racialised outsiders entered party ranks determined to turn the propounded anti-colonial ideals into a political reality.<sup>2</sup> Connections were forged between labour movement activists and anti-colonialists, and between different colonial nationalist campaigners.<sup>3</sup>

However, the extent of metropolitan communist parties' support for these endeavours was questioned both at the time and since. Tom Quelch, a representative of the British Socialist Party (which would soon become the largest organisation within the merger that formed the Communist Party of Great Britain) famously declared at the second world congress that British workers would see the party as treasonous if it openly adopted an anti-imperialist programme. Criticisms of the national parties' lack of progress in organising amongst colonised populations were frequently made both from within the movement and from those who had left its orbit.<sup>4</sup>

In the Comintern's 'Third Period' between 1928 and 1935, the anti-colonialism of the international communist movement came to the

fore, particularly as organisations like the League Against Imperialism (LAI) and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (ITUCNW) encouraged greater solidarity between communists and those involved in national liberation struggles. Although the effects of the Stalinisation of the Comintern created limitations (discussed later), the intermingling of anti-colonialism and communism seemed to be at a peak, with increased institutional attention given to the non-Western world, and a resultant growth in the number of communists and communist parties amongst colonised populations.

While many black communists, especially in the United States and South Africa, had seen the Comintern as a vehicle for action which could bypass the sluggish pace of the national parties, the organisational deprioritisation of anti-colonialism in the name of anti-fascist unity during the Popular Front era proved to be demoralising for this milieu. The subsequent dissolution of the Comintern in 1943 and the post-war rise of China, which challenged the Soviet Union's claim to be the chief ally of the anti-imperialist movements, cast further doubt on the communist movement's commitment to organising for colonial liberation. These trends, particularly after the fractures in the international communist movement after 1956, caused many of the leading anti-colonial activists to drift towards rival political movements, such as Maoism or Pan-Africanism.

Whilst there are certainly grounds to say that there was ambivalence and even antipathy amongst sections of the national parties towards using limited party resources for anti-colonial rather than domestic campaigning, communists faced numerous difficulties in realising the lofty aspirations of their formal anti-colonial politics. Organising certainly could be marked by a lack of due diligence or consistency, and even amateurishness. State repression, including the use of deportations, physical violence, and imprisonment, could seriously disrupt the efforts of anti-colonial organising. One need only think of the Nazis' rise to power and subsequent impact on the operations of the LAI, or else the British colonial state's imprisonment of activists in Meerut, to see this.<sup>5</sup> Compounding this problem, the bureaucratic manoeuvring and battles for leadership that increased in frequency with the Stalinisation of the movement created ruptures in the institutions intended for organising

within the colonies. This is not to discount that political indifference, or even outright racial hostility, could be found within party ranks, but to illustrate the range of barriers that communists faced.

Even so, important initiatives did emerge within the communist world which successfully cohered in the form of the LAI, the ITUCNW, and individual organisations, often based around certain colonial diaspora in the metropole, influenced directly or indirectly by interested communists. ILP member Fenner Brockway, enthusiastically describing his attendance at the founding congress of the LAI, declared 'here at last was something approaching a Parliament of Mankind'.<sup>6</sup> The result was that the actions of individuals and their efforts in anti-colonial or anti-imperial agitation showcased the duality of the Comintern during the 1920s. It was a nexus where grassroots mobilisation was possible, even at times encouraged, but always hampered by the interests or priorities of those leading the Comintern apparatus, as seen in several articles in this issue.

These attempts continued through the transnational connections enjoyed by communists, the result of creating broad radical networks in which those part of the movement could travel throughout, from one nation to another, sharing similar aims, whether the promotion of civil rights or anti-colonialism in Africa and Asia in the Cold War years. While there was disorganisation amongst the Comintern's anti-colonial endeavours in the interwar years, by the time of the Cold War and decolonisation, Moscow (and later Beijing) was able to provide significant resources, training and personnel to national liberation movements, while national communist parties focused on campaigning and solidarity building. National communist party members no longer acted as conduits of the Soviet Union and each national liberation movement had direct relationships with the socialist countries in Eastern Europe, Asia and Latin America. After the victory of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, there was, according to David Lockwood:

an informal 'division of labour' within the world movement seems to have been agreed upon between the Soviet and Chinese parties in which communists in the colonies, 'semi-colonies' and ex-colonies would receive their advice from Beijing.<sup>7</sup>

This division of labour remained in place until the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s. Afterwards, China increasingly promoted itself as the anti-imperialist vanguard, separate from the 'Second World' of the Soviet sphere of influence, but appropriating rhetoric from the Soviet Union's anti-imperial traditions and the postcolonial Non-Aligned Movement. As Arif Dirlik has written, the Sino-Soviet split and the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 'brought the People's Republic to the centre of world radicalism and turned the Chinese revolutionary experience, embodied in Mao Zedong Thought, into a paradigm not only in the Third World... but also in the First'.<sup>8</sup> Julie Lovell has suggested that China worked hard to '[disseminate] its soft power globally between 1949 and 1976'<sup>9</sup> and Dirlik has described the reach of Maoism in this era as spanning from 'the Philippines to Peru and Mexico, to India, Nepal and Turkey' and to 'the United States, France, Germany, Italy, Australia and Japan'.<sup>10</sup>

This meant that the Soviet Union and China often competed in their support for national liberation movements in the Third World and from the 1970s onwards, this also meant that China sometimes aligned itself with allies of the United States in these liberation struggles (such as in Angola). As Evan Smith's article in this issue shows, in Zimbabwe, the Soviet Union backed the Zimbabwe African People's Union, while China back the Zimbabwe African National Union, both of which fought the Ian Smith regime, but also competed with each other. The relationships between communist countries, communist parties and national liberation movements became increasingly complex as the international communist movement fragmented, while more players entered into the national liberation struggles.

Typically, studies addressing the relationship between communism and anti-colonial movements have been drawn back to the 'centre-periphery' question. Literature has often focused on the extent to which national communist parties had to be prompted to engage in anti-colonial organising, and the ways in which Soviet foreign policy could be seen to be reflected in the priority given to work amongst and alongside colonial subjects by communists.<sup>11</sup> However, the development of transnational methodologies inspired by the 'international turn' within the humanities, as well as the post-Cold War proliferation of newly available

source materials, has seen a growing number of studies which approach the question through a different lens. Increasingly eschewing a purely institutional history, these transnational studies have often focused on the work of border-crossing activists and networks which sought to draw upon communist resources to facilitate their anti-colonial aims, navigating various national parties, international departments, and internationally-mobile social groups for their endeavours. Rather than focusing on the high politics of party leaderships, increasingly historians are drawing on biographical and prosopographical studies, as well as cultural-historical methods and new social history approaches to study the ebbs and flows of communist anti-colonial campaigning from the 'bottom up'.<sup>12</sup> In contrast with the 'centre-periphery' model that has been used in studies of the international communist movement and the Comintern, several scholars have used the idea of the geographical hub for communist and anti-colonial activists, such as London, Paris and New York.<sup>13</sup>

Seeking to build on these trends in the history of communist anti-colonialism and internationalism in the twentieth-century, a symposium funded by the Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence and held at the University of Manchester in November 2018 – 'Within and Against the Metropole' – drew scholars and activists from the US, Europe and the UK. Several of the papers from this event are published in this issue, alongside contributions from other authors both new and established within the field, taking a variety of approaches typical of modern communist studies.

There are three major lines of enquiry adopted by the contributors of this special journal issue. Both Daniel Edmonds and Denise Lynn focus on the remarkable lives of individual figures, charting how the political biographies of both Shapurji Saklatvala and Claudia Jones demonstrate the tensions between purported communist aims, national cultures of activism, and the limitations imposed by both state and party structures in Britain and the United States, considering domestic, international and transnational influences on their radical careers.

Transnational approaches to the Third Period (1928-1934) form the second method showcased in this issue. Kasper Braskén examines the literary and visual culture of the *Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung*,

and the ways in which, even in an era of deprioritisation of anti-colonial activism from the international leadership, activists on the ground could make sense of anti-colonial and anti-fascist campaigns as mutually-reinforcing. Oleksa Drachewych, taking a transnational and comparative approach, focuses on the extent to which the border-crossing journeys of Robin Page Arnot and James Ford and their repercussions cast doubt on the claims of the Comintern's dedication to supporting anti-colonial initiatives, instead highlighting how quickly the ECCI abandoned an emphasis on colonial affairs or work amongst racialised peoples in favour of other domestic concerns, acting as a starting point for further study.

In the third approach, both Jimmy Yan and Evan Smith focus on international solidarity campaigns. Jimmy Yan looks at how communists in Australia in the late 1910s and early 1920s viewed the Irish Revolution, and the close links formed between Irish Republicans and communists in both countries. Yan argues that for activists in Australia the Irish Revolution of 1916 to 1923 captured the imagination as much as the October Revolution of 1917, with both seen as part of a broader internationalist question. Smith explores how the CPGB forged solidarity with the national liberation movement in Zimbabwe during the 1960s and 1970s, connected to broader anti-apartheid activism. Smith shows this anti-apartheid activism naturally lent itself to support for the Soviet-aligned Zimbabwe African People's Union. Even as the late Cold War period saw allegiances within the international communist movement splinter, traces of Soviet influence could still be found in the solidarity expressed between national communist parties and national liberation movements.

Historians have recently started to chart the influence of the communist left in anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles across the globe. This themed journal issue, highlighting a collection of experiences and trends in the communist movement throughout the entire twentieth century complicates our understanding of how communists interacted with anti-colonialism and internationalism, with some having their whole lives defined by their experience, some seeing it as the lens on which they viewed the world, and some constrained by the machinations of the movement. The intersection of communism, anti-colonialism, racial

equality and international politics led to a variety of different results and experiences and this collection sheds some light on that history.

## Notes

- 1 It is worth noting here the differences between anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism as separate categories within communist praxis. Imperialism, following from Lenin's definition, was identified as the stage of capitalist development in which financial and state interests combined in the pursuit of opening new markets through establishing formal and informal colonies, leading to a division of the world into spheres of influence. Anti-colonialism was therefore positioned as a facet of anti-imperialism. The exploitation of colonies is reflected in Lenin's definition and in how communists tended to view the imperial project, with colonies needing to be freed from domination, while imperial powers needed to have the guiding ideology of capitalism undone. Anti-imperialist campaigning could manifest in numerous ways, such as through peace campaigns, support for the Soviet Union, as well as through anti-colonial movements for national liberation, within which communists would often emphasise these other facets of their anti-imperialist stance. Jürgen Osterhammel, *Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview*, Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishers, 2010
- 2 Oleksa Drachewych, *The Communist International, Anti-Imperialism and Racial Equality in British Dominions*, London: Routledge, 2018, Chapter 1 & 2.
- 3 Satnam Virdee, *Racism Class and the Racialized Outsider*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp74-97; Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonialism and the Making of British Dissent*, London: Verso, 2019, pp209-278.
- 4 At the fifth Comintern congress in 1924, Ho Chi Minh chided the Communist Party of France for their lack of progress in anti-colonial work. In 1934, Shapurji Saklatvala would write of the CPGB that 'there is a tendency to treat the colonial problem as a mere side issue and as nobody's problem in particular.' Quoted in Marika Sherwood, 'The Comintern, the CPGB, Colonies and Black Britons, 1920–1938', *Science & Society*, 60:2, Summer, 1996, pp137-163. Most famously, Eurocommunist Fernando Claudin claimed the Comintern was

- always Eurocentric in its nature, never committing to its colonial aims. Fernando Claudin, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform, Part One: The Crisis of the Communist International*, trans. Brian Pearce, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975, p260.
- 5 Fredrik Petersson, *Willi Munzenberg, the League Against Imperialism and the Comintern, 1925-1933, vol. II*, Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013, pp923-967; Michele L Louro, ‘Where National Revolutionary Ends and Communist Begins’: The League against Imperialism and the Meerut Conspiracy Case’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 33:3, pp331–344
  - 6 Fenner Brockway, ‘The Coloured Peoples’ International’, *The New Leader*, 26 August, 1927.
  - 7 David Lockwood, *The Communist Party of India and the Indian Emergency*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2016, pp10-1.
  - 8 Arif Dirlik, ‘Mao Zedong Thought and the Third World/Global South’, *Interventions*, 16, 2014, p246.
  - 9 Julia Lovell, ‘The Use of Foreigners in Mao-Era China: ‘Techniques of Hospitality’ and international image-building in the People’s Republic, 1949-1976,’ *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 25, 2015, p138.
  - 10 Dirlik, ‘Mao Zedong Thought and the Third World/Global South’, pp246-247.
  - 11 The discussion regarding the prompting of communist parties is best exemplified by the debate between Marika Sherwood and John Callaghan. Marika Sherwood, ‘The Comintern, the CPGB, Colonies and Black Britons, 1920-1938,’ *Science & Society* 60, 1996; John Callaghan, ‘Colonies, Racism, the CPGB and the Comintern in the Inter-War Years,’ *Science & Society* 61, 1997/1998, pp513-525..
  - 12 For example, Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and the Communist International*, Trenton: Africa World Press, 2013; Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic: African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers*, Leiden: Brill, 2013; Vijay Prashad, *Communist Histories: Volume 1*, New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2016; Margaret Stevens, *Red International and the Black Caribbean: Communists in New York City, Mexico and the West Indies, 1919-1939*, London: Pluto Press, 2017; Oleksa Drachewych & Ian McKay, *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial and Racial*



- Questions*, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020. For studies that focus on the Comintern in a transnational framework, see Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*, trans. Dafydd Rees Roberts, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; Lisa Kirschenbaum, *International Communism and the Spanish Civil War: Solidarity and suspicion*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015; Holger Weiss, ed., *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919-1939*, Leiden: Brill, 2016; For general historiographical overviews, see Sabine Dullin & Brigitte Studer, 'Communism + Transnational: The rediscovered equation of internationalism in the Comintern years,' *Twentieth Century Communism*, 14, Spring 2018, pp66-95; Oleksa Drachewych, 'The Communist Transnational? Transnational studies and the history of the Comintern,' *History Compass* 17, 2, February, 2019.
- 13 Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917-1939*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011; Fredrik Petersson, 'Hub of the Anti-Imperialist Movement,' *Interventions*, 16, 1, 2014, pp49-71; Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015; Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015.