

Editors' introduction: Communist anti-racism and anti-colonialism in the Comintern era

Thomas Beaumont and Tim Rees

The articles assembled in this special issue of *Twentieth Century Communism* explore the related themes of Communist engagement with the politics of anti-colonialism and of anti-racism during the Comintern era. This special issue represents the first publication to emerge from the AHRC-funded 'Rethinking International Communism' research network. The articles were among those presented at the workshop, 'Communist Anti-Racism and Anti-Imperialism', held at the University of Exeter in April 2022.¹ The authors approach the subject with research interests and interdisciplinary backgrounds that illustrate the contrasting, but complementary, perspectives in the expanding body of studies on the relationships between interwar international communism and struggles for liberation from colonialism, imperialism and racial oppression. They also represent the intersection of two mutually enriching approaches that have driven this new research and more nuanced interpretations: studies that are largely concerned with fitting communist involvement into the wider histories of interwar anti-colonialism and anti-racism; and studies focusing on the role of anti-colonialism and anti-racism as an important aspect of interwar international communism. Together they demonstrate the myriad ways in which anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism and anti-racism were often defining elements in the commitment of a great many communists to the international communist movement.² They also show how pivotal their involvement in liberation struggles often was in the wider development and success of those causes in the longer term.

The struggle for a global order free from colonialism and imperialism and for societies based upon racial equality were not ignored after the Communist International (Comintern) was founded in 1919. Although Bolshevik-style revolution to create a new civilisation based on the liberation of the working class always lay at the heart of communist political and social aims, other longstanding campaigns against oppression were also acknowledged – even if translating them into concrete action was not always straightforward, or pursued with equal commitment. Accordingly, article eight of the famous twenty-one conditions for admittance to the Comintern committed member parties to struggle against imperialism, to support the liberation of ‘oppressed peoples’ from colonialism; and, for communists from the imperialist powers, ‘to cultivate in the hearts of the workers in their own country a truly fraternal relationship to the working population in the colonies and to the oppressed nations’. At the fourth world congress of the Comintern in 1922, delegates adopted the ‘Thesis on the Negro Question’ proposed by African-American Communists, which introduced a Pan-African policy that explicitly affirmed that colonialism and racism were linked and that both had to be overcome in the creation of a new social and political order based on equality. Subsequently, the Comintern and the associated Red International of Trade Unions (Profintern) spawned various commissions to discuss and promote action, finally leading to the creation of a ‘Negro Bureau’ in 1928, led by Otto Huiswoud, that sought to foster movements for anti-colonial liberation and to support the struggle for racial equality in Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean. In 1927 the Comintern adopted the League Against Imperialism as an official organisation, followed in 1928 by the creation of the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers by the Profintern.³ By the 1930s matters became more complicated, as the cause of anti-fascism became both linked to that of anti-racism and anti-colonialism but also to an extent superseded them. For many communists the effective demise of the League Against Imperialism in 1935, which was folded into the broader World Committee Against War and Fascism, marked the dilution of a distinctive communist commitment to racial equality and national liberation.⁴

These communist initiatives have always received some scholarly

recognition and attention, but the scope of enquiry was constrained by several connected factors, some of which affected the study of international communism more generally, and others which were specific to the topic. These included limited access to primary source material before the relatively brief period of more open access following the so-called 'opening of the archives' after the fall of the USSR in 1991; an emphasis on inward-looking 'institutional' studies that focused on the formal bodies and central policies of the Comintern and its constituent organisations and member parties; research agendas that were trapped into a 'failure' narrative that focused on why the Comintern did not achieve its revolutionary aims – which marginalised the study of communist activities that were not part of a perceived mainstream; and a tendency towards eurocentrism which privileged 'western' communism and which downplayed the importance of the global south. This meant that, although they were not without value, studies of communist anti-colonialism and anti-racism were mainly concerned with the Comintern's formal policies, and limited explorations of the 'front organisations' dedicated to these questions, or to communist activism confined to individual political parties and leading communists.⁵

In contrast to its previously peripheral status, the study of communist activity in the long campaigns waged against colonial and racist states during the interwar period has, over the past decade or so, been a central component to what amounts to a rejuvenation in the history of the Communist International. Almost immediately following the opening of the Comintern archives, historians drew attention to the significant potential held within to shed new light on the anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles prior to the second world war.⁶ But, for the most part, historians of communism and the Comintern were initially slow to take up this baton. The continued dominance of nation-centred and institutional studies, and particularly the stifling effects of the long-standing centre-periphery debate, which reduced discussions of communist internationalism to arguments over the degree or otherwise of Moscow control, maintained the dominance of limited and Eurocentric approaches to Comintern history. It was quite common for highly significant works published in the initial wave of post-cold-war historiography to make little direct reference to the wide breadth

of Comintern activities, beyond the sphere of individual national parties, or the twists and turns (sometimes deadly) of Moscow politics. Nevertheless, as Oleksa Drachewych has argued, the revisionist critique which attacked monolithic explanations of communism at least implicitly accepted that new approaches and interpretations were possible.⁷

Subsequently, the waning of Cold War debates and, significantly, the development of transnational approaches to the study of the past have proven key in effecting a transformational shift in Comintern history. As Sabine Dullin and Brigitte Studer put it in these pages in 2018, the transnational turn in historical scholarship reframed the research agenda in communist studies: 'Communism is transnational, but we needed the perspective of transnational history in order to be able to think about it as such.'⁸ Increased attention has thus been paid to the movements of Communist militants across borders and oceans, to histories of exile and migration, to the networks forged by activists across the world, and to the Comintern organisations which structured and sustained these activities.

It has not just been Comintern history that has taken a transnational turn in recent years, of course (and indeed one could argue that historians of the Comintern have come somewhat later to the possibilities offered by transnational approaches than others in the historical discipline). Notably, the fields of imperial and global history have been enriched by a growing interest in the interconnections between those opposing colonial and racist states across the globe. Seeking to explore, in Daniel Brückenhaus's words, 'the surprising near simultaneity of decolonisation in large parts of the world between 1945-1970 ... historians now argue that we need to take into account the inherently internationalist visions of many activists in this period'.⁹ The connections between anti-colonial activists, and the encounters and exchanges that shaped their politics, have opened up new research directions, a 'world of connections' in Tim Harper's phrase.¹⁰ The history of the Communist International now looms large in such analyses of the interwar years, and, notably, the significant role of the Comintern organisations, the League against Imperialism and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers in structuring the vast webs of global radical anti-colonial activity during this period has been increasingly recognised by historians

in recent years.¹¹ The ‘discovery’ by these scholars of the radical politics pursued by Comintern militants has thus itself played a significant role in augmenting our knowledge of such activities and posing new questions to explore.¹²

The influence of transnational approaches to the study of the Communist International, with their emphasis upon mobility, networks and encounters, has had the effect of shifting researchers’ perspectives on Comintern organisation and political activity. For a long time, the discussion of movement within international communism was reduced to the analysis of journeys to and from Moscow; now, however, connections forged across the globe by Comintern agents and communist activists are increasingly emerging into focus. International communism was truly a world in motion. At the heart of this new perspective on the global networks of communist activism is an increasing appreciation on the part of scholars of the role played by centres other than Moscow both in the day-to-day organisation of communist activity, and as sites of communist encounters. Such global hubs were pivotal, as Michael Goebel among others has convincingly demonstrated, in the development of radical political opposition to European empires.¹³ Such hubs were often, in Tim Harper’s words, ‘terrain revolutionaries carved out for themselves’, in which were ‘generated new ideas and strategies for action’.¹⁴

The agency of rank-and-file communist activists could be significant in fashioning global centres of revolutionary activity, as Harper attests, but, as Heather Streets-Salter emphasises in this issue with regard to the work of the Far Eastern Bureau (FEB) in Shanghai, Comintern structures were also a vital ingredient in the maintenance of revolutionary activity and organisation. At the core of the FEB were the agents of the *Otdel Mezhdunarodnoy Svyazi* (OMS), the Comintern’s International Liaison department, whose activities have long lain in the shadows, and whose archives in Moscow remain closed to researchers. Streets-Salter provides fascinating and important insights into the daily run-of-the-mill work of OMS agents in Shanghai, who ‘lubricated the whole system by providing the communications and the money, arranging the meeting places, and otherwise creating the conditions for the FEB to function in Shanghai’.¹⁵

The FEB was at the heart of Comintern operations in China and through East and Southeast Asia for a time. Elsewhere, and notably in Europe, the kind of organising role undertaken by the FEB in Shanghai was in part assumed by national communist parties. Acting as ‘umbrella parties’, national organisations such as the PCF took on the role of supporting the various international groupings of communists resident within France during the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁶ Such interactions were not without tensions, as Burak Sayim argues in this issue. Relations between the PCF and the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) over the organisation of the campaign against the European colonial war in Morocco made for an ‘awkward alliance’, Sayim explains, with the PCF having ‘limited trust in the PCE’s organisational capacities’.¹⁷

If relations between European parties could be fraught with difficulties, the solidarities between European communist parties and their comrades among the subjects of European colonial rule have long been subject to significant criticism. Many have shared Aimé Césaire’s summing up of the lack of engagement of metropolitan parties with anti-colonial politics. Césaire’s assessment at the time of his resignation from the PCF in 1956 was damning. For the PCF, he argued, colonial peoples around the world were not seen as agents, but rather as subjects to be led and shaped by European militants. ‘I say’, argued Césaire, ‘that there will never be an African, or Malagassy, or Caribbean Communism because the French Communist Party conceives of its duties towards colonised peoples in terms of a position of authority to fill, and even the anti-colonialism of French communists still bears the marks of the colonialism it is fighting.’¹⁸ Alleging that the PCF’s treatment of colonised peoples resembled the paternalism of the French Colonial Office at the rue Oudinot, Césaire castigated the stifling rigidity and Stalinism of the PCF, which, he argued, subordinated political activity in the colonies to the Eurocentric aims of the party leadership in Paris.¹⁹ Subsequent historians have drawn attention to the apparent lack of metropolitan communist commitment to the cause of anti-colonialism as evidence of the ‘limits of internationalism’ among European activists.²⁰

Burak Sayim’s article suggests a more nuanced reading of the relationship between the PCF and anti-colonial revolutionaries in the Middle East, emphasising a potentially more reciprocal relationship

between metropolitan communism and Middle Eastern anti-colonialism, though one that was not without significant tensions.²¹ An emphasis upon the agency of anti-colonial and anti-racist revolutionaries, and a refusal to see them as simply subjects of the attentions and whims of European Communist parties, has been a significant theme in recent scholarship. Not only were those from the Global South and Black America major figures within the international communist movement; they also shaped Comintern positions and strategies, drawing upon their own experiences and political traditions. As Featherstone and Høgsbjerg note, 'a body of work now exists that challenges a sense of Communism as an export which sprang fully formed from Europe and/or Russia.' Emphasising instead the 'ongoing connections and engagements with movements, intellectuals and political figures beyond Europe which shaped these relations', Featherstone and Høgsbjerg draw attention to the significant 'impact of anti-colonial movements on communist practices and ideas'.²²

In this issue, Cathy Bergin argues forcefully for the need to set Comintern anti-racism within a Black radical tradition. Black left-wing publications, Bergin argues, 'drew upon *both* the black radical tradition and Comintern anti-colonialism to instantiate a powerful black working-class politics of internationalist solidarity'. Indeed, Bergin goes even further, explaining the appeal of Bolshevism by noting how: 'In fact, the Comintern seemed to echo a black radical anti-racist internationalism, not just to black socialists and communists, but across the African diaspora.'²³ This also allowed African American communists to articulate a form of internationalism that circumvented and critiqued the relatively limited effort that they perceived the Communist Party of the USA, one that was devoted in practice to the cause of racial equality. Such 'bottom up' and grassroots forms of anti-racist and anti-colonial activism powerfully affected many communist parties, and fuelled demands for meaningful responses from the international communist movement.

As Oleksa Drachewych's article shows, this was a test that both communist activists and the Comintern often struggled to meet; the results in this area were often mixed. The adoption of the Native Republic thesis at the sixth congress of the Comintern was a policy

that sought to take seriously the issue of racial oppression and to offer self-determination within a socialist society as a solution. Though it was offered largely in relation to the situations of Black workers in South Africa and the USA, defining the Native Republic thesis and exploring its broader applicability to other parts of the world was a much more complicated task for the Comintern and its supporters. The temptation to see anti-racism and anti-colonialism as dead ends, and further testament to the fatal flaws of the international communist movement, is one that this new research counters – or, at least, it suggests that the picture is a more mixed one. International communism was one of the first global political movements to take anti-racism and anti-colonialism seriously. Nevertheless, many adherents to communism who had embraced the movement precisely because of its promise of racial equality and national liberation did subsequently abandon the movement because of lack of progress. However, as Hakim Adi has argued, while communists did not see the full fruits of their campaigns on these fronts during the inter-war period, they made pivotal contributions, organisationally, financially and morally, to these causes and to the support of bodies that did succeed after 1945.²⁴

The wider implications of this kind of new research for our understanding of international communism remain something of a work in progress. Above all, it affirms the truly global nature of international communism, and the importance of looking beyond Europe and the ‘west’ in order to fully comprehend the nature of Communist revolutionary activities and aspirations. It also directs us to look at communist organisation and policies in a new, more complex, light, and emphasises yet further the fluid nature of many interactions and connections between communist organisations, and between communists themselves. The degree to which Comintern institutions and policies enabled these interactions, even if only through forms of organisational and financial support, also suggests that the relationships between the ‘international’ and ‘transnational’ aspects of international communism were subtle and interdependent.

Thomas Beaumont is Senior Lecturer in European History at Liverpool John Moores University. He works on French labour and trade union

history, the history of the French Communist Party, and international Communism in the Comintern era. His book, *Fellow Travellers: Communist Trade Unionism and Industrial Relations on the French Railways, 1914-1939*, was published by Liverpool University Press in 2019. Along with Tim Rees, he is co-organiser of the AHRC-funded 'Rethinking International Communism' Research Network.

Tim Rees is Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Exeter. He is the author and editor of books and articles on the histories of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), revolution, and the international communist movement between the two world wars. He is completing a book on Spanish Communism: *Red Spain: Communist Identity and Politics in the International Era, 1920-1943*. Along with Thomas Beaumont, he is co-organiser of the AHRC-funded 'Rethinking International Communism' Research Network.

Notes

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- 2 Communist ideology drew a connection between colonialism (direct rule of subject peoples) and imperialism (the highest stage of capitalism pursued by dominant capitalist states). This was complicated by the situation of countries in Central and South America, and parts of Asia (particularly China), that were not under formal colonial rule but where rule by a local bourgeoisie or feudal elite was linked to collaboration with economic and political imperialism.
- 3 On these developments see Fredrik Petersson, 'We Are Neither Visionaries Nor Utopian Dreamers': *Willi Münzenberg, the League*

Against Imperialism and the Comintern, 1925-1933, Lampeter 2013; Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic: African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers*, Leiden 2014.

- 4 See Kasper Braskén, “‘Whether Black or White – Unite in the Fight’: Connecting the resistance against colonialism, racism, and fascism in the European metropolises, 1926-1936’, *Twentieth Century Communism* 18, 2020, pp126-149; David Featherstone, ‘Black internationalism, subaltern cosmopolitanism and the spatial politics of anti-fascism’, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol 103, No 6, 2013, pp1406-1420; Bernhard H. Bayerlein, ‘Addis Ababa, Rio de Janeiro and Moscow 1935. The double failure of Communist anti-Fascism and anti-Colonialism’ in Kasper Braskén et al (eds), *Anti-fascism in a Global Perspective. Transnational Networks, Exile Communities and Radical Internationalism*, London: Routledge 2020, pp218-30; and Tom Buchanan, “‘The Dark Millions in the Colonies are Unavenged’: Anti-Fascism and Anti-Imperialism in the 1930s’, *Contemporary European History*, Vol 25 No 4, 2016.
- 5 Evaluations of this early historiography can be found in Hakim Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919-1939*, Trento, 2013; Fredrik Petersson, ‘Anti-Imperialism and Nostalgia: A Re-assessment of the History and Historiography of the League Against Imperialism’, in Holger Weiss (ed.), *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: radical networks, mass movements and global politics, 1919-1939*, Leiden, Brill 2017; and Oleksa Drachewych and Ian Mackay, ‘Introduction: Left Transnationalism? The Communist International, the National, Colonial, and Racial Questions, and the Strengths and Limitations of the “Moscow Rules” Paradigm’, in Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay (eds.), *Transnationalism. The Communist International and the National. Colonial and Racial Questions*, Montreal 2019. Examples of scholarship on the links between communists and anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles which predated the collapse of the Soviet Union and the eastern bloc include: J. Jones, *The League Against Imperialism*, Fulwood 1996; Stephen White, ‘Colonial Revolution and the Communist International, 1919-1924’, *Science and Society*, Vol 40 No 2, 1976; Manuel Caballero, *Latin America and the Comintern 1919-1943*, Cambridge 1986; Philippe Dewitte, *Les Mouvements Nègres en France, 1915-1939*, Paris 1985.
- 6 John D. Hargreaves, ‘The Comintern and Anti-Colonialism: New

- Research Opportunities', *African Affairs*, Vol 92 No 367, April 1993, pp255-261.
- 7 See Oleksa Drachewych, 'The Communist Transnational? Transnational Studies and the history of the Comintern', *History Compass*, Vol 17 No 2, February 2019, pp2-3. Relevant studies include: Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, Basingstoke 1996; Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe (eds.), *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919-1943*, Manchester 1998; Mikhail Narinsky and Jürgen Rohann (eds), *Centre and Periphery: The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents*, Amsterdam 1996; Matthew Worley (ed.), *In Search of Revolution: International Communist Parties in the Third Period*, New York and London 2004.
 - 8 Sabine Dullin and Brigitte Studer, 'Communism + transnational: the rediscovered equation of internationalism in the Comintern years', *Twentieth Century Communism*, 14, 2018, pp66-95 (quote at p66). Brigitte Studer herself has been one of the leading figures in the transnational 'turn' in Comintern study. See especially, idem., *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*, Basingstoke 2015; and, most recently, *Travellers of the World Revolution: A Global History of the Communist International*, London 2023.
 - 9 Daniel Brückenhaus, 'Challenging Imperialism Across Borders: Recent Studies of Twentieth-Century Internationalist Networks against Empire', *Contemporary European History*, 29, 2020, pp104-115, p104.
 - 10 Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire*, London 2020, p19.
 - 11 Fredrik Petersson, 'We Are Neither Visionaries nor Utopian Dreamers'. Holger Weiss has published extensively on the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers, see idem., *Framing a Radical African Atlantic*. See also the special issue 'Transnational communism and anti-colonialism' of *Twentieth Century Communism* 18, 2020; Holger Weiss (ed.), *International Communism and Transnational Solidarity: Radical Networks, Mass Movements and Global Politics, 1919-1939*, Leiden 2017; and Drachewych and McKay, (eds.), *Transnationalism*.
 - 12 For recent examples see Sarah Dunstan, *Race, Rights and Reform: Black Activism in the French Empire and the United States from World War I to the Cold War*, Cambridge 2021; M. Stevens, *Red International and Black Caribbean: Communists in New York City, Mexico and the West Indies, 1919-1939*, London 2017.
 - 13 Micheal Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the*

- Seeds of Third World Nationalism*, Cambridge 2015; see also Fredrik Petersson, 'Hub of the Anti-Imperialist Movement: The League against Imperialism and Berlin, 1927-1933', *Interventions*, Vol 16 No 1, 2014, pp49-71.
- 14 Harper, *Underground Asia*, pxxviii.
- 15 Heather Streets-Salter, 'A Constant Lurking Danger', p91.
- 16 Broadly on this see Thomas Beaumont, 'International Communism in France, 1919-1936', in Ludivine Broch and Alison Carrol (eds), *France in an Era of Global War: Occupation, Politics, Empire and Entanglements*, Basingstoke 2014), pp92-110; regarding the significance of the PCF for the support of anti-imperial activism, see Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*.
- 17 Burak Sayim, 'Communist anti-militarism in France and anti-colonial wars in Morocco and Syria', p27.
- 18 Aimé Césaire, 'Letter to Maurice Thorez, 24 October 1956', translated by Chike Jeffers, *Social Text* 103, Summer 2010, pp145-152 (quote at p150).
- 19 Aimé Césaire, 'Letter to Maurice Thorez, 24 October 1956'.
- 20 David H. Slavin, 'The French Left and the Rif War, 1924-25: Racism and the Limits of Internationalism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol 26 No 1, 1991, pp5-32.
- 21 Burak Sayim, 'Communist anti-militarism in France and anti-colonial wars in Morocco and Syria'.
- 22 Christian Høgsbjerg and David Featherstone, 'Introduction: Red October and the Black Atlantic', in idem. (eds.), *The Red and the Black: The Russian Revolution and the Black Atlantic*, Manchester, Manchester University Press 2021, p16.
- 23 Cathy Bergin, 'Something Real: Black Bolshevism and the Comintern', p44.
- 24 See Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism*.