

# Communist anti-militarism in France and anti-colonial wars in Morocco and Syria

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**Abstract** This article explores the intersection of Middle Eastern anti-colonialism and European anti-militarism in the interwar period through a case study focusing on French communist activities within the army during almost simultaneous anti-colonial revolts in Morocco and Syria. It argues that the interaction between revolutionary militancy in these two regions was not unilinear. Just as the impact of European revolutionary traditions was instrumental in shaping Middle Eastern communist militancy, so Middle Eastern anti-colonialism had an – underappreciated – impact on European communism. Through this case study it shows how the Communist International strove to give anti-militarism in the global north and anti-colonialism in the global south a common political language through which the two aspirations could converge. Instead of focusing on high-level decisions, this study takes a tentative step towards situating this alliance – or lack thereof – in the trenches of colonial wars.

**Keywords:** French Communist Party, PCF, Communist International, anti-militarism, anti-colonialism, Rif War, Morocco, Syria

This article discusses the anti-militarist and revolutionary defeatist propaganda of French communists at the battle front, and its interaction with Middle Eastern anti-colonialism.<sup>1</sup> It focuses on the activities of French communists during the almost simultaneous anti-colonial rebellions in Morocco and Syria in the 1920s. I engage with this

case as one of the most concrete examples of communist anti-militarism in Europe connecting with Middle Eastern anti-colonialism during the interwar years. My argument is that the interactions between revolutionary militants in these two regions were not unilinear.<sup>2</sup> Just as the impact of European revolutionary traditions was instrumental in shaping Middle Eastern communist militancy, Middle Eastern anti-colonialism had an – underappreciated – impact on European communism. As this article demonstrates, the trajectory of Middle Eastern anti-colonial struggles was instrumental in shaping certain aspects of communist militancy in Europe. In other words, this article reframes an episode of European communist militancy within the context of the history of Middle Eastern anti-colonialism.

Accordingly, this article aims to underscore the entanglements between histories that have often been studied within two distinct sets of historiographical literature. The first is the period of militancy and unrest after the First World War in Europe, within which rank-and-file soldier radicalism was an important element. Here the literature has focused particularly on a number of different national episodes in Europe involving soldiers still in active service as well as veterans of the war.<sup>3</sup> Communist organisations within the army during this period have also been the object of scholarly studies.<sup>4</sup> The second set of histories concerns anti-colonial rebellions across the colonial world – including the Middle East – and it is the Middle East which is the focus of this article. The literature in this field focuses on the anti-colonial revolutions and rebellions that followed the First World War, in Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Morocco, Syria and Sudan.<sup>5</sup> Recent scholarship has also paid more attention to regional and transnational links between these events.<sup>6</sup> This article is offered as a contribution to this ongoing effort to emphasise the trans-regional aspect of Middle Eastern anti-colonialism, in this case through a rethinking of European revolutionary militancy within the former's history.

Linking the histories of rank-and-file soldier anti-militarism to the histories of anti-colonialism enables some crucial observations about the overall Comintern project. The political project of the Comintern was exceptional, and worthy of interest, in that it gave anti-militarism in the global north and anti-colonialism in the global south a common

political language through which the two aspirations could converge. To be sure, the Comintern was not the originator of European anti-militarism or Middle Eastern anti-colonialism. European socialism had been committed to a strong anti-militarist credo for decades – though this had by and large not survived the whirlwind of the First World War; and colonial peoples the world over had been fighting the colonial yoke long before the Comintern entered the scene.

Nevertheless, the Comintern stood out as an organisation capable of providing the two forces with a joint anti-imperialist political project. Not only did the two forces objectively have a common enemy in European imperialism: they could now start to perceive one another as allies, even comrades. This was, at least, the intention.

The Comintern's aspiration for a fighting alliance between the Western working class and the colonial peoples has often been discussed through a focus on policy decisions in Moscow – in both its shortcomings and successes. My aim in this article is to take some tentative steps towards situating this alliance – or lack thereof – in the trenches of colonial wars.

There is not a story about a linear convergence of two actors on an anti-imperialist basis. It is one that also shows the tension between two increasingly different conceptions of anti-militarism. The initial anti-militarism of rank-and-file soldiers was founded, more than anything else, on the desire to survive the war and return home. However, for one strand of communists, the signing of a peace treaty was not in itself the ultimate goal – it was a potential beginning of something else. The end goal was the defeat of imperialist armies abroad, followed by the toppling of the imperialist-capitalist order back home. The Comintern was often capable of giving a political language to the way it felt to live in the trenches, but there was a latent tension between the pacifist and revolutionary defeatist strands within anti-militarism, which made friction almost inevitable. The pacifists wanted to bring the war to an end. The defeatists, on the other hand, tried to bring it home – or, as Lenin famously put it during the First World War, to turn the imperialist war into a civil war.<sup>7</sup> The underlying tensions between these positions became visible in conflicts over slogans of fraternisation as opposed to peace, which I will discuss later in the article,

as a way of illustrating the limitations of the anti-imperialist coalition the Comintern tried to build.

The context of this article is the long decade of anti-colonial rebellions and revolutions that took place throughout the Middle East and North Africa – but also the colonial world in general – following the First World War and the October revolution. In Morocco, fighters first started to gather around Abdelkerim al-Khattabi to fight against the Spanish forces in the north in 1921 – in the context of a double colonisation by both Spanish and French forces. Following their decisive victories against the Spanish, they also had to face the French. They carried on fighting for the better part of the 1920s, and inflicted significant defeats on their adversaries; and in the end they lost, in 1926, only after an extensive joint military operation by Spanish and French forces.<sup>8</sup>

In 1925, a new Middle Eastern liberation struggle emerged in Syria – or, as a Comintern executive put it, ‘a new friend of Abd-el-Krim has appeared in the shape of the insurgent tribe of Jebel Drus [Druze].’<sup>9</sup> Starting with the downing of a French surveillance plane on 19 July 1925, guerrilla forces coalesced around Sultan al-Atrash and quickly came to exert their control over the countryside around Jabal Hawran.<sup>10</sup> The cities soon joined the revolution – there were aborted or failed insurrections from Hama to Damascus.<sup>11</sup> At that point, therefore, there were two rebellions in the Middle East and North Africa against French colonialism.<sup>12</sup> Their success and eventual spread to other Middle Eastern colonies was not unthinkable. The Comintern press now argued, or at least wished, that ‘[t]he longer the military operations in Syria and Morocco [we]re prolonged, the more stronger [sic] [would] become the stimulus to the national movement for freedom in a number of countries in Near Asia and North Africa.’<sup>13</sup>

## **Army, colonies and the Communist International**

When Lenin formulated his call to turn the imperialist war into a civil war, he had the concerns of the metropole in mind. According to his strategy, Russian workers and peasants in uniform had to reject the fratricidal horrors of the war in Europe. They would then turn their

arms against the oppressors in their own country, and the arms they had been handed would serve to overthrow the Tsarist regime. As it turned out, Lenin was not off the mark in the Russian case. Its loss of effective control of the army paved the way for the fall of the Tsarist regime.<sup>14</sup> The Bolsheviks' ability to channel the rank-and-file soldiers' anger then helped them to take a leading position during the revolutionary months in Russia.<sup>15</sup>

Thus revolutionary action within the military first came to the fore as a tool for European proletarian revolutions. However, the First World War was not only fought on the European front; there was also action in other theatres of war, as entire empires were mobilised for the war effort.<sup>16</sup> Although the war came to an end on the main European fronts in 1918, anti-colonial rebellions continued until 1927, and this meant continuing military mobilisation in the Middle East and other parts of the colonial world. This situation had a dual impact. First, many European and colonial soldiers of the British and French empires were stationed in the Middle East. Second, anti-colonial rebellions attracted the interest of the Communist International. From then on, it took little imagination to connect the dots.

Communists were politically savvy enough to realise the potential value of their influence and power among European workers for their efforts to strengthen their organisation's position in the colonial world. I will show the practical implications of this realisation later in this article. But first it is worth underlining the tension between the accidental and intentional in the interaction of the anti-colonial and anti-militarist actions of the Communist International. For many militants, assistance to the anti-colonial cause was an unintended, if welcome, by-product of the anti-militarist action undertaken with domestic concerns in mind. In other words, the immediate purpose of revolutionary defeatist action was – perhaps tautologically – *the defeat* of the imperialist army, but it was not necessarily *the victory* of the anti-colonial forces. There was a continuum within left-wing defeatist positions during the inter-imperialistic conflicts of the First World War. The internationalist forces calling for the defeat of their own state during the war – for example in Russia – wanted the autocratic regime at home receive a blow, but it was not because they felt friendly towards the other side's armies. Following

the war, not a few would somewhat unscrupulously apply the same logic to the colonial wars.

At the point when colonial revolutions came to the fore and moved into the limelight, the priorities were rearranged. The anti-militarist action was repurposed, with the main aim now being to ensure the victory of anti-colonial revolutions – but there were simmering tensions between the two conceptions. As Moroccan, Syrian and Chinese revolutionaries were fighting their decisive battles, the Comintern affirmed that the ‘growing rebellions and revolutionary struggles of colonial and semi-colonial peoples will strengthen the revolutionary front [and] strengthen the forces of world revolution’, and it underlined ‘the tremendous significance of anti-militarist work in the near future of all the sections of the Executive Committee of the Communist International as active support for the revolutionary movements of the colonial peoples’. As ‘the development of revolutionary struggles in India, Indonesia, and African countries (Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Syria) [was] of special importance’, the ‘main responsibility’ fell on ‘the English, French and Dutch sections’. These sections needed to use ‘the pacifism among the bourgeoisie and the petit-bourgeoisie to disrupt the action of imperialists’; organise ‘a special activity among the troops of colour, and particularly among those already in the colonies and those who will be sent there’; and ‘resist the military plans against the revolutionary movements of the colonial peoples’, for instance by ‘refusing to transport troops and munition, sabotaging their transportation etc’.<sup>17</sup> To sum up, as the anti-colonial revolution became more central to the global revolutionary wave of 1917-1927, the anti-militarist action of communist parties within the colonial countries had to take their cue from the anti-colonial revolutions, even if not actually from local communists in the colonies.

### **Organising the soldiers in support of Morocco and Syria**

On 23 June 1925, Jacques Doriot stepped up to the rostrum of the French Chamber of Deputies. Doriot, a communist deputy at the age of twenty-six – the youngest deputy in the Chamber – was facing a hostile

crowd, to say the least. The official record of the debate, reproduced as a brochure by the Communist Party, euphemistically describes the reaction Doriot received as ‘applause at the communist extreme left – rumbles from the right, centre and several benches on the left’. The riposte to the taunting deputies from Marcel Cachin, another communist in the Chamber, gives a better sense of the situation; ‘Mr Doriot is here in the same way as you are. He even has more titles than a lot of those booing him’.<sup>18</sup> It is evident that the applause of a small group of communist deputies, twenty-six in all, in a Chamber of some 600, would have had scant success in silencing the heckles.

Doriot found himself a *persona non grata* not just because of his particular role in communist anti-militarist activity, but also because of his evident knack for theatricality and pushing his opponents’ buttons.<sup>19</sup> He first made a name for himself in 1923, for his role in the campaign against the French occupation of the Ruhr, after which he did time in the infamous Santé prison of Paris.<sup>20</sup> After 1924, he played a prominent role in the anti-colonial reorientation of the PCF (Parti Communiste Français, the French Communist Party), and was a co-signatory of the famous French communist letter congratulating Moroccan anti-colonialist leader Abdelkerim for his victories.<sup>21</sup> The particular fury he faced in June 1925 stemmed in the main from his latest feat: the French communists and Doriot had got their hands on an important document that showed that recent skirmishes between the French and Moroccan forces had been started because of a deliberate provocation by the French side, not an unprovoked attack on the Moroccan part – contrary to the claims of the French media. The author of the intercepted document, Emile Vatin-Pérignon, the principal private secretary of the French General-Governor of Morocco Hubert Lyautey, later had to resign due to the scandal after Doriot’s performance in the Chamber, while the communists faced accusations of stealing a sensitive document.<sup>22</sup> Ever the teaser, Doriot claimed that the document was not stolen but was ‘diverted from its normal route by I do not know who, certainly by a soldier or civil servant so outraged at seeing a cynical confession of the secrets of the war that he deemed it essential to immediately communicate this document to the party that is fighting for peace in this country’.<sup>23</sup>

Doriot provoked equal uproar – he was heckled a couple of dozen times by right-wing deputies – through his stance as both the bitter adversary of the war conducted by the French Army, and as the tribune of the self-same army’s soldiers. On the first issue, he made no secret that he sided with Moroccan liberation: ‘In the struggle against the capitalist system that you call Western and European civilisation, we are entirely with the other peoples ... we are with all the colonial peoples who today in their own territory fight against your colonisation, that is to say, a part of your exploitation system and your Western civilisation.’<sup>24</sup> Almost in the same breath, Doriot moved on to a defence of the French soldiers in the trenches, fighting the same war. He declared that his party had received dozens of letters from soldiers expressing their hatred of the ongoing military operation. Meanwhile his fellow communist deputies shouted to the deputies occupying the benches on the right that ‘the volunteers of the reaction should take their [soldiers’] place [on the frontlines].’<sup>25</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Doriot’s words met with anger from the right-wing deputies, including a disabled war veteran colonel-turned-deputy who tried to slap him. Doriot did not respond to this provocation because, he said, the sarcasm thick, the colonel was ‘a victim of the imperialist war’ and he ‘had a lot of pity for him.’<sup>26</sup> More stunningly, even after Doriot had challenged the Chamber to disprove his claim that the anti-war campaign enjoyed broad support amongst the workers, peasants and soldiers, none of the hecklers ventured to do so. During the rest of the session, Jan Périnard of the Democratic-Republican Left labelled Doriot as ‘treason standing at the pulpit’, while Henri Maupoil of the Radical Party claimed that communist propaganda was the main culprit behind the setbacks in the military campaign; Maurice Escoulet, also from the Radical Party, accused Doriot of wanting a civil war, and Joséph-Louis Régis, another deputy of the party, said that he should be brought before a tribunal. According to Jacques Poitou-Duplessy of the Democratic-Republican Union, it was scandalous to hear ‘a Frenchman enjoy the calamities of the motherland’; and Joseph Clausat from the Socialist Party even claimed that communists were probably in command of the defeated French columns.<sup>27</sup> Yet, none challenged the claim that communists enjoyed widespread support within the army.



The idea that communist propaganda was capable of disuniting the army was fanciful. It was based on wishful thinking on the part of the communists, and on bad faith on the part of officialdom: a communist scapegoat helped to explain the less than stellar military results in the colonial campaign. Nevertheless, there was more to this than either vain pride or scaremongering. The French state harboured a deeply rooted fear of communist defeatism in the ranks, which it saw as a potential hindrance in its military adventures. The origin of this fear was the 1919 Black Sea mutiny in the French Navy.<sup>28</sup> Sailors hoisting red flags on French vessels had assisted in the ignominious end of the French anti-communist intervention in Ukraine.<sup>29</sup> The resulting angst was kept simmering during the early 1920s as pieces of intelligence about communist influence within the troops circulated within the military. One tip-off warned that German forces had received information about the unfitness of the 1922 class of French conscripts in the occupation of Ruhr, due to widespread communist propaganda.<sup>30</sup> The same anxiety about the 1922 conscripts found its way to Algeria, in a piece of intelligence stating, 'communist groups anticipate[d] that the incorporation of the 1922 class would lead to resistance in the following May in Algeria'.<sup>31</sup> The fear was probably disproportionate to the level of communist influence in the army in the early 1920s. Yet even if the security threat was blown out of proportion, the fear itself was real.

For the communists, gaining a foothold within the military had been a coveted prize from the very beginning. Building on half a decade of organisational work, they had garnered a certain level of force in the land army. According to their own calculations – even if we do not include the individual militants and contacts listed in the reports – as of 1926, they had ninety-two cells in army divisions throughout the country. The Île-de-France region, which included Paris, constituted its bulk, with thirty-two cells.<sup>32</sup> In North Africa, there was one cell present within all of the troops in Algiers, Oran and Setif, and there was a fourth cell on board the *Senegalais* vessel situated in Oran; and the party also had some thirty addresses for individual soldiers stationed in Morocco.<sup>33</sup>

Constructing a subversive organisation within an army fighting never-ending colonial wars was no easy business; it took meticulous planning. When a militant reached conscription age the local organisa-

tion would report it to the relevant party organs and try to keep track of where he was posted. An array of special publications also followed the cycle of military life. *Le Conscrit* addressed conscripts until they began life in uniform. *La Caserne* (The Barracks) addressed itself to all soldiers, while *Jean Le Gouin* (a nickname for the average navy man in French) was exclusively for the navy. Nor did the communists' press messages end with the end of time served in the military. *Le Libéré* (The Discharged) was a communist journal published as a complement to *La Caserne*, targeting recently demobilised troops, and reminding them that even if their own stint in Morocco or Syria had ended, other comrades-in-arms were still suffering. A typical article from that period addressed the 'the ex-fighter comrades of the Rif front', telling them they no right to forget the others still 'fighting against the Riffans and the Druzes'. Two hundred members of the Young Communists (Jeunes Communistes) had been imprisoned for their work to defend soldiers. Now, 'as you are demobilised, come and help us continue the struggle until victory against the Moroccan War, and the campaign for the fraternisation of young workers and peasants of France with workers of Rif who are rising against imperialism'.<sup>34</sup>

The ascendent anti-colonial revolutions in the French colonies in 1924-1925 gave the French communists an opportunity to put the results of this activity into operation – after the smaller-scale test in the Ruhr in 1923. Their campaign used resources on a mass scale. One particular flier, carrying the title *Camarades soldats* (Comrade soldiers), had a print run of 200,000 copies, half in Arabic and half in French.<sup>35</sup> Other important centres such as Marseille and Algiers also produced their own batches of fliers to reach soldiers, although we have no exact details on their numbers.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to these prosaic methods of everyday activity, the PCF also used more theatrical tactics to give its own political language to the opposition of the trenches. For example, on 21 April 1926, a French communist meeting was staged at the headquarters of the PCF at the same time that the Oujda negotiations between the French, Spanish and Rif delegations were taking place. Following passionate speeches from the delegates of the Young Communists and the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), Doriot stepped onto the stage. At the climax of his address,

he stopped to invite 'a soldier comrade' onto the platform, to 'show the burns on his chest from the chemicals used by the French in the Rif'. The soldier, dressed in civilian clothes, then came to the platform, accompanied by two soldiers in military uniform, to display his 'horribly mutilated chest', and express his hatred towards the war, against the background of a tumultuous crowd chanting 'down with the war'. Doriot made clear to the audience the necessary practical conclusions to be drawn from this touching moment: 'Today, the duty of all is to say, and write, to French soldiers in Morocco, disobey your officers, fraternise!'<sup>37</sup>

As the presence of a Spanish communist delegate at the meeting in Paris indicates, the PCF and the Communist International strove to organise their revolutionary defeatist campaign along transnational lines. The main partner in these efforts was the PCE, given that the Rif warriors were fighting French and Spanish colonialism simultaneously. Nevertheless, the PCE was still a modest force in the 1920s, 'better known in Moscow than it is in Spain', according to Catalan communist Joaquín Maurín.<sup>38</sup> The need for a display of internationalist unity against war, in spite of the disproportionate balance of power between the communist parties on different sides of the border, made for an awkward alliance. The PCF needed unity with their Spanish comrades to show French soldiers that they were not alone in their opposition to the war. However, it had limited trust in the PCE's organisational capacities.

As early as 1924, as soon as France had become openly involved in the 'Rif War', the PCF sent Marcel Cachin as a delegate to Spain to initiate contact with the PCE. He returned to France with an unnamed PCE delegate, who participated in a meeting of the Political Bureau of the PCF. The delegate asked the PCF to send their own delegate to the Central Committee of the PCE, and, upon Cachin's suggestion, the PCF decided to hold a joint meeting of the parties in the border town of Bayonne.<sup>39</sup> Less than a year later, however, the PCF's Political Commission stated the de facto situation, with no sugar-coating; it had decided that the PCF would 'exercise the strictest control' over the PCE's recently-created Action Committee against the colonial war in the Rif.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, Spanish opposition was useful in arguments for the PCF in its campaigning amongst the soldiers. A spontaneous mutiny in

Malaga in 1923 among Spanish soldiers on their way to Morocco offered them a prime opportunity.<sup>41</sup> French and Spanish Young Communists duly published a joint communiqué, addressed to their 'comrade soldiers', which stated that the mutinying soldiers in Malaga and the striking workers in Barcelona had welcomed the victory of Abdelkerim forces over the Spanish colonial army, just as the victorious Moroccans had done. Accordingly, it called for the fraternisation of 'French, Spanish and Arab soldiers'.<sup>42</sup>

This was more than a figure of speech: the PCF tried to convince French troops that it was feasible to change sides. André Marty, as a former mutineer, provided the new generation with some practical tips. He suggested that they could wave clothes that were the same colour as the Rif flag, so that the Moroccan warriors would understand their intention to fraternise.<sup>43</sup> As to what would follow this act of fraternisation, Marty had a ready answer for any soldier asking whether the Moroccans would not in that case slaughter them, and it was printed on the pages of *l'Humanité*. He explained that, were they to surrender to Moroccan fighters, such soldiers would be treated with humanity, citing the good living conditions of the Spanish soldiers imprisoned by Abdelkerim's warriors.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, communists kept hammering away at the idea that the act of fraternisation was not only a moral duty but also a way of surviving the war. For example, one of their fliers tried to inspire French soldiers with the story of two battalions who had surrendered to Druze warriors in Rechaiya, in modern-day Lebanon. It urged the troops in Morocco and Syria to follow this example, warning that the battalions in Rechaiya had surrendered because '[i]t was the only way for them to save their skin'.<sup>45</sup> These warnings, and the horrors of war depicted by the PCF, stood in direct contrast with the rosy picture of the fraternising French soldier and Moroccan man happily holding hands, as depicted in other PCF propaganda.<sup>46</sup>

Another aspect of international collaboration was the mobilisation of communists across the whole of the French imperial space, particularly in North Africa and Syria. North Africa stood at a crucial point, the PCF stressed, because it 'provided seventy-five per cent of the troops mobilised for Morocco'.<sup>47</sup> The campaign that was conducted amongst Algerian and Tunisian workers was couched in terms of local

sensibilities and literary traditions. In Algiers, for example, the fliers of the Young Communists opposed the deployment of Algerian soldiers outside Algeria.<sup>48</sup>

Tunisian communists, for their part, had recourse to parables. In one such example, a short story published in a flier in Arabic explicitly tried to warn young Tunisian *fellahin* against the dangers of joining the French Army. The story's protagonist is a young fellah named Mahmoud, who moves to Tunis due to the deteriorating economic situation in the countryside. While wandering the streets of Tunis, his attention is drawn to some luxurious barrack buildings, and a sergeant from the barracks tries to lure Mahmoud into the army by promising him a better life and adventures in foreign countries. Although tempted, Mahmoud continues to stroll around, and soon meets an old man named Abdallah in a nearby coffee house. Abdallah points out to him the lies behind the sergeant's promises: 'as for the new countries that they will make you visit, it is Morocco and Syria, where you will be sent to fight your Muslim brothers, who, like you, suffer from oppression and fight for their independence'. In the last sequence, Abdallah speaks to Tunisian *fellahin* through Mahmoud in these words:

If you listen to my advice, come rather to our party, which defends the oppressed against the oppressor. You will stand with us against the enlistment of your brothers in the army, against the war in Morocco and Syria, and demand independence for Tunisia. The more we are united, the stronger we will be, and with the support of the French workers' organisations, we will one day say to the government, 'Tunisia to the Tunisians'.<sup>49</sup>

Syrian communists printed their own propaganda material addressing French soldiers.<sup>50</sup> In their archives there is a document with an extremely detailed list of demands for soldiers, seemingly a 'handbook' of sorts prepared by the PCF. There are demands to be made by all the troops, but there are also specific slogans addressing specific groups of soldiers – soldiers stationed in Syria, colonial soldiers, and soldiers from Alsace-Lorraine.<sup>51</sup> The general material includes demands for fascist officers to be fired, and for unionisation rights for soldiers. The many other

demands include: the regular distribution of uncontaminated drinks and ice on the Syrian front; a ban on hitting or swearing at colonial soldiers; German-speaking officers for soldiers from Alsace-Lorraine; and a ban on sending North African soldiers to the Syrian front because 'North African soldiers should not fight their brothers in race and religion'.<sup>52</sup> These demands were formulated from the standpoint of the French soldiers, but fliers printed by Syrian communists had a very different tone. One flyer, apparently printed by the Syrian communists themselves (it was evidently not written by a native French speaker), stated that there had never been a holier fight than that of the oppressed Syrian people, and that Syria showed its will for independence 'by the blood of its martyrs'; French soldiers should 'fraternise with these brave heroes of freedom' and leave 'Syria to Syrians'.<sup>53</sup> As these examples illustrate, the Comintern's efforts to support uprisings in the Middle East brought together different militant traditions and created transnational connections. In this endeavour, European anti-militarism and Middle Eastern anti-colonialism came together for a common goal.

### **A mutiny in the Mediterranean**

After the Black Sea mutiny of 1919, French communists and the Communist International had high expectations of the French Navy. Their plan was to use the spectre of a second Black Sea incident as a deterrent against the French government's deployment of colonial or counter-revolutionary naval expeditions. In September 1922, the Executive Committee of the Communist International discussed an open letter from Russian communist sailors to their French counterparts;<sup>54</sup> and the Comintern press published the letter soon afterwards, reminding their French comrades that:

the navy is the most important revolutionary force in each country. The navy of imperialist France, which counts in its ranks so many courageous revolutionists, will not be the last to perform its revolutionary duty. In the struggle of the working class of France, a great historic role devolves upon it.<sup>55</sup>

Just two months later, French military intelligence warned of revolutionary agitation on several warships. The communist committee on the *Jules Ferry* vessel was its nerve centre – and was probably an indication that the Comintern message had reached its target audience.<sup>56</sup> Later, at the Young Communists' Congress in 1926, an ex-navy serviceman tried to explain the relatively greater success of communist activism in the navy. According to him, it was partly because there were more urban workers among their ranks, men who were more accustomed and better aligned to collective action than those in the land army.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the navy had a particular importance: 'it took a navy to conquer new colonies, it took a navy to hold on to these colonies ... We have the examples of Syria and Morocco where the navy plays the role that you are aware of'.<sup>58</sup>

It was therefore no surprise when, on France's joining the Rif War, the PCF sought to give its anti-militarist action a boost with a second '1919'. The most concrete outcome of the ensuing activism was a small-scale mutiny in the Mediterranean Fleet in the summer of 1925. According to the official communist account published in the same year, the mutiny started on board the *Strasbourg* vessel in Bizerte. It then spread to three others, the *Courbet*, visiting the Italian Navy in Naples, and then the *Paris* and the *Duchauffaut*.<sup>59</sup> However, an internal report by the Young Communists saw food issues as the most direct cause of the mutinies in the *Courbet* and *Paris*.<sup>60</sup> According to the same report, it was sailors on ships such as the *Mulhouse*, *Senegalais*, *Metz*, and *Maroc* who later mutinied in direct opposition to the Moroccan War.<sup>61</sup> Soon after the first wave of mutinies, the communist press published a letter from 'the revolutionary sailors of Toulon', a major military port of the French Navy. The letter drew a parallel between the Black Sea mutiny of 1919 and the Mediterranean case, saluting the action of 'the comrades of *Courbet* and *Paris*, who rose against the war' and repeating their demands for immediate peace with the Rif and the evacuation of Morocco.<sup>62</sup>

According to Pierre Broué, up to 1,500 sailors faced military tribunals as a result of the Mediterranean mutinies.<sup>63</sup> Henri Dumoulin, a twenty-one-year-old quartermaster on the *Courbet*, became one of the symbols of the mutiny and its repression. He faced trial in Toulon as

the leader of the mutiny, along with three other sailors. In the trial, which was extensively covered by the communist press, Dumoulin and his comrades firmly refused to express any regret. The communist press commended the determination of the sailors, and the *l'Humanité* reporter present expressed utter admiration: 'O brave lads! Tears fall from our eyes ... Dumoulin, Quillery, Chavau, and you too, Bigorne, now enter the proletarian saga, following the sailors of the Black Sea and the soldiers of Mainz'.<sup>64</sup> Punishing this steadfastness, and without clemency, the court sentenced Dumoulin to four years, Quillery to three years, and the other sailors to one year each.<sup>65</sup>

Roger Petitot, the leader of the mutiny onboard the *Metz*, faced harsher conditions after the rebellion was defeated, given that *Metz* had mutinied during a mission in Morocco. Petitot and three other sailors spent almost two months in Oran in a prison 'infested with snakes and scorpions' before even facing any official charges. Petitot was eventually charged with 'mutiny in the presence of the enemy' and hence faced the prospect of a death sentence, as the communist press underlined.<sup>66</sup> In the end, the council of war in Toulon sentenced him to three years in prison, along with another sailor who received two years.<sup>67</sup>

While they were in prison, in 1927, the PCF put Dumoulin and Petitot on the list of candidates to run for city councillors in Ivry-sur-Seine and Bagnolet, respectively, both of them communist strongholds par excellence.<sup>68</sup> A prominent PCF leader, Marcel Cachin, put the purpose of the PCF's act in crystal clear terms just before the elections, writing that 'a vote for Dumoulin, for those in Ivry, is a vote against the Moroccan War'.<sup>69</sup> André Marty, the original 'internationalist mutineer', presented Dumoulin as the 'candidate of fraternisation'.<sup>70</sup> To dispel any doubt about the meaning of Dumoulin's candidacy, Marty underlined that '... the Communist Party asks the Ivry proletariat to show whether they approve of Dumoulin and all the sailors, soldiers, workers and peasants whose actions have been part of the fight against the Moroccan War'.<sup>71</sup> As expected, the answer was in the affirmative, and Dumoulin and Petitot won by large margins.<sup>72</sup> Although this political challenge from the PCF had ended in success, it did not, however, affect the personal fate of the successful candidates. The authorities annulled the imprisoned candidates' election, and both served their sentences in



full.<sup>73</sup> Their stories, beyond the personal misfortune they had endured, serve as an important reminder of the militant tradition of left-wing sailor mutinies in the French navy, which emerged in 1919 in support of the Bolshevik Revolution, before rallying behind the Middle Eastern anti-colonial uprisings.

## **Peace, defeat and revolution**

Contemporary accounts, communist and anti-communist alike, depicted European communist opposition to the colonial wars in Syria and Morocco as the product of a solidly united front.<sup>74</sup> For communists, this depiction helped in their projection of themselves as a cohesive political unit built around a consistent ideological line. For anti-communists, it helped explain the perceived aberration of French citizens opposing the national war effort: they were merely a group of traitors in Moscow's pay.<sup>75</sup> The following section considers some of the lines of tension within this opposition, arguing that they should not be regarded as evidence of an obscure internal discussion in one communist party's history, but, rather, as evidence of the broader complexities of the alliance between the European working class and the anti-colonial liberation movements that the Communist International strove to forge.

It is an easier task to discern the significant dividing line between socialists who supported their countries in the First World War and those who opposed the war. The issue came to the fore very early on in the history of Communist International. The struggle against socialist patriotism was among the founding principles of the Communist International, even if the stakes had more to do with the intra-European war than with the colonial wars.<sup>76</sup> The socialists' support of the national unity governments of the First World War received harsh criticism from the emerging communist movement. There were, however, some notable exceptions among the socialists, such as Marcel Cachin, who seamlessly evolved from obedience to the official socialist line to obedience to the internationalist communist line – and later to Stalinism.<sup>77</sup>

However, not all differences were this clear. Even within the body of militants who adhered to the internationalist position against the colo-

nial wars, considerable differences persisted, leading to further latent tensions. The end of the fighting was the common goal, and while the war was underway and, more particularly, while it was going the colonial powers' way, this was a goal that was easily shared. Pacifism and militant defeatism could easily come together around a shared negative stance, of opposing the war. However, when things started to go wrong for the imperial country, awkward questions arose. When Abdelkerim's fighters seemed to be imposing themselves on the battlefield, would French communists support the total victory of the Rif forces? Many who opposed the war had qualms about answering these questions in the affirmative. In 1925, Edouard Dudilieux, a new but leading party member, gave a perfect example of these misgivings. In a PCF Political Bureau meeting, he outlined a more prudent position concerning the Moroccan War and 'the victorious situation of the Riffians' army'.<sup>78</sup>

One should also refrain from over-simplifying the 'sides' as consisting of a top-down internationalism imposed by communist internationalism and the more moderate positions held by local parties.<sup>79</sup> The PCF's Political Bureau minutes from 1925, when both the Rif War and the PCF campaign on the issue were at their peak, show a less Manichean situation. A clear example comes from the Political Commission meeting held on 21 July 1925. On that occasion, Doriot – usually represented as the *ne plus ultra* representative of the extreme left-wing position during the campaign – found himself defending the party's position against criticism levelled from the left by another prominent PCF leader, Albert Treint. Treint argued that his position was similar to that of the 'Zimmerwaldians': he wanted the party to campaign for 'the fraternisation and the military defeat of French imperialism'.<sup>80</sup> However he found himself isolated, and the commission adopted the more moderate position supported by Doriot, Suzanne Girault and Georges Marrane. According to this position, the party would call for 'fraternisation', just as Treint proposed, but instead of the 'military defeat of French imperialism' proposed by Treint, it would use the more benign 'cessation of hostilities'.<sup>81</sup>

It should be noted that this discussion took place while the PCF were facing stiff odds, with the looming threat of their paper *l'Humanité* being banned and their legal existence prohibited.<sup>82</sup> Just three months prior to the meeting, the PCF had found itself in a tough spot following

an incident in Paris. The rising fascist movement had decided to hold an electoral meeting in a very working-class neighbourhood in the 18th arrondissement. When the paramilitary forces of the fascist *Jeunesses Patriotes* (Patriotic Youth) tried to leave the meeting and form a march, communist militants had opened fire on the Rue Damrémont, claiming the lives of three of the fascist militiamen. Although the use of arms was against PCF orders, the party had to face growing calls for it to be banned.<sup>83</sup>

In this context, the PCF faced the need to carefully adjust its political line. In a Central Committee meeting during the same week, Doriot defined his position as one of opposition to what he called two deviations. The first deviation came from those who thought conditions were not suitable for the slogan of 'fraternisation'. The second came from those who did not care about winning over French workers. This second 'deviation', or Treint's position, had even suggested the organisation of a subscription campaign to send arms to the Rif. Treint opposed Doriot, arguing that there were reservations about defeatism within the party. Doriot replied that repeating the word 'defeatism' was not the same as being defeatist. Maurice Thorez also opposed Treint's strand of defeatism, warning it might produce other incidents like the one in Rue Damrémont. According to Thorez, these extreme positions created confusion within the party. He had recently met a comrade who kept on asking if they should start sabotaging the railways.<sup>84</sup> Thus, possibly owing to the dire conditions faced by the PCF, the most extreme strand of defeatism was rejected. But, regardless of the immediate result of this debate, these international conflicts reveal that there were a number of conflicting interpretations of anti-militarism behind the façade of camaraderie.

## Conclusion

As this article has suggested, we can rethink communist anti-militarism in Europe in direct connection with the history of Middle Eastern anti-colonialism. This article has located the story of communist militancy in the French army and navy at the time of the anti-colonial revolutions as the point where these two militant worlds overlapped. Whereas

Middle Eastern anti-colonial resistance has often been understood as an auxiliary of the European socialist revolution, this article has thought about European militancy as the auxiliary to the Middle Eastern and North African anti-colonial struggles. This is a way of reframing the interaction between European and Middle Eastern militancy in a more reciprocal manner.

Yet the story was about more than European workers and soldiers converging with the struggle of Middle Eastern anti-colonialist fighters. A view from the ground zero of anti-militarist action in support of Middle Eastern anti-colonialism – i.e. the trenches and battle ships – provides us with a picture of the intricacies involved in sustaining the alliance of European communism and Middle Eastern anti-colonialism that is much fuller than anything that could be gleaned from an exclusive focus on high-level decisions taken in Moscow. The story explored in this article is a case in point: it reveals the tension between the PCF's internationalist duties and its ambition to emerge as the tribune of the rank-and-file French soldiers.

Although this tension was evident, the Comintern's attempt to forge an alliance between the European working class and Middle Eastern anti-colonialism in the latter's heyday, and its protracted efforts to mobilise the former in this quest, was nonetheless exceptional. This article has focused on a case study of French communist anti-militarism in the context of Middle Eastern anti-colonial rebellions as a concrete example of these less-than-smooth and not-always-so-successful Comintern efforts, as a way of exploring the story – and the limits – of this fighting alliance.

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## Notes

- 1 As the 'Middle East and North Africa' is a rather cumbersome expression, and its abbreviation MENA is an eyesore, here I use the expression Middle East as a shorthand.

- 2 This paper focuses on the European side of the story. However, for Middle Eastern anti-colonialists and their perception of the European militancy discussed here, see Burak Sayim (ed), *Transnational Communist Networks in the Post-WWI Middle East: Anticolonialism, Internationalism and Itinerant Militancy (1919-1928)*, Geneva: Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies 2022, pp208-15.
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- 7 Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, 'The Defeat of One's Own Government in the Imperialist War', Marxists Internet Archive, 1915: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/jul/26.htm>.
  - 8 David Senter Woolman, *Rebels in the Rif: Abd El Krim and the Rif Rebellion*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 1968; Germain Ayache, *La Guerre du Rif*, Paris: Editions L'Harmattan 1996; Vicente Pedro Colomar Cerrada, *Primo de Rivera contra Abd El krim* Madrid: De Buena Tinta 2013; Vincent Courcelle-Labrousse and Nicolas Marmié-Maniglier, *La Guerre du Rif: Maroc 1921-1926*, Paris: Editions Tallandier 2018.
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