

# Transnational Connections and Anti-Imperial Intentions of the League against Imperialism, 1927 – 1937

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Author's note: this paper and presentation at the 'Willi Münzenberg Kongress' (Berlin, 19.9.2015) is partly based on my doctoral dissertation and book on the *League Against Imperialism and for National Independence* (LAI) (Petersson 2013),<sup>1</sup> and it is also an abridged version of my forthcoming contribution 'History, transnational connections and anti-imperial intentions: The League Against Imperialism and for National Independence (1927-37) in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism*, Immanuel Ness and Zak Cope (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan (October 2015).

The presentation follows the disposition as given below, however, some parts will either be omitted or highlighted further.

**Please note: This paper is not for publication.**

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<sup>1</sup> Fredrik Petersson, 'We Are Neither Visionaries Nor Utopian Dreamers'. *Willi Münzenberg, the League against Imperialism, and the Comintern, 1925-1933* (Åbo Akademi University 2013, published by Lewiston: Queenston Press, vol.I-II 2013).

## **Transnational Connections and Anti-Imperial Intentions of the League Against Imperialism and for National Independence (1927–37)**

**[PP2]**

The League against Imperialism and for National Independence (LAI) was established at the ‘First International Congress Against Imperialism and Colonialism’ in Brussels on 10–14 February 1927. The Brussels Congress was attended by 174 delegates from 34 countries, representing 134 organisations, associations, or political parties.

This aim of this presentation is to shed some light on the transnational connections and anti-imperial intentions of the LAI. First, by addressing the LAI’s two international congresses, the first one taking place in Brussels, and the second in Frankfurt am Main on 21-27 July 1929.

Secondly, to discuss the transnational connections of the LAI in the form of its national sections and individual connections. Finally, the public campaigns of the LAI shall also be addressed.

### ‘First International Congress against Colonialism and Imperialism’ Brussels 10-14 February 1927



**[PP3]** *Brussels and 'Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais d'Egmont', 10-14 February 1927*

The Brussels Congress corresponded to Münzenberg's vision to gather 'prominent' characters from European trade unions and social democratic leaders, bourgeois radicals, pacifists and intellectuals, standing side-by-side with 'liberal radical elements in the imperialist countries' and colonial delegates. However, Münzenberg's vision corresponded also to the visions of the Communist International, which, prior to the congress, stated that the ultimate goal of the congress to connect anti-colonial movements into an international anti-imperial struggle that cut across political and geographical borders. Hence, this explains the transnational nature and scope of the Brussels Congress, and later, the LAI.

The Brussels Congress tried to offer a template of contemporary colonialism and imperialism, and it gathered several characters that later had leading roles in the postwar decolonization process, for example Jawaharlal Nehru of the *Indian National Congress*, and the Indonesian Mohammad Hatta of *Perhimpunan Indonesia*. Other prolific individuals were Reginald Bridgeman, British socialist and devoted advocate of anti-colonial and pacifist ideals, or the trade unionist Edo Fimmen from the Netherlands, and the Senegalese delegate of the French based *Committee in Defense of the Negro Race* Lamine Senghor. While Albert Einstein supported the foundation of the LAI, appointed as member of its Honorary Presidium in Brussels, Mahatma K. Gandhi had prior to congress in 1926 politely declined of getting involved, stating how this anti-colonial movement brought about 'a certain fright'.

**[PP4]** *Origins and Key Concepts of the Brussels Congress*

It was Münzenberg that introduced the original plan for the Brussels Congress. In 1925, in connection with the proletarian solidarity campaigns *Hands Off China* and *Against the Cruelties in Syria Committee* in Germany. The former was in support of the textile workers' strike movement in Shanghai, and the later focused on the tribal uprising against the French mandate forces.

It is pivotal to bear in mind that the process, which ultimately resulted in the Brussels Congress, was complex and centered around factors such as the moral consent and material support from the *Communist International* and its headquarters in Moscow. It was an intertwined process that depended on settling issues of power struggles, control and responsibilities around who was going to do what, and finally, the production of visions against colonialism and imperialism. In its purest form, the relationship between the two of them determined the history of the LAI throughout its existence from 1927 to 1937.

Four topics are essential to address in the assessment of the Brussels Congress: but first,

1. Münzenberg and *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe*: Münzenberg is pivotal for the history of the LAI. In the capacity as General Secretary of the communist mass organization the *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe* (Workers' International Relief; IAH; 1921-35), Münzenberg included the colonial question in various IAH campaigns in 1925, enacted in Germany, a country that no longer had any colonial possessions as an outcome of the Versailles Peace Treaty in 1919.
2. The gathering of and support from prominent individuals: Münzenberg succeeded in getting prominent intellectuals across Europe, known for their engagement in pacifist, leftist, or humanitarian questions, to sign petitions and resolutions, e.g. the French author Henri Barbusse, Georges Pioch, Emilie Chauvelon, Léon Werth, Albert Fournier, Helen Crawford, Frances Countess of Warridge, Arthur James Cook, the British socialist George Lansbury, Arthur Holitscher, Alfons Paquet, Helene Stöcker, Otto Lehmann-Russbüldt of the *League for Human Rights* in Germany, the German authors Ernst Toller and Eduard Fuchs, the artist John Heartfield, the Manager of the left-wing theatre *Weltbühne* in Berlin Erwin Piscator and the well-known communist figurehead Clara Zetkin. Yet in January 1927, Münzenberg conceded how the frequent use of these names had made them 'no longer that effective'.
3. *League against Colonial Oppression*: is a central actor that partly explains the birth of the LAI, and why and how Münzenberg conceived this loosely knit organization as pivotal for the realization of the Brussels Congress. Founded in Berlin on 10 February 1926, the so-called 'Rathauskeller' conference gathered 43 delegates representing anti-colonial movements in Berlin and Europe. The purpose and functions of the LACO was to act as the official convener of the Brussels Congress, assisting Münzenberg's IAH to coordinate and prepare the congress. Moreover, the LACO and Münzenberg's behaviour tells us about the dependence and influence the Comintern had in deciding and shaping the outcome of the Brussels Congress.
4. The Finale/Brussels Congress: The Brussels Congress was Münzenberg's finale in the anti-imperialist project if you consider the fact that he expected of the event that it would create a massive demonstration against imperialism and colonialism, and to find recruits for communism. This is when the main conundrum appeared as Münzenberg and the Comintern had not calculated with the prospect that the congress turned into a massive political success,

stirring up euphoric emotions among the participants, causing international attention in the press. Attempting to utilize on the euphoria, the ‘Organisation Resolution’, adopted at the Brussels Congress, stipulated on the urgency to develop activity on a national level by establishing national sections across the world.

**[PP5]** *The LAI’s National Sections as Transnational Connections*

Trying to capitalize on the euphoria of the Brussels Congress, the principal organizers and governance behind the LAI – Münzenberg’s IAH and the Comintern – were at a loss on how to behave and react in the initial phase. The LAI’s nerve centre – the International Secretariat in Berlin – had to combat the confusion due to poor communications with Comintern headquarters, for example lack of money and directives.

The LAI’s International Secretariat nevertheless advanced the project of establishing sections in Europe (Germany, Great Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium), USA and Latin America, and Japan, yet it proved next-to-impossible to organize sections in Asia, India, and Africa.

The LAI had a brief but expansive phase that culminated in 1929, having to combat the effects of the *Kuomintang* putsch in China against the communists in April 1927, increased antagonism from the *Labour and Socialist International*, and increased surveillance from national security services across Europe. Though, it can be argued that the primary damage done was caused by the Comintern’s silence in the initial phase. **[PP6]**

The anti-imperial intentions of the LAI were global in scope and intent, i.e. to question and criticize the system of colonialism and imperialism, and to function as an international petitioner against these systems,

If we focus more on the national sections as transnational connections, we must begin in Berlin. A colonial metropolis that housed about 5,000 colonial residents, and has been described as the Comintern’s ‘global village’. Anti-imperialist centers of similar magnitude were few in Europe, but contained similar anti-colonial potential and diversity of activists.

Great Britain: The LAI section and its secretary Reginald Bridgeman in London was under strict surveillance by the MI5 and Scotland Yard and received next-to-none support from the *Communist Party of Great Britain*;

France: the French section experienced an even more desolate situation, isolated by the *Partei Communiste Francais* and circumscribed by the *Sûreté*;

The Netherlands: the Dutch section had a promising position with Fimmen assuming a leading position, supported by Hatta’s *Perhimpunan Indonesia*, however,

the sectarianism of the *Communist Party of Holland* more or less shredded the section's position in 1928.

USA: in the USA experienced the section a downward spiral, despite of the initial support coming from author Upton Sinclair, Professor William Pickens of the *National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People* (NAACP) and Roger Baldwin of the *American Civil Liberties Union*, and having New York as the center to coordinate and connect with the Latin American continent. In 1930, Earl Browder, leader in the *Communist Party of the USA*, stated nonetheless that the section had turned into a political space for 'fascist agents'.

Though, it must be mentioned that propaganda and letter writing campaigns were crucial for the LAI to expand its transnational connections was its propaganda. Through the channels of the Agitprop Department at Comintern headquarters, and from Berlin, issued the LAI's International Secretariat anti-imperialist propaganda by publishing leaflets, pamphlets and newsletters (*Pressedienst*, *Informationsbulletin der Liga gegen Imperialismus*, *The Anti-Imperialist Review*, *Der koloniale Freiheitskampf* to mention a few), material aiming for global circulation and for perusal by the anti-imperialist movement.

*The Second International Congress against Colonialism and Imperialism, Frankfurt am Main, 1929 [PP7]*

The LAI was caught in the ideological *maelstrom* of interwar international communism. This relates to the Comintern's continual advocacy of policy shifts that ran parallel with the societal and political milieu in the Soviet Union. It must be noted that the LAI was established in the spirit of the 'united front' period (the second period; 'from above'), however, in August 1928, at the Sixth International Comintern Congress in Moscow in August, and with the introduction of the 'new line' that promoted no collaborations outside of the communist movement, the doctrine of 'class against class' offered a completely new political outline for a sympathizing organization as the LAI.<sup>2</sup>

This is decisive from a contextual perspective if we want to understand the dichotomies of the 'Second International Congress against Colonialism and Imperialism' in Frankfurt am Main 21-27 July 1929.

In comparison to the Brussels Congress, the Frankfurt Congress turned into a vitriolic scene of disputes and polarization between the communist and non-

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<sup>2</sup> In 1930, Bohumil Smeral, a Czechoslovakian communist and Comintern emissary who had been appointed as secretary at the LAI's International Secretariat in Berlin after the LAI's Frankfurt Congress, concluded that it was 'unfortunate' for the LAI since it was established in the 'second period'. These policy shifts in the Comintern had the effect of 'epileptic zigzags' on the international communist movement, as noted by the Catalan communist Andreu Nin in 1928.

communist delegates. The congress was, in size, larger than the Brussels Congress, attended by 263 delegates from 31 countries and regions representing 99 organizations, preceded by an anti-imperialist youth conference on July 20. Evidently, a closer reading of the sources in the Comintern Archive discloses a carefully planned plot by the Comintern in Moscow, carried out with perfection by communist delegates only for the purpose to demon who actually was in control over the LAI, and from a larger perspective, the international anti-imperialist movement.

The political *leitmotif* at the congress was twofold:

1. to highlight the issue of the war threat against the fatherland of socialist construction (the Soviet Union),
2. and declare support for the Soviet Union.

The effect of this scheme worked in reverse, exposing the communist nature of the LAI and left the organization at a loss on how to act, plunging the LAI and the European anti-imperialist movement into a year of confusion. A majority of non-communist members in the LAI Executive Committee resigned after the congress (Fimmen, Nehru, Pickens, Hatta, and Baldwin), whereas Albert Einstein (the Honorary President) renounced the LAI after experiencing the organization's attitude on the Arabic question as anti-Semitic, and finally, James Maxton of the Independent Labour Party and chairman of the LAI, was expelled by the British LAI section in September 1929.

The crisis and organizational turmoil forced the decision-makers at Comintern headquarters to reassess the very purpose of the LAI, a process that paved the way of trying to use the organization as the hub for the anti-imperialist movement in Europe. The later was an undertaking designed and left in the hands of the LAI's International Secretary, Virendranath Chattophadyaya, with explicit focus on finding anti-colonial activists in Berlin, London, Amsterdam, Marseille and Hamburg to act as vital links in the global spread of anti-imperialism.

So, where does this leave us? **[PP8]**

### *The Scope of the League Against Imperialism's Transnationalism*

I would like to highlight three particular topics that addresses the scope of the LAI's transnationalism:

1. the creation of public campaigns and raise awareness on global political events,
2. the conscription of anti-colonial activists in Europe, and finally,
3. the LAI assumed the character of an educational centre in Berlin for anti-colonial activists that lived in Europe from 1927 to 1933, and after 1933, in London. **[PP9]**

If we focus on the LAI's propaganda and letter writing campaigns, this raised awareness on, for example, in the British LAI section was the Meerut Conspiracy Trial central for Bridgeman, especially as it connected him closer to Nehru in 1929. Other campaigns involved the political disorder in Latin America and against American imperialism, protests against the Manchurian crisis in 1931, amassing support in Europe in cooperation with the Internationale Rote Hilfe for the defendants in the Scottsboro Trial in 1931, and developing the anti-war campaign in Germany in 1932, an idea that resulted in the Amsterdam Anti-War Congress in August same year, which later evolved into the Amsterdam-Pleyel Movement in 1933, one of the first opponents against the Nazi regime and Hitler's rule over Germany.

**[PP10]** An end of Germany as the League Against Imperialism's Transnational Centre: The LAI faced a decisive change with the Nazi Party's ascendancy to power in Germany on January 30, 1933. Prior to this dramatic turn of events, the LAI was part of and belonged to a movement that had to combat the daily political struggles and humiliating police raids in Berlin, and at the same time, the national sections barely existed on paper due to lack of assistance from the communist parties, lack of funds, and external and internal pressure. The mere section that managed to make some kind of impact was the British LAI section and its focus on the Meerut trial, which ended in the beginning of 1933.

With the Reichstag Fire in Berlin on the night of February 27, the LAI's transnational centre came to an end. However, preparations for a transfer to Paris had already been done in February.<sup>3</sup>

By relocating the LAI's International Secretariat to Paris in March 1933, the ambition was to revive the LAI as a vigorous anti-imperialist agency. But for the ones involved, especially for Münzenberg (who escaped from Germany in a car in the first days of March), it was no longer possible to resurrect the LAI, requesting the decision-makers at Comintern headquarters in Moscow to remove him from the position as General Secretary, and transfer the International Secretariat to London.

/Osip Piatnitsky, the Russian communist and administrative key figure in the Comintern apparatus, approved of Münzenberg's request in August 1933, authorizing Bridgeman to assume responsibility over the LAI International Secretariat in London. |

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<sup>3</sup> The International Secretariat (which held its last meeting on January 30), had prepared for the possibility of being forced to escape from Berlin to Paris. In February, the LAI functionary Allo Bayer from Germany, dismantled the International Secretariat and sent most of the bureau's material to Paris, but a majority of the documents never seemed to have made it across the German-French border.

What Bridgeman was handed over was an organization not comparable to its former glories, concluding that ‘it was necessary to reconstitute the work of the LAI from the beginning’. Despite Bridgeman’s socialist pathos, the LAI was an isolated entity that drifted into an abyss of inactivity, managing to produce a pamphlet in defense of the Chinese nationalist struggle in 1936 and trying to establish protest campaigns against Italian fascism in connection with the Abyssinian crisis.

In May 1937, Bridgeman resolved to dissolve and replace it with the *Colonial Information Bureau* (CIB):

/‘Since its foundation in 1927 the League against Imperialism has done consistent work in connection with the different aspects of the colonial struggle; but it is essential that we should advance from the position of a small group of people interested in the colonial struggle, seriously restricted in their activities because of their association with a “banned organization”, and activate the working class organizations and peace societies’. |

### [PP11] *Legacy and Heritage*

The history of the LAI expose how difficult the actors found it to create an anti-imperialist utopia, a dilemma which confirms the utopianism of communism, i.e. the LAI was an expression of communism and belonged to the complex ideological and administrative system of international communism. The LAI was unified by a two-fold dimension: firstly, the ambition to create a public platform against the system of colonialism and imperialism and, secondly, the LAI was inescapably part of a movement wanting to spread communism on a global scale. Stripped of its communist ties, the LAI resembles a business enterprise or a religious clique, restricted by its incapacity to act due to a weak financial structure, while confronting ambitions of power within its hierarchy. The heritage left was to function as a nostalgic reference for the decolonization movements emerging both in the Western world and the colonies after the Second World War.

I am here thinking of new associations and organizations that assumed the LAI’s political agenda, for example:

- Colonial Information Bureau,
- Centre Against Imperialism,
- Congress of Peoples’ Against Imperialism,
- Movement for Colonial Freedom and
- Liberation.

If we turn our attention to the ‘Afro-Asian Conference’ in Bandung, Indonesia, 1955, the opening statement of Achmed Sukarno, the President of Indonesia, summarize the LAI’s legacy as a nostalgic reference and how its transnationalism

functioned as a concerted source of inspiration for the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movement in the postwar years:

‘[O]nly a few decades ago it was frequently necessary to travel to other countries and even other continents before the spokesmen of our peoples could confer. I recall in this connection the Conference of the ‘League Against Imperialism and Colonialism’ which was held in Brussels almost thirty years ago. At that Conference, many distinguished delegates who are present here today met each other and found new strength in their fight for independence. [...] It was not assembled there by choice, but by necessity’.

I would like to conclude by arguing that it is necessary, as much as it is advisable, to not strengthen the mythology of the LAI. By this I mean that one has to assess and understand the LAI from its context and causality, and how the patterns of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism altered in the breaking-point of increased Bolshevization, Stalinization, and ultimately, with the Second World War and the postwar years.

Thank you!

**Fredrik Petersson**