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Prelude to Bandung: Anti-Colonialism between the Wars

In 1927, the “First International Congress against Imperialism and Colonialism” convened in Brussels at Palais d’Egmont. The event celebrated the establishment of the League against Imperialism, and as the congress reached its crescendo, Willi Münzenberg, the German communist and General Secretary of *International Arbeiterhilfe* (IAH), declared that this was “neither the end, nor the beginning of a new powerful movement”.¹ Nearly 28 years later, amid the aftermath of the brutality of the Second World War, Münzenberg’s anti-imperial vision was revitalized at the Afro-Asian conference in Bandung, Indonesia.

In the 1955 Bandung Conference’s opening address, Achmed Sukarno, the Indonesian president, declared to the leaders of the twenty-nine countries in attendance: “I recognise that we are gathered here today as a result of sacrifices. [...] I recall in this connection the Conference of the ‘League against Imperialism and Colonialism’ which was held in Brussels almost thirty years ago.”² These two events illustrate why a global history of transnational anti-colonial movements in the 20th century cannot be fixed around a particular moment in time and space – rather, it is a history enacted in radical spaces in a changing world.

The idea of radical spaces as meeting points and connective sources of anti-colonialism is part of the suggestion that postwar decolonization was a process with its origins in Europe’s cosmopolitan centers—Berlin, Paris, Brussels, London, Hamburg—in the Interwar years. The Bandung Conference represents a turning point for anti-colonialism in the postwar era, and as Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton argues, by “thinking backward from Bandung” it is possible to trace people, policies, ideas, and political platforms. In other words, anti-colonialism was not “new post-1919”. The 1920s witnessed how these movements of

¹ For Münzenberg’s quote, see Russian State Archive for Political and Social History (RGASPI), 542/1/69, 37-49, Manuscript of Willi Münzenberg’s speech, Brussels, 13/2-1927. The speech was later included in the official report from the Brussels Congress, see Louis Gibarti (Hrsg.), *Das Flammenzeichen vom Palais Egmont*, Neuer Deutscher Verlag, Berlin (1927). Münzenberg’s statement and the history of the *League against Imperialism* are assessed in Fredrik Petersson, “*We Are Neither Visionaries Nor Utopian Dreamers*”. *Willi Münzenberg, the League against Imperialism, and the Comintern, 1925-1933* (doctoral dissertation, General History) Åbo Akademi University (2013).

² George McTurnan Kahin (ed.), *The Asian-African Conference: Bandung, Indonesia, April 1955*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1956, p.40.

resistance had become politically conscious and consolidated.³ From anti-colonial actors – organizations, associations, and individuals – that either migrated to or visited Europe in the 1920-30s, emerges a transnational history of anti-colonialism that dates back to the Versailles Conference and was partly concluded at Bandung.

But what constitutes the transnational historical narrative of anti-colonialism between the world wars? The central focus must be to disclose why and how anti-colonialism and radical spaces were interconnected as sharing and benefiting from both informal and formal networks, capable of assembling and putting into practice campaigns, propaganda, associations, and committees. These sources of anti-colonial solidarity are representative of political and cultural articulations shaped by the spatiality of places and spaces. Anti-colonial movements were representative of the type of resistance that was (and still is) embedded in transnational exchanges of information and opposition. Transnational history—movements, flows, and circulations of ideas and peoples⁴—allows us to link together anti-colonialism as it was enacted in spaces and places from Versailles, between the world wars, and the road to Bandung.

Origins and Spaces of Anti-Colonialism

Before there was a *League against Imperialism*, there was the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. It represented a crucial turning point for anti-colonialism between the world wars, particularly as the event's managers agreed upon a template for the continuance of global empires. However, it also offered anti-colonial activists that, first, had travelled to attend the Versailles conference to engage in political and cultural discussions, and second, to perceive Europe as the center of anti-colonialism in the 1920s.⁵ The legacy of 1919 is relevant if one wants to understand the impact of the Brussels Congress in 1927, the critique against the *League of Nations* on the colonial question, and Bandung in 1955.

³ Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, "Empires and the Reach of the Global", in *A World Connecting 1870-1945*, Emily S. Rosenberg (ed.), The Belknap Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp.390-91; Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment. Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (2007).

⁴ C. A. Bayly et al, "AHR Conversation: On Transnational History", in *American Historical Review*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, December 2006, p.1443.

⁵ Petersson (2013).

The Versailles conference coincided with and, as a consequence of the poor resolution of the colonial question, exacerbated protests against colonialism and imperialism in China, Korea, Egypt, and India. Dubbing this anti-imperial response the “Wilsonian moment”, Erez Manela has outlined how this episode contributed to turning anti-colonial movements into conscious and organised transnational political actors (Manela 2006).⁶ The gradual disappearance of the “Wilsonian moment” was replaced by the growth of disillusioned anti-colonial movements globally after the Great War.

The anti-colonial shadow cast in 1919 has procured an imprint that is still present in our postcolonial and globalized society. For example, the establishment in 1921 of the *Union Intercoloniale* in France, which received support from the *Parti Communiste français* (PCF), sought to unite colonial activists in Paris by providing them with means, methods, and outlets like the newspaper *La Paria*. This undertaking displayed the interwar consolidation of anti-colonial actors, foremost Nguyen ai Quoc. And in 1925 the once-marginalized Black African community in Paris gained greater voice through the efforts of Lamine Senghor of Senegal, who formed a section within the *Union Intercoloniale* to infuse a discussion on the Black African agenda. In 1926, Senghor assumed a leading position in the *Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre* (CDRN), and in 1927, he attended the Brussels Congress as its representative. Similar anti-colonial groups emerged in London, Manchester and Liverpool. In London emerged a center for Indian nationalist movements before the Great War (the India House for example), however, in 1919 and on, African and Indian anti-colonialism gained a foothold in political spaces (committees, journals, organisations) in the heart of the British Empire. The *West African Students’ Union* was thereafter founded in London 1925, and some contacts from West Africa, such as the *Sierra Leone Railway Workers’ Union* and the *South African National Congress*, were established with likeminded activists in Europe.⁷ Anti-colonialism in Germany assumed a different character. Berlin had quickly turned into a haven for colonial residents after the Great War, where approximately around 5,000 such individuals lived and studied in the Weimar capital, representing Chinese, Indian, Arab, and North African groups. In 1925, Willi Münzenberg and the IAH focused much of their

⁶ Manela (2007).

⁷ See for example Jonathan Derrick, *Africa’s ‘Agitators’. Militant Anti-Colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918-1939*, Hurst Publishers, London (2008); Imanuel Geiss, *Panafrikanismus. Zur Geschichte der Dekolonisation*, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Frankfurt am Main, 1968, pp.173, 220-26. A number of these organizations and individuals mentioned above are also featured and discussed in Petersson (2013).

attention on philanthropic questions related to the political and social development in these colonial and semi-colonial countries. Partly sanctioned by the *Communist International* (Comintern, 1919-43) in Moscow, and partly as a strategy to widen the global activities of the IAH, Münzenberg coordinated the establishment of committees and campaigns in support of the Chinese and Syrian national liberation struggle (*Hands Off China*, and *Against the Cruelties in Syria*).⁸ However, the consolidation of anti-colonialism in Europe required, according to Münzenberg, the convening of an international congress against colonialism and imperialism. The Comintern therefore authorized Münzenberg to form the *League against Colonial Oppression* in 1926 as a connective and organising source to accomplish the twofold objective of convening a demonstration against colonialism and imperialism, and second, to establish the *League against Imperialism*.⁹

The League Against Imperialism (1927-1937)

The *League against Imperialism* was therefore the culmination of a process that mirrored the development of anti-colonialism in Europe. To turn this into an “international organisation”, much depended on the benevolence of engaged persons that were active outside of the communist movement and anti-colonial groups in Europe: the labour and socialist movement, radical and pacifist elements, and transatlantic intellectuals like Upton Sinclair, Henri Barbusse, Albert Einstein. While after 1927 the *League against Imperialism* posed as an international organisation, Berlin represented its principal geographical and connective platform. Anti-colonial activists from colonial and semi-colonial countries—among them George Padmore from Trinidad, Mohammad Hatta from Indonesia, Jawaharlal Nehru and Virendranath Chattophadyaya from India—drew experience during their time in Europe from the *League against Imperialism* by establishing or contributing to committees like the *League in Defence of the Negro Race* (1927), the *Independence for India League* (1928), the *International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers* (1931), and the *League*

⁸ The anti-colonial work of the IAH and Münzenberg’s direct involvement is analyzed in Petersson, chapter 1 “Conceiving the Anti-Colonial Project”, 2013, pp.53-91, and Fredrik Petersson, “Hub of the Anti-Imperialist Movement: The League against Imperialism and Berlin, 1927 – 1933”, in *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, Vol.16, No.1, Taylor & Francis, London, 2014, pp.49-71.

⁹ RGASPI 542/1/4, 2-4, Protokoll der im Berliner Rathauskeller am 10. Februar abgehaltenen Konferenz der deutschen Organisationen und der Kolonialvertreter, Berlin, 10/2-1926; RGASPI 495/18/425, 32-33, Resolution from the Commission for the Examination of the Question of a Colonial Congress in Brussels, Moscow, 30/3-1926.

of *Coloured Peoples'* (1931). These organised constellations remained connected to *League against Imperialism*, while articulating their own agendas based on different sets of ideological interpretations of the world.¹⁰

Perhaps even more importantly, the interwar years showed that anti-colonialism was managing to survive authoritarian and totalitarian systems. After the Nazi regime assumed power in Germany 1933, the *League against Imperialism* shifted location briefly to Paris, however, the Comintern decided to permanently locate the organisation in London. British socialist and longstanding member of the League, Reginald Francis Orlando Bridgeman (1884-1968), was given authority to assume formal leadership over the organisation.¹¹ However, owing to the communist bias and faltering interest in the League in Great Britain and Europe, particularly as anti-fascism and the Popular Front in France 1936 superseded the anti-colonial agenda, Bridgeman resolved to disband the organisation in 1937. That same year, Bridgeman would then form the *Colonial Information Bureau*, which functioned somewhat as a successor to the League (Saville 1984; Petersson 2013). With the demise of the *Colonial Information Bureau* in 1944, the work of the *West African Students' Union* at the Fifth Pan-African Congress in Manchester in October 1945 would help in further solidifying African anti-colonialism.¹²

Bandung

The post-1945, transnational radical anti-colonial movements were thus but continuing the activities, structures, practices, and cultures of the Interwar years (Ballantyne & Burton 2012).¹³ This political process culminated with the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. However, the cataclysm of Bandung ("the Bandung spirit") had been preceded by careful planning, organizing, demonstrations and conferences, like that of the

¹⁰ The corpus of accumulated literature on these topics are vast, see further in Petersson (2013); Holger Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic. African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers*, Brill, Leiden (2014); Nirode K. Barooah, *Chatto. The Life and Times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe*, Oxford University Press, Oxford (2003); Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism. A Historical Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford (2001); Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, The New Press, New York (2007).

¹¹ RGASPI 542/1/60, 39-49, Bericht über Lage und Tätigkeit des Intern[ationales] Sekretariats der Liga ab 30. Januar 1933, author: Allo Bayer, Paris, 1/4-1933; RGASPI 495/4/260, 72, Short note from Münzenberg, Moscow, to Osip Piatnitsky, Moscow, 20/8-1933.

¹² John Saville, "Bridgeman, Reginald Francis Orlando", in *Dictionary of Labour Biography Volume VII*, Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville (eds.), The MacMillan Press, London, 1984, pp.26-40; Petersson, 2013, pp.497-501; Young (2001).

¹³ Ballantyne and Burton, 2012, pp.390-93.

Fifth Pan-African Congress, and the 1948 “Congress of the Peoples of Europe, Asia and Africa” in Puteaux, Paris.¹⁴

From a longer transnational perspective, the link between Versailles and Bandung is a strong one. The 1919 Versailles conference had left in its trail a legacy that spurred the growth of politically conscious and global anti-colonial movements, of which the Bandung Conference was but one in a long story of anti-colonialism. Bandung can perhaps be perceived as “originary”, that is, representing the utopian hopes on the future of “Third World” solidarities. Yet Ballantyne and Burton write that transnational anti-colonial history should be centered around “long histories of intercolonial connection, collaboration, and [...] friction”.¹⁵ Yes, Bandung symbolized the future of “Third World” solidarities as it sent off a wave of reactions, aspirations, and hopes. But one must grasp the fact that the post-1945 “spirit of Bandung” was a transnational practice that surfaced owing to interwar political and cultural currents in the Western world.¹⁶ Such a transnational approach shows us how these anti-colonial movements stretch over time and space, and provide us with a historical context for why and how anti-colonial movements formulated and constructed agendas of resistance against colonialism and imperialism.

¹⁴ Hakim Adi, Marika Sherwood, George Padmore, *The 1945 Manchester Pan-African Congress Revisited*, New Beacon Books (1995); Anne-Isabelle Richard, “The limits of solidarity: Europeanism, anti-colonialism and socialism at the Congress of the Peoples of Europe, Asia and Africa in Puteaux, 1948, in *European Review of History*, Vol.21, No.4, Routledge, London, 2014, pp.519-37.

¹⁵ Ballantyne and Burton 2012, p.391.

¹⁶ Prashad (2007); Robert J. C. Young, “The Postcolonial Condition”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History*, Dan Stone (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford (2012); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, The Belknap Press, Harvard (2010); Christopher J. Lee, *Making a World After Empire. The Bandung Moment and its Political Afterlives*, Ohio University Press, Athens (2010).