

# Asia in the Global 1919: Reimagining Territory, Identity, and Solidarity

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PERHAPS THE FIRST THING to note about a forum on the subject of 1919 in Asia is how awkwardly the spatial frame of “Asia” maps onto the international history of that moment. To be sure, the postwar international conjuncture, which I have elsewhere called the “Wilsonian Moment,” had a revolutionary impact across Asia, perhaps more so than in any other world region outside of Europe.<sup>1</sup> As the three preceding essays in this forum note, that year was a waypoint, and sometimes a launching pad, for a rush of novel or renewed revolutionary discourses, connections, and mobilizations in China, India, and Korea, as it was in other parts of Asia and of the world. These were all propelled by the accumulated material and ideological transformations of the years of war, transformation that imbued the moment with revolutionary potential and gave contemporaries a sense that the international order, its power structures and its norms of legitimacy, were uniquely malleable, amenable to concerted action. Indeed, 1919 was a moment in which the very idea of “Asia”—its spaces, the identities they attached to, and the solidarities that ran across and beyond it—was reimagined in ways that at once stitched it together and rent it apart.

In what follows, I survey briefly the multiple ways in which 1919 was experienced in Asia and ask how those experiences inflected the relationship between territory, identity, and solidarity across Asia and beyond.

Clearly, despite similarities and connections, China, India, and Korea each experienced the conjuncture of 1919 differently, not least since each was differently situated within international society at the time. The Korean case was, in a sense, the simplest: Japan had seized control of the peninsula in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5, an arrangement that was formalized in 1910 when Korea became a Japanese colony. The March First protesters, therefore, made the straightforward demand of Korean freedom from Japanese rule. The Chinese protests that broke out some two

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<sup>1</sup>Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anti-colonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). One could argue that the impact of 1919 on the Middle East in the aftermath of the Ottoman collapse was as great if not greater than it was in Asia. That reflection, however, reminds us that the post-Ottoman territories most affected at the time were, geographically speaking at least, located in western Asia, though the longstanding if now antiquated line that separates “Asian studies” from “Middle East studies” leaves these regions outside of “Asia” as defined in this journal.

months later, on May 4, were more complicated in their origins and goals. Though they, too, were aimed against Japan's influence in China, particularly the onerous Twenty-One Demands of 1915 and the Japanese claims on the former German territories in Shandong Province, the May Fourth demonstrators also protested the Western Allies, who came out in support of the Japanese position at the peace conference in Paris, and their own government, which they condemned as weak in the face of foreign encroachment.

The situation in India was more complicated still. Indian soldiers had participated in the war *en masse* as a crucial part of the British imperial forces. More than one million Indian soldiers fought in the war, and hundreds of thousands more participated in it as laborers. The Indian National Congress, the primary representative of the all-India national movement, had urged Indians to enlist, with Mohandas Gandhi, who had returned to India in 1915 from his long sojourn in South Africa, arguing that such service to the empire was “the easiest and straightest way” to home rule since it would allow Indians to prove that they were “deserving of the rights of Englishmen.”<sup>2</sup> British anxieties about Indian loyalty, however, led to wartime emergency laws to suppress dissent and, as Durba Ghosh notes in her essay, when these laws were extended into the postwar period Gandhi and others realized their error and rose up in protest. But Gandhi's *satyagraha*, or nonviolent resistance, launched in April 1919, intersected in India with the concurrent Khilafat movement which, led by prominent Indian Muslims but supported by prominent non-Muslim figures, demanded that the Allies preserve the office and authority of the Caliph in Istanbul despite the Ottoman Empire's defeat and collapse in the war.<sup>3</sup>

This last intersection points to the complex concatenation of demands, interests, and identities that defined the conjuncture of 1919 in Asia and connected it to contemporary events elsewhere. To this I will return. First, however, it is worth pointing out that the stories of Koreans, Chinese, and Indians hardly exhaust, or even fully exemplify, Asian experiences of that moment.<sup>4</sup> Perspectives from Southeast Asia are notably missing from such a frame, this despite the fact that one of the best known stories at the intersection of Asia and 1919 is that of a petition to the peace conference—“The Demands of the Annamite People”—signed by a young activist from French Indochina who would not long after take the name Ho Chi Minh.<sup>5</sup> Less well-known but far more important are the stories of the nearly 100,000 other French colonial subjects from Indochina who were pressed into wartime service as soldiers or workers in Europe in whose name, presumably, Ho had presented his petition.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Gajendra Singh, “India and the Great War: Colonial Fantasies, Anxieties and Discontent,” *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 14, no. 2 (2014): 343–61.

<sup>3</sup>Gail Minault, *The Khilafat Movement: Religious Symbolism and Political Mobilization in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup>An important recent work that tells the story of Asia in World War I, and particularly in its aftermath, is Xu Guoqi, *Asia and the Great War: A Shared History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>5</sup>Robert Joseph Gowen, “Ho Chi Minh in the Paris Peace Conference of 1919: A Documentary Footnote,” *International Studies* 12, no. 1 (1973): 133–37.

<sup>6</sup>Geoffrey C. Gunn, “‘Mort pour la France’: Coercion and Co-optation of ‘Indochinese’ Worker-Soldiers in World War One,” *Social Scientist* 42, no. 7/8 (2014): 63–84.

Across the South China Sea from French Indochina, Filipinos, living under US colonial rule since 1898, also mobilized in those years, first to fight in the war and then, in its aftermath, to lodge their claims for self-determination. After the United States entered the war in April 1917, nationalists in Manila sought to make sure Filipinos took part in the fighting so they could demonstrate their “loyalty, capacity, and martial masculinity.”<sup>7</sup> After the armistice, Filipino nationalists, again like their counterparts in India, mobilized to convert their wartime loyalty into political rights. In the spring of 1919, the president of the Filipino Senate, Manuel Quezon, led an independence mission to Washington. There, Quezon made his case, as so many others did at the time, by drawing on US President Woodrow Wilson’s rhetoric of self-determination. In response, he was told that Filipinos would have to wait until “the equilibrium of world conditions was restored” before the US government could consider their case. It was only after the Democrats’ defeat in the 1920 presidential elections that Wilson, by then a lame duck, announced his support for Filipino independence, but the incoming Republican administration did not follow through and the Philippines remained a US possession for several more decades.<sup>8</sup>

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The postwar upheavals across Asia and elsewhere were all part of the wider global moment of 1919; oriented toward developments in the world arena, they also shaped each other as they evolved. The activists who took part in those movements closely followed the peace conference in Paris as they sought to leverage the postwar reshuffling of power and legitimacy, but they also, as Gi-Wook Shin and Rennie Moon note in their essay, paid attention to what other groups with similar aims were doing to articulate and advance their claims, seeking to derive lessons and, in many cases, to forge solidarities. News traveled fast in 1919—the world, after all, had been encircled in telegraph cables in the decades before the war—so it is hardly surprising that we find the young Mao Zedong, then twenty-five years old, noting that summer from Changsha the failure of the peace conference to attend to the demands of Koreans, Indians, and others and signaling his growing interest in Russian Bolshevism, just as Jawaharlal Nehru, then twenty-nine, was thinking along similar lines in Delhi.<sup>9</sup>

But it was not only the news of these movements that traveled transnationally; the movements were themselves fully transnational. Koreans were marching not only in Seoul and across the peninsula but also in Tokyo, Shanghai, and Philadelphia, and Korean activists who headed to Paris to try to register their claims relied on the Chinese delegation to help transport them to France. In Paris, French intelligence noted that another traveler, “Nguyen Ai Quoc”—that same twenty-nine-year-old activist from French Indochina who would soon take the name Ho Chi Minh—“bases himself on

<sup>7</sup>See Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, & the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 382–88 (quote on 383).

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 386–87. See also Emily S. Rosenberg, “World War I, Wilsonianism, and Challenges to US Empire,” *Diplomatic History* 38, no. 4 (2014): 852–63. As Rosenberg notes, activists in other US colonial possessions, notably Puerto Rico, also tried to mobilize Wilsonian rhetoric in their cause, as did opponents of the then-ongoing US occupation in Haiti and Santo Domingo.

<sup>9</sup>Erez Manela, “Imagining Woodrow Wilson in Asia: Dreams of East-West Harmony and the Revolt against Empire in 1919,” *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (2006): 1327–51.

everything the Koreans do.... In order to know what Quoc does, we only have to get the publications of the Koreans in America.” Ho, it seems, had shown an agent copies of the *Korean Review*, a journal published by Korean independence activists in New York and, noting how Chinese and Korean activists had managed to gain visibility for their claims in international circles, quickly became active in an expanding transnational milieu in the city, handing out copies of his petition at anticolonial meetings to the consternation of French intelligence, who confessed to being “at a complete loss as to the Chinese, Koreans, and even one Irishman” with whom Ho appeared to be conspiring.<sup>10</sup>

What drew these various activists together and helped to mobilize them was a common sense of opportunity at a moment of historical inflection. Lenin’s Bolshevism and Wilson’s liberalism had both erupted onto the world stage in the final years of the war, shaking the foundations of the prewar world of empires. Both Lenin and Wilson had called for a postwar settlement based on the principle of “self-determination,” but there was a vast gulf between what each meant with the term. Lenin called for “national” self-determination, which meant the right of any culturally or historically defined ethnic nation to have its own state. Wilson’s version, which he rarely if ever described as specifically “national,” suggested that the population of a given territory should be ruled only with its consent, while also qualifying that right, often implicitly, with the requirement that such a population be politically “mature” enough—“civilized” enough—to offer that consent. Neither man, moreover, saw Asia (or Africa, or anywhere in the Global South) as a primary locus for the application of these principles, but their words echoed far beyond the European audiences they were primarily intended for. Neither Wilson nor Lenin, after all, had explicitly limited the application of their avowed principles to one continent only.<sup>11</sup>

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Just as the talk of self-determination in 1919 had multiple origins, it also had numerous potential (and imagined) trajectories into the future. For some, it meant independence, as it did for Koreans who fought to end Japanese rule. For others, as in the case of China, it meant the assertion of equality on the international stage and full sovereignty—over territory, resources, tariffs—after decades of unequal treaties with other powers. For yet others it meant, for a time at least, imperial reform, as it did for Indian “moderates” or even for future Indochinese revolutionaries—Ho’s petition in 1919, after all, demanded the liberalization of French rule in Indochina, not its removal. A similar reformist approach was also in evidence in the desiderata for European rule in Africa put forth by the 1919 Pan-African Congress that gathered in Paris alongside the peace conference and that counted among its participants the African American luminary W. E. B. Du Bois and the Senegalese parliamentarian Blaise Diagne. Others, such as Diagne’s fellow Senegalese Lamine Senghor, fiercely critiqued such accommodationist approaches as weak and self-serving.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Cited in Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 157.

<sup>11</sup>This is worked out in Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, *op. cit.* note 1, esp. pp. 37–45.

<sup>12</sup>On the Pan-African Congress of 1919, see, most recently, Sarah Claire Dunstan, “Conflicts of Interest: The 1919 Pan-African Congress and the Wilsonian Moment,” *Callaloo: A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters* 39, no. 1 (2016): 133–50. On Lamine Senghor, see David

Ho, Diagne, and Senghor were all, of course, French subjects, a reminder, if one was needed, that Asian connections and solidarities in 1919 stretched out far beyond the boundaries of the continent. After all, Paris, like other major European cities, hosted a veritable anticolonial transnational, where Indochinese activists rubbed shoulders not only with Koreans, Chinese, Indians, or Javanese but also with north and west Africans—Algerians, Moroccans, Tunisians, Senegalese—as well as a great many others, including activists, officials, and students from the Caribbean and Latin America and more than one Irishman.<sup>13</sup> Such trans-imperial connections meant that Indians, for example, envisioned and worked to build networks of solidarity not only with other Asians but across the empire with Egyptians, Irish, and Africans, ranging across Europe and in North America, where both imperial reformists and anticolonial revolutionaries operated during the war trying to advance their cause.

In 1919, however, such Asian connections across continents and empires intersected—at times competing, at others reinforcing—with the notion of “Asia” as a unified space on the cusp of a radical historical inflection, a notion that encouraged the proliferation of pan-Asian claims and projects. There was not one pan-Asianism but many, with some versions claiming a leading role for one or another national or civilizational formation (Japan, or China, or India) while others centered the “spirit” of Asia on one or more transregional tradition, such as Buddhism or Islam, even if at times claims of pan-Asian solidarity were little more than thinly veiled excuses for imperial expansion, as with Japan from 1931 to 1945.<sup>14</sup> Other efforts to stitch together territory, identity, solidarity, and power highlighted affinities based on a shared language, culture and history, or faith, with ideologies and movements calling for pan-Arab, pan-Turkic, or pan-Islamic solidarities making claims on the loyalty of those politicized or mobilized in the war’s wake alongside claims for pan-Asian solidarity or national self-determination. Even as the Khilafat movement’s call to Islamic solidarity centered on the Sultan in Istanbul waned as the new Turkish nation was established on the ruins of the Ottoman Sultanate, other pan-Islamic discourses retained their power from French North Africa to the Dutch East Indies and beyond.

The politico-spatial imaginaries of Asians in 1919, then, went far beyond the confines of the continent; they were fully global. One who took such a global perspective was the longtime Indian freedom fighter Lala Lajpat Rai, who, as Durba Ghosh notes in her essay, spent the war years in North American exile. In the January 1919 issue of his journal, *Young India*, which was published in the United States under the motto of “Europe is not the only place that is to be made safe for democracy,” Lajpat Rai illustrated this global sensibility vividly with a world map entitled: “Here Are the Oppressed Nations of the World; What Will the Peace Conference Do for Them?” (see [figure 1](#)). The map,

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Murphy, “Defending the ‘Negro Race’: Lamine Senghor and Black Internationalism in Interwar France,” *French Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (2013): 161–73.

<sup>13</sup>On this milieu, see Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*, *op. cit.* note 10.

<sup>14</sup>Sven Saaler and Christopher W. A. Szpilman, eds., *Pan-Asianism: A Documentary History*, 2 vols. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2011) is a rich resource. See also Gal Gvili, “Pan-Asian Poetics: Tagore and the Interpersonal in May Fourth New Poetry,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 77, no. 1 (2018): 181–203.



**Figure 1.** A map published in *Young India* in January 1919.

which sought to indicate the status of every territory in relation to the ideal of self-determination, designated East-Central Europe, Ireland, and practically all of Asia and Africa as “oppressed nations.” China was described as “nominally independent, really dependent,” and the expanse of southern Africa was marked “nominally republics. Whites free; natives dependent.” India—together with Ireland, Korea, Southeast Asia (excluding Siam), and much of Africa—was shaded black and marked simply as “dependencies.” The Indian struggle against Britain, the map suggested, was an integral part of a global struggle against imperialism, a struggle in which the peace conference was now expected to play a pivotal role.<sup>15</sup>

Such a global perspective on the problem of imperialism helped cement ideological solidarities, too, perhaps none more important than that represented in the Communist International, or Comintern. Itself founded in 1919, the Comintern, or Third International, was born of the wartime collapse of its prewar predecessor, the Second International, which was betrayed by those whom Lenin condemned as “social chauvinists,” socialists who supported their respective national war efforts once the conflict broke out in the summer of 1914.<sup>16</sup> Founded to promote the spread of revolution, the Comintern initially focused on Europe, but with its second congress in the summer of 1920 it increasingly turned its attention to the colonial world, and particularly to Asia. This was, to no small degree, the result of the influence of the Indian revolutionary M. N. Roy, who attended the 1920 congress in Moscow representing not an Indian communist party, which did not yet exist, but the Mexican one, which he himself had helped found in

<sup>15</sup>*Young India* 2, no. 1 (January 1919), 2.

<sup>16</sup>Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1996).



1917. Fashioning itself after 1920 as a champion of anticolonial nationalism, the Comintern dispatched agents who helped establish, train, and direct communist activists and parties among Chinese, Indians, Koreans, Indochinese, Javanese, Filipinos, and others.<sup>17</sup> Thus, an organization founded on the rejection of the nationalism that had infected its predecessor soon came to seize on that selfsame nationalism as a useful instrument in promoting revolution in Asia and beyond.

The Comintern sought to knit together these rising movements and promote anticolonial solidarity in the international arena, eventually establishing a League against Imperialism (LAI), designed to serve as an anticolonial counterpoint to the League of Nations. The LAI's first meeting, held in Brussels in early 1927, hosted a veritable who's who of anticolonial nationalists, including a large delegation of the Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang), India's Jawaharlal Nehru, and the young Mohammad Hatta, later the first vice president of independent Indonesia, as well as the Algerian nationalist leader Ahmed Ben Messali Hadj.<sup>18</sup> The LAI fell into disarray soon after as communists clashed with "bourgeois nationalists" in China and elsewhere and its Berlin-based activities were increasingly suppressed by an ascendant German right.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the 1927 Brussels meeting remained so well etched in the memories of participants as a crucial juncture in the construction of anti-imperial solidarities across the colonial world that it was cited nearly thirty years later by Indonesian President Sukarno in his opening address at the famed Bandung Conference of 1955.<sup>20</sup>

In retrospect, we know that this kaleidoscopic interplay of potential spatialities, identities, and solidarities eventually converged on the form of the nation-state, with other formations—whether pan-ideologies, trans-imperial connections, or global solidarities—often pursued or abandoned based on their utility in the drive toward self-determination. The achievement of any one claim for national self-determination, after all, often entailed the suppression of other, competing claims, whether it was Chinese sovereignty built on the denial of the claims of Tibetans, Uighurs, etc., or Indian on

<sup>17</sup>Takeshi Onimaru, "Shanghai Connection: The Construction and Collapse of the Comintern Network in East and Southeast Asia," *Southeast Asian Studies* 5, no. 1 (2016): 115–33.

<sup>18</sup>On Nehru and the LAI, see Michele Louro, *Comrades against Imperialism: Nehru, India, and Interwar Internationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018). On Hatta, see Klaas Stutje, "To Maintain an Independent Course: Inter-war Indonesian Nationalism and International Communism on a Dutch-European Stage," *Dutch Crossing* 39, no. 3 (2015): 204–20. On Messali Hadj, see Dónal Hassett, "Defining Imperial Citizenship in the Shadow of World War I: Equality and Difference in the Debates around Post-War Colonial Reform in Algeria," in Gearóid Barry, Enrico Dal Lago, and Róisín Healy, eds., *Small Nations and Colonial Peripheries in World War I* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 263–80.

<sup>19</sup>Fredrik Petersson, "Hub of the Anti-Imperialist Movement: The League against Imperialism and Berlin, 1927–1933," *Interventions* 16, no. 1 (2014): 49–71; Daniel Brückenhaus, *Policing Transnational Protest: Liberal Imperialism and the Surveillance of Anticolonialists in Europe, 1905–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), chap. 5, "The League against Imperialism Years, 1926–1933."

<sup>20</sup>Opening address given by Sukarno (Bandung, 18 April 1955), 2, [https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2001/9/5/88d3f71c-c9f9-415a-b397-b27b8581a4f5/publishable\\_en.pdf](https://www.cvce.eu/content/publication/2001/9/5/88d3f71c-c9f9-415a-b397-b27b8581a4f5/publishable_en.pdf) (accessed December 12, 2018).

the rejection of those of Kashmiris, Nagas, and so on.<sup>21</sup> This inevitability was already clear in 1919 when, to take just one example, the maps that accompanied the respective petitions of Kurds, Armenians, and Assyrians for self-determination all claimed nearly the same territory for their future state. All three claims could never be satisfied; as it happened, none were, as the Turkish, Soviet, Iraqi, and Iranian nation-building projects consumed the territories they all claimed. If empire had long luxuriated in the (often violent) elaboration and sustainment of difference, the creation of nation-states required its (often no less violent) suppression, a fact as painfully apparent in much of Europe in 1919 as it would be across Asia in the ensuing decades.

For Liang Qichao, the prominent Chinese reformer who spent 1919 on a grand tour of postwar Europe, the war was “a mediating passage that connects the past and the future.”<sup>22</sup> One hundred years later, we see 1919 in Asia and elsewhere as a historical inflection point, one which many contemporaries experienced as a moment of plasticity in which determined action could shape the course of world events. This perception instilled in them a sense of possibility, a sort of leverage on the arch of history, that, in turn, drove them to articulate and mobilize new, renewed, or reconceived political projects. The moment, it seemed, offered unprecedented possibilities for claiming political identities, mapping them onto territories, and knitting them together in a shifting array of solidarities. Yet, in retrospect it seems that the window of opportunity was smaller and less revolutionary than the more radical contemporaries had imagined; history moved more slowly, and along a narrower path, than many at the time had thought it would. Part of our challenge as historians of the century that followed remains to explain why some potential solidarities, and the spatial imaginaries attached to them, lost their momentum while others—mostly, though not exclusively, of the national-territorial type—became dominant, across Asia as elsewhere.

<sup>21</sup>On the Naga question, see Lydia Walker, “Decolonization in the 1960s: On Legitimate and Illegitimate Nationalist Claims-Making,” *Past & Present* 242, no. 1 (2019): 227–64.

<sup>22</sup>Cited in Xu, *Asia and the Great War*, *op. cit.* note 4, 227.