

Foreword: Plotting the Anticolonial Transnational

Erez Manela

The 1920s were a heady time for those fighting against imperialism. World War I had shaken the foundations of a world order based on imperial formations. Three multinational empires—the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman—lay shattered, their territories reshaped by revolutionary forces that advocated the principle of the self-determination of nations. A fourth empire, the German, was stripped of its overseas territories and reborn as a republic. And the failure of the peace treaties to fulfill the aspirations of the millions who had mobilized against imperialism in 1919 left its enemies casting about for other avenues of attack. At the same time, the Bolshevik Revolution had transformed the vast multinational domain of the Romanovs into a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The newly formed Soviet Union and the Communist International (Comintern) it led posed a sharp challenge to domestic and international orders predicated on the logic of capitalism and imperialism and dominated by Britain, France, and the United States.

The League Against Imperialism (LAI) was born in that period at the intersection of the Comintern's commitment to the promotion of world revolution, on the one hand, and the escalating resistance to empire across large swaths of Asia and Africa, on the other. In particular, Comintern officials recognized the potency of anti-imperial sentiment in the protests against foreign influence that erupted in China on May 30, 1925; in the ongoing Rif War in North Africa; and in the outbreak of the Syrian revolt against French rule in the Levant.¹ The League Against Imperialism, which emerged from a meeting convened in Brussels in 1927 by Comintern organizers, was therefore in one sense an example of the transformative impact of the Bolshevik Revolution on international society in the wake of the collapse of the Wilsonian moment.

Only a minority of those who attended the conference, however, were committed communists. At first, the LAI, following Moscow's united front policy, was willing to reconcile the class-based critique of capitalism with the claims for self-determination based on distinctions of national identity. Only months after the Brussels meeting, however, the united front began to fray, most spectacularly in the break between the Chinese

Nationalists, led by Chiang Kai-shek, and the Chinese Communist Party, a break signaled with the bloody purge of Chinese communists by Nationalist forces in Shanghai in April of 1927, only weeks after the Brussels conference adjourned.

The collapse of the Comintern's united front policy shattered the unity of the LAI. Soon after, non-communist members such as Jawaharlal Nehru, the future prime minister of India, and Muhammad Hatta, the future vice president of Indonesia, exited the fold.² As it turned out, they were the lucky ones, as some leading LAI figures who remained committed to the Comintern cause fared worse. Liao Huanxing, who was the top Chinese delegate at Brussels, and Virendranath Chattopadhyaya ("Chatto"), the Indian revolutionary who served for years as the LAI general secretary, both eventually moved to Moscow and were caught in Stalin's purges: Chatto was executed in 1937, and Liao spent nearly a decade in a Soviet prison. And Willi Münzenberg, the German communist who was the main organizer of the Brussels conference, turned against Stalin and, condemned by his former comrades, was found dead in a forest in Southeastern France in 1940.³

Still, the ideals of anti-imperialist solidarity that the LAI represented survived, echoing in myriad ways and places through the succeeding decades. The LAI, as this volume highlights, had consequential afterlives in the minds of participants and in the mythologies of anticolonial movements across Asia and Africa. In its time and long after, the LAI helped give a concrete institutional form to the increasingly transnational nature of the struggle against imperialism in the interwar years. In this period, anticolonial activists and movements were nearly always vastly outmatched by the forces that supported and sustained imperial formations. Banding together in solidarity was one strategy of survival for these fledgling movements. Even more importantly, however, anticolonial activists across the global south saw that the defeat of imperialism in their own countries and regions would require its defeat everywhere. The transition to a postcolonial arrangement in their own context would therefore have to depend upon, and accompany, a larger shift from an international order predicated on empires to one constructed around self-governing political units—often, though notably not always, conceived and articulated as self-determining nation-states.

The LAI was also pioneering in acting on the notion that imperialism involved not simply political domination but was also, primarily, economic in nature. This approach, based upon Lenin's theory that imperialism was the highest stage of capitalism, allowed, indeed called for, the inclusion

of the countries of Latin America within the anti-imperialist fold, despite their nominal political independence. Once inside the fold, however, the differences between the Latin American delegates and those from Asia and Africa quickly became apparent. Distinctions of race and class separated Latin Americans from the others, as did their preoccupation with an imperial power—the United States—of less concern during this period to most Asian and Africans, whose focus was on the European powers. Still, the tricontinentalism of the LAI set an important precedent, and served as a resonant echo, when Latin America swept back into the anti-imperialist fold in the 1960s.⁴

As the example of Latin America suggests, even as the LAI forged connections and solidarities among anti-imperialists around the world to fortify their cause, it also served as a staging ground and a premonition of their cleavages and their schisms. The most obvious and disruptive one in the context of the 1920s was the ideological divide, already mentioned, between communists and noncommunists. This was a deep and substantive schism, because it turned on the question of what the primary enemy of the anti-imperialist was. Was the primary enemy, as the Comintern saw it, capitalism, with imperialism being simply one manifestation of it? Or was the enemy the rule of one nation over another of a different region, ethnicity, or race? Put in the starkest terms, the question was this: Did class matter more, or did race?

Beyond the ideological fault line between communists and noncommunists, the history of the LAI also exposes other cleavages that have challenged projects of anticolonial (and postcolonial) solidarity in the decades since, cleavages centered on distinctions of race, religion, or region. Some anti-imperialists from Africa, like Lamine Senghor, emphasized the unique suffering of the peoples of their continent and their descendants around the world.⁵ Other delegates focused their efforts on solidarities of a pan-Arab, pan-Islamic, or pan-Asian character, some overlapping but none encompassing the full diversity of peoples languishing under imperialism. Moreover, many delegates from the colonial world viewed with skepticism the central role of European communists in organizing the conference, and they remained determined to use the forum to advance their cause while also safeguarding their own independence.⁶

Another set of cleavages reflected in the history of the LAI is related not to the identity of the primary enemy (capitalism or imperialism, class or race) nor to distinctions of race, ethnicity, region, or religion among its victims, but to the remedy for imperialism. The Bolsheviks had long advocated the principle of national self-determination as a wedge to crack

open imperial edifices, but they were perfectly ready to subordinate that principle to the pursuit of a world revolution against capitalism. Other anti-imperialists wanted to reform rather than destroy imperial structures, as in Gandhi's longtime pursuit of dominion status for India, akin to that of Canada under the British crown. Federalist ideas were also often aired, especially in the pan-African context but also in the pan-Asian one. Other alternative imaginaries to a world of "free nations" included a workers' international (proposed by trade unionists) and the liberation, sought by some pan-African activists, of the "Negro masses" wherever they may be.⁷

In the end, many *anticolonial* elites found that the surest path to making the transition to *postcolonial* elites ran through the replacement of dependent colonial formations with independent nation-states under their leadership. These states then sought to solidify their legitimacy, both domestically and internationally, through participation in international organizations designed to scaffold and reflect a world of independent nation-states. These included, firstly, the United Nations, but also numerous other, regional organizations intended at least in part to signal the sovereignty of their members.⁸ But the fixation on the sovereign nation-state as the end goal of the struggle against imperialism also circumscribed the possibilities for cooperation among its former victims, as the state imperatives sidelined calls for solidarity. Despite well-known efforts in Bandung and elsewhere, enacting solidarity that went beyond mere rhetoric proved ever more challenging in the postcolonial era.

The contributors to the present volume have given us, within a single cover, some of the best and most cutting-edge scholarship on the history of international society. For some time now, scholars of anticolonial movements and of anti-imperialism more broadly have been attuned to the significance of transnational and global perspectives on their subject. Each anticolonial struggle, of course, had its own local and regional contexts, and these are well represented in the chapters that follow. Most, if not all, struggles, however, were connected in myriad ways to transnational networks and contexts. Activists were often based outside their home territories, often in major imperial metropolises or other foreign capitals—London, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo—and embedded within networks that spanned the globe. The ideas and ideologies that shaped anticolonial struggles and the resources that supported them also circulated globally. And the anti-imperialist imagination was itself inherently global, since it viewed the problem as encompassing the entire world. The solution, therefore, had to do the same.

It may be tempting, nearly a century later, to view the LAI as little more than a failed Comintern effort to harness the rising force of anti-imperialism to its goal of world revolution, an effort that began to buckle under the weight of its own contradictions soon after launching. This view, however, is belied by the attitudes of the major colonial powers themselves, who saw the LAI, its members, and its activities as a significant threat and sought to surveil and suppress them. The LAI also amplified what were in some cases nascent projects of national liberation, involving small networks of activists based outside the territories they sought to liberate.

But more importantly, this volume shows how the story of the LAI, told here more fully than ever before, shines a light on the transformation of international order in the twentieth century, from a world of empires to a world of nation-states. It shows how some of imperialism's most committed enemies came together to fight it and, at the same time, highlights the tensions that plagued their efforts at solidarity. Moreover, the LAI was perhaps the first organization to gather a broad, transcontinental coalition around the proposition that imperialism involved not only political control but also economic domination, and that its defeat therefore required not only a new international order based on political self-determination but also one that safeguarded economic sovereignty and promoted greater equality among the peoples of the world. In this sense, not least, the iniquities that the LAI was formed to resist are still with us today.

Notes

- 1 On this last issue, see Sana Tannoury-Karam's chapter in this volume.
- 2 See Michele Louro's chapter on Nehru and Klaas Stutje's chapter on Hatta.
- 3 Liao, Chatto, and Münzenberg were central figures in LAI history and appear throughout this volume, but esp. in the chapters by Anna Belogurova, Fredrik Petersson, Michele Louro, and Carolien Stolte.
- 4 See Michael Goebel's chapter in this volume.
- 5 See David Murphy's chapter in this volume.
- 6 On this see esp. the chapters by Sana Tannoury-Karam and Dónal Hassett.
- 7 See Disha Karnad Jani's chapter in this volume.
- 8 See Jeffrey James Byrne's chapter in this volume.