Caught Between Nostalgia, Anti-Colonialism, International Communism, Transnational Networks and Radical Spaces: A Re-Assessment on the Historiography of the *League against Imperialism*

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The *League against Imperialism* (LAI) was a sympathising organisation established at the “First Congress against Colonialism and Imperialism” in Brussels on 10-14 February 1927.\(^1\) Brussels, one of the “hearts of European imperialism” in the interwar years, was used as the venue to publicly declare “National Freedom – Social Equality” in its protest against colonial oppression and imperialism, gathering 174 delegates, representing the European and Western labour movement – socialists, trade unionists, radical pacifists, intellectuals and communists – standing side-by-side with colonial delegates living either in Europe, or had arrived from the colonial and semi-colonial countries to attend the congress. However, it was Berlin that spawned the development and activities of the LAI after the Brussels Congress. Aiming to function as the hub of the anti-imperialist/colonial movement in Europe and beyond,\(^2\) the LAI International Secretariat in Berlin remained active there from 1927 to 1933, a history characterized, initially, by the euphoria created in connection with and after the Brussels Congress, which, however, shifted into despair over time. The reason for the latter was two-fold: first, the intimate ties of the LAI International Secretariat to its main supporter, the *Communist International* (Third International; Comintern, 1919 – 43), its rigid control and supervision of the LAI and somewhat detached understanding of the political realities outside

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\(^1\) The following text is based on the presentation, “The *League against Imperialism*, Anti-Colonialism, Networks & Place: The Historiography of a Communist Front Organization”, addressed by the author at the European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC) in Glasgow on April 11, 2012. The presentation was part of the panel “International Solidarity: Radical and Leftwing Networks During the Interwar Period”. The LAI was alternatively referred to by its contemporaries and in scholarly works as the *Anti-Imperialist League, League against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression, League against Imperialism and Colonialism*. However, throughout this chapter, the abbreviation LAI shall be retained as the point of reference.

of the Soviet Union. Second, the external pressures imposed upon the LAI and its sections in Berlin and across Europe.³

The LAI did not emerge as a global political actor in 1927 due to the spontaneous reactions and results of the Brussels Congress; on the contrary, it had been a meticulous process involving an array of individual and institutional actors intimately linked to the Comintern and the international communist movement. On 29 May 1926, one of the first proponents behind the idea, the Indian communist Manabendra Nath Roy, declared in a secret resolution to the Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) in Moscow the general objective for if the Comintern should support the establishment of “league against colonial atrocities or something similar”: to act as a neutral intermediary between the Comintern and nationalist movements in the colonies.⁴

For the Comintern, therefore, the primary aim with the LAI was to install and maintain a direct link for the communist movement, i.e. the Bolshevik regime and the Comintern, to the colonial and semi-colonial countries. These were countries and regions inaccessible for the communist movement to manifest its ideas and structures, a structural and administrative consequence of the prohibitive techniques implemented into practice by the French, British, Dutch colonial security services to curb the global spread of communism.⁵ Yet, the fundamental source behind the idea of organising an international congress against colonialism and imperialism in Brussels was not conceived neither by Roy nor the Comintern, it was a project shaped along Willi Münzenberg’s (1889 – 1940) vision. Münzenberg, the renowned communist of German origin and General Secretary of the mass organisation Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (Workers’ International Relief; IAH, 1921 – 35), realized already in 1925, after having launched what would become the successful proletarian solidarity campaign Hands off China campaign in Germany, the benefit for the international communist movement of trying to convene a congress in support of the colonial liberation struggle. This set in motion an active and organisational collaboration in the vein of the colonial question

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³ I have introduced a more thorough understanding on the history of the League against Imperialism, using this structural framework in my doctoral dissertation, “We Are Neither Visionaries Nor Utopian Dreamers”. Willi Münzenberg, the League against Imperialism, and the Comintern, 1925 – 1933 (Åbo Akademi University, doctoral thesis defended on 3 May 2013).
⁴ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive for Social and Political History; RGASPI) 542/1/3, 10-11, (Confidential) Letter from ECCI Secretariat (author: M. N. Roy), Moscow, to Münzenberg, Berlin, 29/5-1926.
between the IAH and the Comintern, emanating in the creation of the LAI at the Brussels Congress.⁶

Münzenberg can be described as the “spiritus rector” of the LAI, and despite this description being taken from one of the main contemporary opponents against the LAI, the secretary of the Labour and Socialist International (LSI), the Swiss socialist Friedrich Adler; it gives a fairly good picture of his relation to the LAI. However, the hidden ideological and organisational links uniting the activities of the LAI’s International Secretariat in Berlin, commonly perceived as the “global village [and] Org-Welt” of the Comintern, with its “parent”, the Comintern and its headquarters in the capital of the revolution, Moscow, has remained ambiguous and obscured until recently, explained primarily with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which was followed by the archival revolution in Russia. Yet, the global history of international communism in the inter-war years is also explained by locating the history of “Red Berlin” as an important factor to determine the development of radical spaces in a changing world I must argue.⁷

The LAI essentially aimed to function and act a “sympathising organisation” for one specific reason, in support of the colonial struggle and of facilitating an anti-imperialist platform for the anti-colonial movements. Hence, as a cover for Comintern’s objectives and its ever-changing policy in the inter-war years (Bolshevization, Stalinization, the united front, class against class, the popular front), the LAI contributed to Comintern’s vision of creating a world of communism by “building bridges” between the labour movements in the “imperialist nations” and the oppressed colonial peoples.⁸ While one may suggest that this is primarily an organisational history, however, the history of the LAI is albeit also confronted by nostalgia. This understanding of the LAI, as a structural framework, was, at first, introduced by the British socialist and secretary of the British LAI Section (1927 – 37) Reginald Bridgeman in 1937 (see further below), only to receive its conformation after Indonesia’s President Achmed Sukarno’s opening speech at the Afro – Asian Conference in Bandung, Indonesia on 17 April 1955:

[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

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⁶ Petersson (Åbo Akademi University, 2013).
⁸ RGASPI 542/1/3, 5-17, Instructions from ECCI Secretariat, Moscow, to Münzenberg, Berlin, 2/7-1926.
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.9

Known as the “Bandung moment”, the conference emphasized on the necessity to critically question the longevity of global imperial structures and colonialism, and according to Christopher J. Lee, the conference was the “rendezvous of decolonization”. In reference to the LAI, the “Bandung moment” celebrated the “culmination of a process” commenced at the Brussels Congress in 1927, Vijay Prashad states in his study of important locations linked to the history of decolonization.10

The primary aim of this chapter is to re-assess and discuss the historiography of the LAI. By doing so, this contributes to the on-going discussion on the recovery of “lost” history, i.e. as highlighted by Josephine Fowler, the gaps or silences in the historical record on questions and subjects which inescapably belongs to the global history of labour, communist and radical movements in the interwar years.11 This calls for shedding light on previous and current historiographical trends and narrative perspectives, hence, a questioning of the nostalgia which surrounds the LAI in political history and biographical works. On the other hand, the LAI is also relevant to include in the history of international communism and its development between the two world wars. This requires a division between two specific parts. On the one hand, what does the term nostalgia tell us in this context, and on the other hand, which is inseparably linked to the history of the LAI, what is the nature of a sympathising organisation established for a sole purpose, as in this case, anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism?

Nostalgia is an understanding that emphasizes “semantic vagueness, drift and ambiguity”. Nevertheless, nostalgia also put into question “the yearning for a different and previous time/place/experience”, Dennis Walder writes. Does the history of the LAI fit into

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the description outlined above? When it comes to the question of yearning for a “time/place/experience”, e.g. the prominence of Sukarno at the Bandung conference and his reference to the Brussels Congress is important to note. Considering that Sukarno never attended and witnessed the euphoria among the delegates in 1927, whilst, however, an individual of similar dignity as Sukarno was in fact in Brussels, the Indonesian nationalist and leader of the Perhimpunan Indonesia, Mohammad Hatta, the nostalgia of the LAI as it was introduced in Bandung, is a narrative given in a secondary fashion. This implies that “history is what might rescue” the legacy of the LAI and its relevance for the decolonization movements as they emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War.12

Can the same be equalled to the understanding of a sympathising organisation which had hidden organisational and ideological links to the international communist movement? This is primarily a political question; however, to begin the journey of comprehending the ideological and structural nature of the LAI, and the essential motives for why the Comintern initiated and supported its establishment in 1927, this calls for an understanding of the functionality and instrumental use of the sympathizing organisation as political and social phenomena. First we must question the erroneous description of the sympathizing organisation merely as a *front organisation*. This terminology of the sympathizing organisation was established and kept alive by the antagonists to communism prior to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, personified mainly by national governments and their security services, and the international socialist movement, especially through the *Second International* (LSI). This phraseology continued after 1945, and more or less manifested itself as a permanent term in order to approach, write and describe the different characteristics and features connected to the international communist movement. This is, above all, a historiographical tradition moulded upon the Cold War division of the world and the writing of history, embodied by the totalitarian paradigm, which epitomized the sympathizing organisations as “fronts” for Soviet foreign policy interests.13 This so-called

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13 The writings and total number of works that describe the LAI as a “front organization” is monumental. Examples that have contributed to establishing the understanding of the sympathizing communist organizations as “fronts” are William Giffies [the International Secretary of the Second International], *The Communist Solar System*, The Labour Party, London, September, 1933; Elizabeth Kirkpatrick Dilling, *The Red Network: A “Who’s Who and Handbook of Radicalism for Patriots*, Chicago, 1934. On a curious note, Dilling’s book was a
Cold War traditionalism and its perception of global and political history has, by designating the LAI only as a front for communist activities, blurred out what the organisation initially set out to be: a sympathising organisation for the anti-colonial movement, and on the other hand, an organisational instrument initiated and sponsored by the Comintern to act as an intermediary to the colonial and semi-colonial countries.

Second, the sympathising organisation should not be perceived in general terms as an organisation, i.e. as a unified and permanent constellation. On the contrary, in its advocacy of the term sympathising, the Comintern envisioned a strategy which could be deployed to circumvent suspicion and probation by governmental authorities and agencies, but foremost, to attract attention and support from circles outside of the communist movement. This leads us to the principal goal for the sympathising organisation: to extend communist influence among the masses which could be found among the epitome of the European leftwing movement: socialists, anarchists, radical pacifists and intellectuals. This idea of the sympathizing organisation was initially based upon Lenin’s belief after the Bolshevik’s had seized power in Russia 1917, and with the ensuing turbulence in Soviet Russia and the short period of War Communism, ending in 1921 and leaving the country shattered on all levels, that in order to foment the global spread of communism, this relied partly on the urgent establishment of organisations, associations and committees to amass moral and material support for the “Soviet experiment”. Lenin realized at an early stage that the communist movement, especially in connection with the formation of national communist parties (sections) in Europe and beyond, the pivotal task of constructing interactionist links between the communist party and the masses. The challenge for Lenin, and later, for the Comintern after its inception in 1919, was how to gain the attention from political, cultural and social circles outside of the communist movement, e.g. one method was to aim propaganda for a 

self-financed enterprise aiming to define the anti-communist disposition of the author vis-à-vis the American communist movement. The report by the Joint Fact-Finding Committee, supported by the Senate of the USA, Fourth Report on Un-American Activities in California: Communist Front Organizations (1948) more or less confirmed the perception of communist organizations as “fronts”, arguing that “front organizations are indispensable” to supporting and establishing “the ‘vanguard position’ of Communism and to pose as the only true friend of the ‘struggling masses’” (p.25). See also Louis Nemzer, “The Soviet Friendship Societies”, in The Public Opinion Quarterly, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1949, pp.265-284.

special cause or question in these spheres. Focusing on the Comintern’s vision and expectations on the sympathising organisation, this was essentially an organisational design which should devote itself to find contacts within the core of the left-wing movement, e.g. workers, pacifists, petit bourgeois and intellectuals. The Comintern’s lingua franca described this form of organisation as “auxiliary” (podobnyye) and “camouflage organisations” (maskiruyuschiye organizatsii), or as a “cover” (maska, skryvat’). The preferred method was finally introduced at the Sixth ECCI Plenum in Moscow (17 February – 15 March 1926) by Otto W. Kuusinen, a communist émigré from Finland and distinguished secretary within the Comintern apparatus. At the plenum, as noted in Kuusinen’s “Report of the Commission for Work among Masses”, the basic principles and aims of the “sympathizing mass organisation” was re-defined along the theory of the communist “Solar System”, which sprung from the conception of strengthening the international communist movement by creating “not only communist organisations, but other organisations as well”. The objective with these organisations, constructed around the policy of the “Solar System”, was primarily to exert communist influence over the masses in which the “sympathising mass organisations” ought to have a flexible organisational structure as possible, Kuusinen argued. Sole motif for why was to let these organisations and smaller committees revolve around the communist Party, or to be more precise: “under the influence of our Party [Comintern]”.

The academic study of the sympathy and moral support by Western intellectuals towards the Soviet Union in the inter-war years disclose the dynamics and intentions of the Soviet government and the Comintern with the sympathising organisations, e.g. Ludmila Stern and Michael David-Fox’s studies are good examples of the above. What needs to be further accentuated, as highlighted both by Stern and David-Fox, the sympathizing organisation obviously kept its ties to the Comintern concealed to the public, having the Comintern assumed the role of the silent partner/leader. What specific characteristics can be attributed to the type of sympathizing organisations erected by the Comintern for a sole purpose? First of all, they were by its nature “focus centred” organisations, including, e.g. educational and curricular activities with a focus on the study of Marxist-Leninist perception.

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of the society as a whole, or through a given political or geographical topic: war veterans’ organisations, sport associations, theatre groups, questions of gender, pacifism and anti-colonialism. This could either be organised in the shape an organisation, committee or association.

Second, the leadership of the sympathizing organisation was fundamental for the Comintern to realise the launching of such enterprises, i.e. the public portrayal of the organisation depended on the willing participation and benevolence of non-communist actors, which preferably already had a prominent position within their own political context. By accomplishing the above, which the LAI became a prolific example of after the Brussels Congress, however, the internal leadership – the real governance – included individuals carefully selected by the Comintern. Hence, whilst keeping the official figure of well-known communists as acknowledged members at a minimum, the sympathizing organisation was in reality governed by a so-called “communist fraction” (kommunistische Fraktion; kom.Fraktion). Sole purpose for why was to get the communists to supervise and control the organisational and political work. This can in turn be divided into two explanations: to ensure the inclusion of the slogan “in defence of the Soviet Union” and to highlight the undertakings of the Bolsheviks to build socialism in the Soviet Union, which in a broader context clearly was an expression of the continual Bolshevization and Stalinization of the international communist movement in the interwar years. The second explanation is of a more laconic and pragmatic nature which plausibly can be traced to every sympathizing organisation established within the communist “Solar System”. Prominent communists involved in realizing the establishment and continuation of the LAI in the aftermath of the Brussels Congress, e.g. Münzenberg and the Japanese communist Sen Katayama, declared on the necessity of making and getting the organisation to remain “steady in our hands”.

This leads us to the third and final aspect. The LAI was one of many cultural and political organisations linked to the web of sympathising communist organisations of the


Comintern, e.g. the *Friends of the Soviet Union* (established 1927), the *Anti-Fascist League* (1923), the *International Association of Revolutionary Writers* (1930) and the *Anti-War Amsterdam/Pleyel Movement* (1932). Therefore, before it is even possible to fully grasp the historiography of the LAI, it is relevant to concisely outline the chronology of the LAI and its activities.

**Pre and Post Brussels, 1925 – 1937**

The LAI was a source of concerted inspiration for the liberation movements in the colonial and semi-colonial countries in the post-war society and with onset of the Cold War division of the world in capitalism and communism. This questions foremost the postulation that the LAI exclusively functioned as a front for Soviet propaganda and covert communist activity. Yet the question of discerning between the nostalgia of the LAI, or choosing to adopt a more complex attitude towards the dynamics of the organization, opens up the discussion of trying to reach an understanding on the history of the LAI. Firstly, however, what needs to established, I must argue, is the LAI’s symbolism of introducing itself as one of the first ever global protesters against colonialism and imperialism. While some have categorized the link between anti-colonialism and communism as “fateful”, which it indeed turned out to be in the end for the LAI, it cannot be disregarded that the LAI should be seen as leading a global protest movement against colonialism and imperialism prior to the decline of imperial structures in the post-war era. Anti-colonialism, if we look at it as one of the political phenomena of the twentieth century, in the interwar years this spurred ideas and motifs for why it was necessary to mobilize and establish a movement in response to the disappointments among anti-colonial activists attending the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. As the “victorious Entente” (USA, Great Britain, France, and to some degree, Italy) turned the peace conference into a celebration of a new world order, Woodrow Wilson, the President of the USA, experienced his “moment” with the introduction of national independence and self-determination to be the solution which would guarantee eternal peace and the reconstruction of the European continent. It was nonetheless a deceitful scheme. For the Entente, it was a primary a question of degrading Germany. As a means to settle

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18 The presentation on various sympathizing organizations is given in Petersson 2013 (Åbo Akademi University), p.49.
Germany’s war repatriations, but also, limiting the global power space of Germany after the Great War, the Entente divided up within themselves the German colonial possessions, designating them as “mandates”. Anti-colonial representatives in Versailles, e.g. Ho Chi Minh, experienced therefore how the bliss of the “Wilsonian moment” evaporated in 1919, beginning to search for answers elsewhere. Consequently, the anti-colonial riots emerging in Egypt, China, and Korea in 1919 was symptomatic of the above. However disappointing the failure of Wilson and the peace conference to even touch upon the colonial question, the contributing factor to radicalize the anti-colonial movement was the establishment of the Bolshevik regime in 1917, and even more, with the formation of the world party, the Comintern in March 1919. This set in motion ideas and visions among some anti-colonial activists that the internationalism of the communist movement would answer to the hopes of liberating the world.20

To concisely outline the history of the LAI, it is suitable to adapt four perspectives: chronology, topography (space and place), actors and sources. These are all suggestions on how to constructively approach, first, and then secondly, introduce the LAI’s history in a narrative, including both its successes and failures. This involves pondering on the theoretical concept of chronotopos, a framework introduced by Russian literary scientist Michail M. Bachtin in the 1920s, and further developed in Karl Schlögel’s study Terror und Traum – Moskau 1937, i.e. the bringing together of place, time and action in a historical narrative.21

Whilst this is a concept that works well to define the chronological and structural history of the LAI, what also needs to be reassessed is Max Weber’s discussion on charisma, the authority of leader(s) and how this affects legitimating a social movement. Weber suggests that the charismatic movement(s) is represented by a powerful leader (Münzenberg), having individuals in the movement separated from each other both internally and externally, and finally, the movement (LAI) is organised through informal, communal and emotional bonds.22 Thus, this fits well into explaining the nature and content of the sources linked

22 Steven M. Buechler, Understanding Social Movements. Theories from the Classical Era to the Present, Paradigm Publishers, Boulder, 2011, p.34.
explicitly to the LAI, a point of departure which puts its focus on the actors in the history of the LAI: the individuals and institutions.\textsuperscript{23}

The history of the LAI did not begin in Brussels on 10-14 February 1927.\textsuperscript{24} The idea for the congress had been conceived already in 1925 by Münzenberg as a result of the success of the proletarian solidarity campaign \textit{Hands off China} (Hände weg China). At the onset of 1925, the IAH was struggling to position themselves within the international communist movement, but also, fought to justify its existence to the primary stakeholders, the decision-makers at Comintern’s headquarters in Moscow. Once the economic situation in Soviet Russia had stabilized itself after the tragic consequences of War Communism, especially after Lenin’s introduction of the New Economic Policy, the original purpose and aim of the IAH – to amass material and moral support for Soviet Russia – had reached its end. This called both for a transformation and broadening of IAH’s activities, hence, by 1925, the IAH included the colonial question on its agenda. The main question for Münzenberg and the IAH was though how to develop this line of activity within the general framework of the IAH. The first steps to inaugurate IAH’s colonial work were tentative, depending on political and social developments outside of Europe, and would extensively focus on propaganda and the preferred \textit{modus operandi}, which Münzenberg had begun to distinguish himself as the leading architect behind, namely, proletarian solidarity campaigns with the aim of unifying broad and disparate political camps around one common cause. While the Comintern had struggled to gain a foothold in colonial and semi-colonial countries prior to 1925, the most prolific failure being the short-lived attempt under Roy’s leadership in Paris, the \textit{International Colonial Bureau} in 1924, the IAH approached the colonial question by mixing structural themes as proletarian solidarity together with philanthropy.

The \textit{Hands off China} campaign was the first drive towards the IAH realizing its anti-colonial project. The campaign was established as a response against the violent suppression of a strike in the textile industry in Shanghai by British Concession police in Shanghai on 30 May 1925, killing thirteen individuals at a demonstration, an incident which created a wave of

\textsuperscript{23} I have consulted documents in the following archives: Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (Russian State Archive for Social and Political History; RGASPI) in Moscow; Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen der DDR im Bundesarchiv, Zentrales Parteiarchiv (SAPMO BA-ZPA) in Lichterfelde, Berlin; Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz/GStA_PK, Berlin; Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis (IISG) in Amsterdam; The National Archive (TNA) in Kew, London; Stockholm City Archive (SCA) in Stockholm; and Riksarkivet (RA) in Stockholm.

\textsuperscript{24} The remaining part of this section is a summary of my doctoral dissertation on the LAI (Åbo Akademi University, 2013).
international reaction. This action led to large-scale strikes and student disorder in China itself, a movement focusing on the social unrest, poor economic conditions and the slave-like working conditions in the Chinese textile industry. Whilst the IAH had been waiting for a reason in the first half of 1925 to initiate a campaign in China, the Shanghai incident was the answer. Throughout the summer of 1925, the Hands off China campaign progressed, and rather unexpectedly for Münzenberg, the IAH and the Comintern turned into a political success after creating strong reactions in the European socialist scene. The campaign culminated at the Herrenhaus in Berlin on 18 August when the IAH organised the Hands off China conference, gathering non-communist and communist guests, but also representatives from China who introduced Münzenberg to the idea of organising “an international congress against colonialism” in Brussels, something which Münzenberg keenly approved of and intended to develop in his negotiations with the Comintern. Hence, this was the starting point for the Brussels Congress.

What was lacking in structured order and political cogency became the main challenge for Münzenberg and the IAH to solve in order to even initiate the process of organising the international congress. However much the Hands off China campaign had indicated to Münzenberg that there resided an interest and ethos in political and cultural circles on the colonial question in Europe, the work had barely begun. Nonetheless, inspired by the success of the Hands off China campaign, Münzenberg used this as a result to mould and launch other anti-colonial committees and campaigns, e.g. the Against the Cruelties in Syria Committee (established in December 1925). Yet it was Münzenberg’s own realization on the necessity to broaden the anti-colonial agenda before even pushing ahead with the vision to organise the international congress. In January 1926, Münzenberg took stride to organisationally link together the IAH and the Comintern (the Eastern Department, after 1926, the Eastern Secretariat) to manifest the presence of a physical representative for the anti-colonial movement in Europe and beyond. Münzenberg’s pragmatism strived primarily to establish an actor which could coordinate and attract world-wide attention on the international congress against colonialism. On 10 February 1926 at the Rathauskeller in Berlin, forty six invited delegates, representing the socialist, communist, and anti-colonial movement, authorized the IAH to transform the moral and political message of former colonial campaigns into the organisation the League against Colonial Oppression (LACO), and use Berlin as the centre for its activities.
LACO’s primary purpose was to centralize the anti-colonial movement, and above all, begin the work of finding names and characters willing to give their consent to participate at the congress in Brussels. Moreover, the LACO showed Münzenberg’s intentions of wanting to locate Berlin as the hub for the anti-colonial movement in Europe. Yet what needs to be distinguished is that, at this point, Münzenberg did not envision the idea of creating “a permanent organization … against colonial atrocities or something similar”, those were the words advocated by the Comintern, and put on paper by Roy in Moscow after reviewing the results of the founding conference of the LACO.\(^\text{25}\) Münzenberg had, on the other hand, a different outlook on the primary reason for why the Comintern should support the international anti-colonial congress: to disburse and demonstrate anti-imperialist propaganda and finding recruits for communism. Throughout 1926, leading all the way to the official opening of the Brussels Congress on 10 February 1927, Münzenberg had but one vision before his eyes, the congress had to convene at any cost. This was an attitude which developed a tender relation to the decision-makers at Comintern headquarters; however, once the LACO had enrolled the support from distinguished colonial representatives (e.g. Jawaharlal Nehru, and J. T. Gumede, the South African and leader of the African National Congress), but also, the Belgian Foreign Ministry granted permission to the LACO to hold the event, the road to Brussels was open.

The “First International Congress against Colonialism and Imperialism” convened on 10 February at the medieval Palais d’Egmont, ending on 14 February. On February 13, Münzenberg delivered the conclusive speech, reflecting on this “historical moment” in the history of colonialism, summoning delegates from the “imperialist nations” in Europe and the USA together with colonial delegates, having pacifists, communists, socialists and trade union officials seated next to each other to fulfil the principal aim of the congress:

Today, on this afternoon, it was decided to establish the League against Imperialism […] The LAI […] shall invite […] organisations, parties, trade unions and individuals […] to lead the struggle against capitalism, imperialist rule, in support of national determination and national independence for every people, and for equal rights for every class and human […] From today, we are

\(^{25}\) RGASPI 495/18/425, 32-33, Resolution from the Commission of Examination on the Question of a Colonial Conference in Brussels, Moscow, 30/3-1926.
no more a loose conference, but the first international congress of the World League against Imperialism.26

This was the culmination of a process which had been initiated in 1927. Nevertheless, Münzenberg and the Comintern had not expected the Brussels Congress of becoming such a success as it did, nor to cause the widespread international attention it did. Procuring euphoria and the feeling of collective joy both among the organisers (the LACO, the IAH and the Comintern) and the attending delegates, yet once it all was comprehensible for the involved to understand, this left Münzenberg and the nerve centre of the LAI, the International Secretariat in Berlin, confounded on how to construct transnational networks and the organisational structure of the LAI, e.g. establish national sections and confirm a functional channel to Comintern headquarters in Moscow.

This was the first setback for the LAI, i.e. the slowness of the Comintern to capture and capitalize on the charisma of the LAI outside the realms of the international communist movement (national communist parties, communist mass and sympathising organisations). Yet it cannot be refuted that in 1927, the LAI was the very quintessence of a sympathising organisation, having covert (but dysfunctional) organisational links to the Comintern and the international communist movement.

Berlin and the LAI International Secretariat was the operative centre, despite a short-lived dispute between Münzenberg and the Comintern on whether to locate the International Secretariat either in Berlin or Paris. Paris was perceived by the Comintern as the colonial metropolis in Europe, however, the Comintern neglected the fact that Germany neither had any colonial possessions and that the emergent German pro-colonial movement (e.g. Vereinigung für deutsche Siedlung und Wanderung, and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Eingeborenenkunde) could be used by the LAI to advance anti-imperialist propaganda. Moreover, the LAI aimed to develop its contacts with anti-colonial activists in, for example, London, Amsterdam, Marseille and Hamburg, as vital links to spread its political message on a global scale. The most successful undertaking of the LAI was three-fold: public campaigns and to raise awareness on global political events, the conscription of anti-colonial activists to the anti-imperialist movement, and functioning as an educational centre for anti-colonial activists living in Europe from 1927 to 1933. The former accounted for the Meerut trial in

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26 RGASPI 542/1/69, 37-49, Transcript of Münzenberg’s speech, Brussels, 14/2-1927.
India and the LAI campaign (1929 – 33) in Europe, the continued effort to raise awareness on China despite the Kuomintang putsch against the communists in April 1927 via the brief operations of the *Chinese National Agency* in Berlin, and continuing, the spread of information on the situation in the colonies, and testing the political credibility of the anti-war campaign in 1932, which later resulted in the Amsterdam-Pleyel Movement (1932-33). The later became one of the first and most vociferous critics against the Nazi regime in 1933. The non-public side of the LAI is of a more shadowy character, i.e. the LAI and its International Secretariat aiming to function as the hub of the anti-imperialist movement in Europe. This is an aspect which, nevertheless, discloses the instrumental use the Comintern had with the organisation: to act as an intermediary for the Comintern to the colonies. Virendranath Chattophadyaya (more known as Chatto; 1880 – 1937), the Indian nationalist and LAI International Secretary (1928-31) at the International Secretariat, was the actor responsible of and putting into practice the idea of using the LAI as an educational centre and hub for anti-colonial activists. The primary reason was to target and establish reliable contacts/representatives of the anti-colonial community dispersed across Europe, originating from China, Japan, India, West Africa and North Africa, individuals which the LAI could make use of in their activities. One preferred method Chatto advocated was the use of curricular activity, i.e. by educating anti-colonial activists in the Marxist-Leninist conception of imperialism, the LAI was able to examine if these candidates either were useful, reliable, or suitable to undergo further education in one of the educational units of the Comintern in Moscow (e.g. the *International Lenin School*, or the *Kommunisticheskii universitet trudiashchikhsia Vostoka*; Communist University for Eastern Workers; KUTV).

The activities at the LAI International Secretariat, which then was transmitted to the national sections, was developed, formulated and sanctioned mainly through the consent of the decision-makers at the Comintern headquarters in Moscow. This involved essentially gathering intelligence on the nature of international anti-colonial movements for the simple reason of constructing and introducing the LAI as a vigorous anti-imperialist movement, but also, Comintern designed the character and content of the propaganda, and in reference to Chatto’s curricular activity, authorized and monitored this line of activity. Connected to the latter, the LAI International Secretariat functioned as the educational centre for individuals later resurfacing in the post-war era as leading figures in anti-colonial movements, e.g. India’s first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and Indonesian nationalist Mohammad Hatta, the
leader of the Indonesian nationalist movement *Perhimpunan Indonesia* in Europe, and associate with Achmed Sukarno.

Whilst the LAI commenced its activities in euphoria, fairly soon, primarily due to internal explanations, the LAI was heading towards a downward spiral throughout the rest of its existence in Berlin. This can also be described as a “disintegrative process”, according to Mustafa Haikal’s groundbreaking study of the LAI (1992).\(^{27}\) What are the observations laying the foundation for such a conclusion? The most decisive event for the LAI was the “Second International Congress against Colonialism and Imperialism” in Frankfurt am Main 21-27 July, 1929. The congress had been, in comparison to the rather chaotic and makeshift preparations for the Brussels Congress, meticulously planned from the beginning to the end in Moscow in different commissions, involving high ranking figures (e.g. Dmitri Manuilsky, Molotov, Kuusinen and Osip Piatnitsky) at Comintern headquarters. The Frankfurt Congress was enacted simultaneously as the international communist movement made its radical “turn to the left”, i.e. the manifestation of Stalin’s leadership in the Soviet Union. In theory and practice, this confirmed the Stalinization of the parties and the communist “Solar System”. This “turn to the left” celebrated the entry of the class against class policy in the Comintern, a theoretical and political framework sanctioned at the Sixth International Comintern Congress in Moscow 1928. Yet it was the Tenth ECCI Plenum on 3-19 July 1929, in Moscow, which corroborated the correctness of this new policy, according to Kuusinen:

> The united front strategy, which we used to carry out from below, we have since then no longer pursued from below, but from above. We have through our tactic a stable position among the broad working masses, [and] in the mass movements of the proletariat.\(^ {28}\)

This was a disaster for the LAI, basing its political impetus and charisma on finding contacts outside of the communist movement. The Frankfurt Congress turned into a political battle facing the communists standing on one side, and the non-communist delegates on the other side, having the former criticizing the socialists of advocating reformism and pacifism instead of revolution. Moreover, by branding some of the colonial delegates as “Gandhist followers” (the Indian delegation) or “agents of imperialism”, the Frankfurt Congress was the opposite of


\(^{28}\) RGASPI 495/168/120, 1-25, X Plenum, 16. Sitzung/nachmittags, Moscow, 13/7-1929.
the Brussels Congress. In the aftermath of the congress, a majority of leading non-communist members in the LAI Executive Committee, addressed by the LAI as “prominente Persönlichkeiten”, voluntarily resigned from their post, e.g. Nehru, Edo Fimmen and Hatta. The Honorary President, Albert Einstein, also left after experiencing the attitude of the LAI on the Arab question as anti-Semitic, while the Chairman, the British socialist and leader of the Independent Labour Party, James Maxton, was expelled by the members of the British LAI Section. The dilemma facing the LAI, having to adapt itself to Stalinization and the class against class doctrine, amplified by the indifference from the communist parties in Europe to provide support, was explained by one of the secretaries at the LAI International Secretariat, the Czechoslovakian communist Bohumil Smeral, at a meeting with the Political Commission in Moscow on 13 September 1930. Smeral argued that it was unfortunate for the LAI that the inauguration of the organisation had coincided with the peak of the “second period” [the united front], conceding therefore that it was not logical and “wrong to apply the policy [the third period; class against class] of today to the former”. Caught in the void between the second and third periods, the very idea of turning the organisation into “a progressive” political actor had been thrown into question, Smeral concluded.

Internal factors brought the LAI down on its knees; however, the pressure of the political development in Germany contributed to, and verified the definite end of the LAI International Secretariat in Berlin in 1933. For a majority of the actors involved in the LAI, the causality of internal and external factors contributed to their tragic end, e.g. Chatto was summoned to Moscow in 1931, deprived of his position as LAI International Secretary, and in 1937, executed in Moscow. After Hitler and the Nazi Party (NSDAP) assumed power after the Reichstag election on 30 January 1933, this foreboded the end of German communism, an end which literally came with the Reichstag Fire on the night of 27 February. However, in February, preparations had already been set in motion to secure a safe transfer of the LAI International Secretariat to Paris, a place which would function as a haven for the émigrés of the German communist movement. Yet after the move of the International Secretariat to Paris, Münzenberg realized that it was not possible to resurrect the activities of the LAI, recommending the decision-makers at the headquarters of the Comintern to remove him as General Secretary, and transfer the International Secretariat to London. In August 1933,

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Piatnitsky approved of Münzenberg’s request, authorizing the British socialist and secretary of the British LAI Section, Reginald Bridgeman, to assume responsibility of the LAI International Secretariat in London. Yet the organisation Bridgeman inherited was not comparable to former glories, conceding that the LAI had to be rebuilt from bottom to the top. The LAI maintained in existence in London 1933-37, whereupon Bridgeman took the initiative to dissolve the organisation under rather undramatic forms, replacing it with the socialist Colonial Information Bureau. This also marked the beginning of the nostalgia of the LAI, leaving Bridgeman to reflect on the heritage left in the wake of the LAI:

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 organisation’, and activate the working class organisations and peace societies,…

Bridgeman’s reflection is illustrative and conclusive of the history of the LAI. The question is: how has the LAI been interpreted in previous research?

**Previous Research and the Interpretations**

The Comintern and the message and practices of international communism in the interwar years are progressively turning into a field covered in a multitude of academic studies. This is particularly characteristic of research conducted after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, however, this was also a question immensely covered during the Cold War. Yet what can be agreed upon is that the consequences of the political and demographical change in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, particularly with the literal disintegration of state communism in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1989, and the later, the Soviet Union in 1991, forced the opening of closed and secret archives in Berlin and Moscow. This made it possible to conduct research and produce critical (re-)assessments on the structural and ideological implications of communism as a political, social, economic and cultural

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phenomena in the twentieth century. Every gap in the historical record of the Comintern remains yet to be covered, however, with the first critical investigation on the structure and activities of the LAI, as introduced in my doctoral dissertation “We Are Neither Visionaries Nor Utopian Dreamers”. Willi Münzenberg, the League against Imperialism, and the Comintern, 1925 – 1933 (2013), this has contributed to cover one of these gaps. Further, this study has also challenged the predominantly erroneous and misconceived historiography of the LAI, or as highlighted in Peter Martin’s concise conclusion: “the interest in this organization has, for a long time, been at a low ebb”. 

Previous research results on the LAI are essentially restricted by limitations and possibilities, cursory generalizations, or for that matter, biased conceptions. In 1993, John D. Hargreaves illustrated the possibilities, after having consulted some documents located in the LAI fond [collection] in the Comintern Archive in Moscow (RGASPI), stating that access to Russian archives “greatly enhanced possibilities for research” on anti-colonial movements and the LAI. Hargreaves reflection more or less fulfilled John Saville’s prophecy from 1984, which lamented on the basic prerequisites needed to conduct a “comprehensive evaluation” on the LAI and its ties to anti-colonialism: gaining access to the archives in the Soviet Union. Yet in 2008, Jonathan Derrick concluded that the challenge still remained untouched, emphasizing that with the “closer study of episodes, themes or individuals” on interwar anti-colonial activism and organizations, the history of the LAI would finally establish itself in this history.

Mustafa Haikal’s chapter on the LAI in the groundbreaking anthology Aufstieg und Zerfall der Komintern (1992), represents, nonetheless, a distinctive point of departure in the study of the LAI. This was the first critical assessment on the LAI, based on documents from the Comintern Archive in Moscow, having Haikal’s pioneering effort disclose patterns of disintegration and introducing the first cursory chronology of the LAI. In 1995, Haikal

continued to re-define his observations on the LAI in the anthology *Willi Münzenberg: ein deutscher Kommunist im Spannungsfeld zwischen Stalinismus und Antifaschismus* (1995), a chapter that focused on Münzenberg’s pivotal role in the organisation.  

Haikal’s understanding of the LAI is illustrative of having belonged to, first, and then departing from the East German historiographical tradition of “politics of biography” after the collapse of communism. This way of writing history was endorsed and sanctioned in the East German academia in the 1960s solely for the reason to produce the history of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*. Haikal shared this academic tradition with Hans Piazza, the acting editor of the anthology *Die Liga gegen Imperialismus und für nationale Unabhängigkeit* (1987), published to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the LAI, issued by the History Department at *Karl-Marx-Universität* in Leipzig. Piazza concluded in the foreword that “the history and actuality of a little-known anti-colonial world organization” remained to be told, yet what could be conceded at this stage was that the LAI was “motivated by the desire” to end “barbaric colonial rule and act in solidarity against imperialism”, an undertaking although characterized by “varying consequences”. As noted above, Haikal and Piazza continued to develop their research on the LAI after 1991; however, the significant difference was that they now had access to the documents in Moscow. In Piazza’s chapter “The Anti-Imperialist League and the Chinese Revolution” (2002), he conceded that “the documents … shed new light on the history of the AIL [LAI], which has enabled me to revise my previous view of the subject”.  

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international communism, therefore, is the key, i.e. this makes the history of the LAI inescapably a part of the history of the Comintern.

The above makes it therefore necessary to introduce former and current theoretical approaches used by scholars to interpret the Comintern’s structural dynamics, e.g. the centre and periphery model, the Cold War tradition of the totalitarian perspective, a framework which came under confrontation by the 1960s revisionist school. The later was further developed prior to, and after the fall of communism, in comparative and prosopographical approaches. Currently the study of the Comintern is a topic, according to the definition introduced by Alexander Vatlin in 2009, which includes “legends and myths” in document editions, academic assessments, dissertations and on the Internet. We can nonetheless trace this back even to when the Comintern was in existence. Franz Borkenau, the German communist who turned towards anti-communism, published one of the first critical assessments on the Comintern, The Communist International (1938). Despite Borkenau’s study being somewhat dated and biased, it introduced one of the structural themes in the study of the Comintern: the world party was a “puzzling phenomenon” which depended on “the firm hopes of the communists”.

The LAI is also a puzzling phenomenon; however, this calls for structuring viable approaches to even begin the journey of assessing how the LAI has been interpreted. A constructive departure is to discuss the vast corpus of biographical literature and memoirs, which either focus on, or include individuals that had some connections to the LAI. This critical examination unfolds nonetheless that a majority of these works has produced an erroneous understanding of the LAI. Focusing on Münzenberg’s prominent position in the LAI, both as the instigator and developer of the anti-colonial project, his persona is at the centre of attention in Babette Gross biography Willi Münzenberg. Eine politische Biographie


37 Vatlin 2009, p.9.

Further, the convenience of Gross to write Münzenberg’s biography was particularly fitting considering that she also was Münzenberg’s fiancée and confidential relation throughout his career in the Comintern and after. This can also be stated of Gross sister, Margarete Buber-Neumann’s two books on the Comintern and European communism, *Von Potsdam – Nach Moskau* (1957) and *Kriegsschauplätze der Weltrevolution* (1967), where she outline from a personal perspective her experiences of the German communist movement and the Comintern. Despite Gross and Buber-Neumann’s cursory narrative of the LAI, they still represent captivating illustrations on the LAI, having the former stand as some kind of political testament on Münzenberg, and the later provides with an intriguing insight into the world of communism in the interwar years.  

Gary L. Ulmen’s detailed biography of German sinologist Karl August Wittfogel in *The Science of Society* (1978) is well worth to include in this discussion. Wittfogel was at an early stage involved in shaping the public agenda of the LAI in 1927, especially the Chinese question, and Ulmen’s appraisal of Wittfogel tells of the ideological and organisational difficulties which emerged in the LAI and at the International Secretariat in Berlin. However promising George Padmore’s book *Pan-Africanism or Communism* (1956) may seem in his description of the LAI, the Pan-Africanist visionary and one-time communist activist during his tenure in Germany and Moscow in the 1920s and the first years of the 1930s, gives a diluted understanding on the intentions of the German communist movement to capitalise on the colonial question in the 1920s, yet, Padmore concedes that Münzenberg had a central role in realizing the LAI as a political and organisational project.

Biographical works which focus on Münzenberg life and career in the European communist movement contributes and continues to build on the established misconceptions of

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40 Gary L. Ulmen, *The Science of Society. Toward an Understanding of the Life and Work of Karl August Wittfogel*, Mouton Publishers, The Hague, 1978, pp.80-85, 103-105. Wittfogel was at first responsible for the curricular activity and colonial courses which the LAI International Secretariat organized in Berlin and Frankfurt am Main, acting also as leader of the German LAI branch in Frankfurt am Main, and finally, as editor of the LAI organ, *The Anti-Imperialist Review*.

the LAI. Two books typical of the above are Stephen Koch’s sensationalist study *Double Lives* (1994) and Sean McMeekin’s academic attempt in *The Red Millionaire* (2003). Koch portrays the LAI erroneously. The reason for why is his lack of proper source criticism, hence, Koch produces a brusque categorisation of the LAI as an “instrument for propaganda, sabotage, and espionage”, ignoring to discuss why he has reached this conclusion. McMeekin’s biography is essentially a remake of Gross “political biography” of Münzenberg, but also, he strongly opposes Koch’s “careless polemic” and “dramatic claims” on Münzenberg’s life and political career. Yet McMeekin’s analysis is burdened by its prejudice on Münzenberg as a person and character, selling the idea that Münzenberg was an unabashed, calculated and stern believer who promoted communism only to fulfil his own needs by embezzling vast amounts of money from the Bolsheviks in Moscow. In McMeekin’s depiction of the LAI, one gets the (wrongful) understanding, based on a misreading of Gross, that the organisation was dissolved when the theoretical organ of the LAI, *The Anti-Imperialist Review*, momentarily had to cease its publication in 1929. What is even more baffling, and considering the fact that Koch and McMeekin has used and analyzed documents in the Comintern Archive in Moscow, the misconceptions produced in these accounts leave more questions than answers.

Nirode K. Barooah’s biography *Chatto: The Life and Times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe* (2004) is therefore, in juxtaposition to Koch and McMeekin, a refreshing contribution to the history of the LAI. Chatto’s life and career in the LAI, first, as a national revolutionary promoting Indian independence, using the prominence of acting as LAI International Secretary (1928-31), and then, as a communist, is approached and carefully examined by Barooah. This makes Barooah’s contributions into one of few which shed some new light into the activities of the LAI and the struggle to establish international anti-imperialist activism. The research presented in Barooah’s biography is momentous, an archival journey which stretches over thirty years. While the findings and conclusions in

42 Stephen Koch, *Double Lives: Stalin, Willi Münzenberg and the Seduction of the Intellectuals*, Harper Collins, London, 1995, p.64; Sean McMeekin, *The Red Millionaire. A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow’s Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2003, p. 208, 310 (see footnote 3), 348 (see footnote 15). The most astonishing remark is how McMeekin resemble Münzenberg and the Comintern with the “world’s most formidable terrorist organizations” of today, that is, “Islamic terrorists” (p.307). This is not only a bold suggestion; it is a comparison that gives lip service to speculations. Criticism against both Koch and McMeekin’s portrayal of Münzenberg can be found in Michael Scammel’s article in *New York Review of Books* (3/11-2005, pp.32-35), and Tania Schlie’s review of Koch’s book in *Die Zeit* (Nr.8, 1994, 18/4-1994).
Barooah cannot be refuted, however, some parts of the narrative include ambiguous and vague discussions on relevant events in the history of the LAI. The reasons for why is that Barooah, in some cases, depended on secondary sources. Thomas Kampen’s introduce a similar understanding of individuals active in the LAI in the article, “Solidarität und Propaganda: Willi Münzenberg, die Internationale Arbeiterhilfe und China” (2004). Kampen focus on the life of Hansin Liau, a Chinese communist and functionary at the International Secretariat, a person that epitomized the characteristics of an anti-imperialist activist at the Brussels Congress, and afterwards, appointed by Münzenberg to lead the short-lived propaganda experiment, the Chinese National Agency in Berlin in 1927. Münzenberg and the IAH are also given a central role, which, according to Kampen, functioned as the centre to initiate and consolidate Chinese proletarian solidarity campaigns in Germany in the 1920s. The LAI was, of course, a part of this, yet Kampen also recognize that the LAI served the purpose of engaging anti-colonial activists, and providing them with organisational and political experience.

The LAI attempted through its existence to install active and vigorous sections in the “imperialist countries”, e.g. across Europe and in the USA. The national sections were administered by the LAI International Secretariat in Berlin, existing at least on paper, and performed some kind of activism. Are there any studies on the national sections of the LAI? First of all, the lacuna on the sections are descriptive of the remote understanding on the international ambitions of the LAI, however, some examples diverge from the above. In Barbara Bush’s study of resistance movements against British imperialism in Africa gives a brief introduction on the activities and political nature of the LAI section in Great Britain and the members, e.g. Bridgeman, the communist and Member of British Parliament Shapurji Saklatvala, the socialists James Maxton and Ellen Wilkinson, and Vicar Conrad Noel. Yet it is in Jean Jones (1996) and Kate O’Malley’s (2003) studies, the central narratives on the LAI

43 Virendranath Chattophadyaya (Chatto) acted as “International Secretary” in the LAI from 1928 to 1931; he was executed in Moscow 1937. Nirode K. Barooah, Chatto. The Life and Times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, pp.246-282. See also Jawaharlal Nehru’s own account of the LAI in Jawaharlal Nehru, An Autobiography with musings on recent events in India (first edition: 1936), The Bodley Head, London (1953). For a thorough biography on Nehru, which includes a shorter passage on Nehru’s contacts with the LAI and Chatto, see Benjamin Zachariah, Nehru, Routledge, London (2004).

in Great Britain and Ireland can be found insofar. The LAI also had an active national section in Weimar Germany, an actor deeply involved in protesting against the pro-colonial movement as it emerged in the country in the aftermath of the degrading peace settlement in 1919. The German LAI Section did however only continue what its forerunner had initiated, i.e. the LACO tried to connect itself with the German pacifist and anti-war movements in 1926. The connection between anti-imperialism and pacifism is further discussed in Susanne Heyn’s in “Der kolonialkritische Diskurs der Weimarer Friedensbewegung zwischen Antikolonialismus und Kulturmission” (2005). Similar exposés are found; for example, in Henrick Stahr’s study of German journalism and how the themes “Exotismus und Rassismus” was used to explain the colonies in Germany in the interwar years, while Joachim Nöhre assess in his dissertation the nature of the pro-colonial movement in Weimar Germany. The former is a good example of a discursive analysis on the public campaigns initiated by the IAH to broadcast a political and social attitude towards the Negro question. However, to begin understanding the geographical extent of the LAI, this would require a comparative evaluation and analysis of its activities on a global scale.

The LAI aimed from the beginning to function as a political arena and platform for critical discussions on colonialism and imperialism. Therefore is it essential to highlight the political nature of the LAI, a statement which suggest (or imply) that the history of the LAI is political history. Connected to the above are also the social and cultural dimensions of anti-imperialism in the interwar years, i.e. the transnational networks of the LAI to anti-colonial


47 I have interpreted the following process in my doctoral dissertation as the gathering of “every visionary and utopian dreamer” on a global scale, i.e. the undertakings to establish active LAI sections in Germany, Great Britain, India, the Netherlands, the USA and Latin America in the initial phase of the LAI in 1927, see pp.161-187 (Åbo Akademi University 2013). The connections of the LAI in France and its section in Paris will be analysed by me in the article “La Ligue contre l’impérialisme et le movement anticolonial en France, 1927-1933”, part of the theme “La gauche française et la question coloniale dans l’entre-deux-guerres” in the French journal *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire.*
movements, which indicate that the LAI deserve to be included in the subaltern understanding of colonial oppression.48

The LAI is a topic, as introduced above, included to some extent in regional and national studies on anti-imperialist movements in an “imperialist” context (the LAI sections). The subaltern approach may also contribute to discern how the LAI functioned as a source of inspiration to mobilize anti-colonial movements, a proposition which broaden the study from merely understanding the LAI as a disburser of Bolshevik propaganda and supporter of Soviet foreign policy. The research on Pan-Africanism and the African nationalist movements is a good example of the above, which focus on the study of the “Black Belt” movement in the USA, and the Negro liberation movement in Europe, research that introduces the understanding of the LAI as a moral supporter of Negro liberation movements, and of functioning as a link to the international communist movement. This framework emerged in Imanuel Geiss groundbreaking study, *Panafrikanismus* (1968), which showed that the anti-imperialism of the LAI and the message espoused by the communist movement contributed to consolidate the struggle against colonialism in Africa, but also, this represented an ideological alternative to the Pan-Africanism advocated in the distinguished writings of W. E. B. du Bois and Marcus Garvey. J. Ayodele Langley continued to build on Geiss framework, discerning new ideological and organisational patterns in the history of Pan-Africanism and African nationalism, and how the LAI functioned as a central actor to develop this political discourse. Yet it was with the archival revolution in Russia in 1992 scholars finally were able to revise and critically evaluate the political and organisational nature between international communism, African nationalism, the LAI and other pivotal anti-imperialist organisations, e.g. the *International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers*’ (ITUCNW, 1930) and the *Ligue de Défense de la Race Négre* (League for the Defence of the Negro Race; LDRN, 1927). This is an undertaking carried out by Hakim Adi, Robbie Aitken, Mark Salomon, and the research project “Comintern and African Nationalism, 1921-1935”, initiated at Åbo Akademi University by Holger Weiss. The research have procured a vast sum of studies since

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the 1990s, illustrating the links between the LAI and European communism to black radical movements in an European, African and transatlantic context.\(^{49}\)

The research on the history of nationalist independence movements in the colonies in the interwar years are intertwined with the study of international communism. These evaluations are related to a wide variety of national topics, e.g. the growth of the communist movement in India. This contextual framework mentions the LAI as a contributing factor for the development of anti-imperialist rhetoric’s in India, but also, its role as a connective source to coordinate and educate anti-colonial activists in Europe. Whilst Barooah’s study of Chatto is central to the above, however, other studies also contribute in establishing a deeper understanding on the dynamics of the LAI in India. For example, Hans-Bernd Zöllner’s doctoral dissertation on the Burmese nationalist movement makes the connection with the LAI’s engagement to support Jawaharlal Nehru’s political journey, an understanding Nehru introduced in his *An Autobiography* (1936), which was later confirmed in Sarvepalli Gopal’s momentous biographical work *Jawaharlal Nehru. A Biography Volume One 1889-1947* (1975).\(^{50}\) It is nevertheless through the subaltern interpretation of Sobhanalal Datta Gupta in *Comintern and the Destiny of Communism in India 1919-1943* (2006) a more nuanced picture of the activities of the LAI in India emerge. Gupta’s analysis illustrates the understanding of the LAI, as it is portrayed despite the archival revolution in Russia, i.e. the organisation is commonly interpreted as an enigma in the history of anti-colonialism and international communism. Milton Israel’s assessment on the Indian nationalist propaganda network in

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Communications and power (1994) unveils, however, a deeper understanding on the dynamics of the LAI, focusing on its instrumental purpose, meaning, to develop techniques of communications between the LAI International Secretariat in Berlin with Indian activists and organisations in India.\textsuperscript{51} The method Israel has adopted to interpret the LAI corresponds to the idea of putting the LAI as a vital actor in the global history of anti-colonialism, which is a framework introduced in the late Josephine Fowler’s study of Japanese and Chinese immigrants organizing in international communist movements (2007). Fowler’s analysis is shrewd from the standpoint that she managed to define and put the LAI in a migratory, multilingual and transnational context, implying that the LAI functioned as a source of inspiration for the anti-colonial movement already during its momentum as an organisation.\textsuperscript{52}

**Questioning Nostalgia**

This chapter has aimed to introduce distinctions on how the LAI has been interpreted in previous research found in either academic studies or within the biographical vein. However ambitious this may seem, this has also made it essential to outline the chronology of the LAI, i.e. what did the LAI represent, why was the organisation established, and what kind of heritage did the LAI leave after its dissolution in 1937? Therefore, and connected to the comprehensive aim of this chapter: why is it necessary to make the distinction if the history of the LAI is a part of either the annals of the history of the Comintern, or if the LAI is intertwined with the historiography on decolonization and the post-colonial critique? Illustrative of the dilemma such a proposition introduces, one has to return to basic problem, i.e. how has the LAI been interpreted, and what kind of sources has been used to do so? The archival revolution in Russia and in Germany have for sure made it possible, and logical I must suggest, to revise and re-assess the dynamics of the communist “Solar System” in the interwar years. The LAI was inescapably a part of this system, posing and introducing itself as sympathising organisation, working and existing in the interest of the colonial liberation struggle. Thus, the revised historical understanding of the LAI is a result solemnly due to the


\textsuperscript{52} Fowler 2007, pp.1-14.
archival work conducted by Haikal, Martin, Piazza and others, efforts which, I must argue, manifest a much more nuanced picture on the dynamics and instrumental use of the LAI in the context of international communism, anti-colonialism, and its heritage and meaning for the liberation movements as they emerged in the post-war era, culminating at the *Afro – Asian Conference* in Bandung, 1955.

This is not to say that the methods and theories adopted and advocated in the postcolonial critique, i.e. the subaltern interpretation of Empire as the global determinant, is of secondary value. On the contrary, interpretations on the LAI found in Robert JC Young’s *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Vijay Prashad’s *The Darker Nations*, or Christopher J. Lee’s *Making a World after Empire*, represent relevant contributions to the study of the LAI and the anti-imperialist movement of the interwar years. Yet there remain gaps in the postcolonial perception on the fundamental structural and political landscapes of interwar anti-colonialism. The otherwise discerning *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature* (2012) is illustrative of the above. The “Chronology”, which outline both historical and political events together with literary and cultural events, ignores mentioning the Brussels Congress in 1927, while the Bandung conference is located in its proper context. However negligent this may seem, yet, in the presentation of literary and cultural events in 1927, one finds the Puerto Rican author and anti-colonial activist José Vasconcelos book *The Cosmic Race*.53 Why is this fallacy necessary to emphasize? First of all, Vasconcelos contributed to the work of amassing support for the realisation of the Brussels Congress in 1926, appointed as member the “Provisional Committee of the International Congress against Colonial Oppression”, a committee organised by the LACO in September 1926. This group was introduced as the official organisers of the congress and comprised: Mme Sun Yat-sen; Nehru; the Egyptian Mohamed Hafiz Ramadan Bey; Ramon de Negri from Mexico; the German scholar Theodor Lessing; the German Alfons Goldschmidt (who lived in Mexico); Münzenberg; the French authors Henri Barbusse and Fernand Buisson; Albert Fournier; the British socialist George Lansbury; the leader of the *Independent Labour Party* (ILP) James Maxton; Saklatvala; the scholar and representative of the *National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People* (NAACP) William Pickens; the pacifist and leader of the *American Civil Liberties Union* Roger Baldwin; and Vasconcelos associates

in the *Nationalist Party of Puerto Rico* Manuel Ugarte, Louis Casabona and César Falcon.\(^5^4\)

This “Provisional Committee” mirrors the disparate political and cultural characters involved in the anti-colonial movement prior to the Brussels Congress. Secondly, this shows on the necessity and difficulties to establish a *historie totale* of anti-colonial history.

To seriously question the nostalgia of the LAI, a constructive approach would be to continue discussing theoretical and methodological frameworks to reach a genuine understanding of the LAI as a sympathising organisation. While this has been the *leitmotif* for my doctoral dissertation on the LAI, however, this is also an idea that challenges the traditional and persisting view of national communism as a way to define the history of communism in the twentieth century. This chapter is another step in challenging this historiography. By offering a generalisation on the research results discussed above, it is fairly logical to conclude that the history of the LAI is located in the global history of international communism, radical labour movements and anti-colonialism in the interwar years.

It would be like taking a shortcut to conclude that the previous research on the LAI is characterized as scarce; however, this shows on the necessity to cover this gap in the “lost” history. Hence, recent research results as mentioned above, including my doctoral dissertation on the LAI, have taken a decisive step towards this direction of enriching the historical record on the most influential sympathising organisations of the interwar years, an organisation which spurred nostalgic references for leading proponents within the colonial liberation movements after the Second World War. The LAI is a political history, I must argue, while the narratives on the LAI in biographical works and memoirs persist on a different and more personal level. However, these works also contribute to portray the LAI for what it really was: a complex and unique entity in the international communist movement. When the LAI was mentioned in terms of nostalgia, as it was fermented in Sukarno’s speech in Bandung 1955, the LAI quickly earned the role of a political symbol for the decolonization movement, while at the same time; this contributed to ignoring its role and history within international

communism. With the archival revolution in Russia and Germany, the moment arrived to challenge this nostalgia, and adopt a more complex attitude towards the LAI. This has, for sure, strengthened the position of the LAI in the global history of international communism and radical movements.