

The Revolt of the Oppressed World: British Internationalism from Meerut to the League against Imperialism

On our platform in Hyde Park we must remember that three English comrades are among the thirty-one prisoners of British Imperialism now awaiting trial in Meerut in India. These British and Indian comrades are threatened with twenty years' imprisonment in barbarous conditions, for no more heinous a crime than that of openly and legally organising workers and peasants in India ... Let May Day be a pledge of our determination to rid the world of Imperialism, breeder of war, poverty and pestilence.

Shapurji Saklatvala, May Day speech in Hyde Park, 1929

On the morning of 20 March 1929, the young British journalist and labour organizer Lester Hutchinson was disturbed twice: the first time, as usual, by his tiresome milkman, and then by 'a posse of armed police headed by a European inspector and an Anglo-Indian sergeant in occupation of my front garden'.¹ Hutchinson, who would shortly become editor of the left-wing journal the *New Spark*, after the Indian editor of its predecessor, *The Spark*, was arrested that day, only had his house searched that morning – an experience he described as a rather romantic one; he too would be arrested a few months later. But, that same morning, no fewer than thirty-one labour activists were detained and imprisoned across half a dozen towns in British India, as the Warwickshire Regiment spread out all over Bombay – where the majority resided – to avert any trouble. They included twenty-nine Indians and two Britons, Philip Spratt and Ben Bradley. All were transferred to a jurisdiction none of them resided in, and twenty-four of them had never even been to: the cantonment town of Meerut, which would lend its name to the most infamous colonial 'conspiracy case' of the time. Charged under Section 121A of the Indian Penal Code with conspiring to 'deprive the King of the sovereignty of British India', the detainees would controversially be refused bail and subjected to trial without jury.² In addition, Section 121A carried a proviso whereby no actual illegal act had to take place in order for a conspiracy charge to be levied.³

The arrests had been in planning for several months, as a rattled imperial government assessed the threat of the Soviet Union to the British Empire and attempted to stem intensifying waves of labour unrest and increased violence by groups such as the Hindustan Republican Association (modelled on the IRA). Early in 1929, protesting the Public Safety Act and the Trades Disputes Bill, the association's Bhagat Singh and two accomplices threw

bombs onto the floor of the Indian Legislative Assembly; he would be caught and hanged, becoming a *shaheed*, or martyr.⁴ The Public Safety Act would have also prevented foreign communists from coming to India and working there with Indian labour organizers. Part of a wave of colonial repression, the arrests of the Meerut defendants also took place – not by accident – as the government braced for the release of the Fawcett Report, commissioned in the wake of the Bombay General Strike of 1928, which was expected to be unfavourable to worker demands, and therefore to generate more militancy and strikes. As Saklatvala had been warning in his parliamentary speeches, ‘reforms’ as a response to genteel petitioning were no longer going to staunch the colonial wound. Indeed, a note to senior government officials, sent in June 1927, warned that among ‘the lower classes in India’, both in town and rural areas, post-war inflation had ‘induced a feeling of restlessness, making them discontented with conditions which previously they bore patiently’.⁵ In turn, repressive legislation which had been put in place to pre-empt and punish resistance was routinely invoked – and wound up producing the long-running international drama that became the Meerut Trials, described by one prisoner as ‘a war of attrition, a trial of endurance’.⁶ Their aim was to staunch the spread of communism in India – certainly a major contributing factor to the strikes in the textile mills; the Girni Kamgar Union for millworkers was a hugely successful communist-led endeavour, and the Millowners’ Association had petitioned the British government ‘to rid them of the nuisance’.⁷

News of the arrests spread immediately, and the ensuing protests encompassed work stoppages in fourteen Bombay textile mills, public meetings, demonstrations, and processions which resulted in clashes with the police. Many Indian leaders – eight of the accused also held posts in the Indian National Congress – spoke up immediately against the arrests, arguing quite rightly that the real motive of the colonial government was to kill the labour movement at an early stage, and so obstruct the growing momentum towards full independence.⁸ Rather than attempt to make the case for the existence of an actual conspiracy, in his lengthy opening statement prosecutor Langford James notoriously dwelt on the dangers of the Russian Revolution, Soviet politics, the perniciousness of communism, and the manifold problems with Marxism, using his readings of various general left-wing texts as ‘evidence’ against the accused. James averred that these were relevant to those in the dock because their object was ‘to replace the Government of His Majesty King George in India, and in its place to put the Government of the Third Communist International’.⁹ Irrespective of whether Bolshevism was ‘a cruel and tyrannous autocracy’ or ‘a paradise on earth’, James claimed: ‘The hard fact still remains that if Bolshevism and that system is to be introduced into India the government of His Majesty must as a preliminary be smashed in pieces. There is no room for both of them’.¹⁰ The incompatibility between capitalism and communism – on which the defendants agreed with the prosecution – was in itself deemed to prove ‘conspiracy’ on the part of the accused, who criticized capitalism. Partly to drive a wedge between the defendants and the mainstream nationalist movement, James would later insist that his problem was with ‘perpetual revolution’ and not with ‘a national revolution’. The defendants, he pointed out with alacrity, were in fact deeply critical of the ‘leaders of Nationalist thought in India’, and ‘stigmatised’ the Indian National Congress ‘as a misguided

bourgeois body'.¹¹ The first half of his speech took great pains to insist that 'there is no question of their being nationalists'; the professed internationalism of the defendants was, in effect, anti-nationalism.¹² As the Bolsheviks he deemed them to be, they shared certain characteristics: 'You do not love your country, you are anti-country, you are anti-God, and you are anti-family.'¹³ Meanwhile, the magistrate, R. Milner-White, argued that those nationalists who sought to petition the king through the 'usual civil channels' to 'give independence to India' were not, unlike the defendants, in breach of Section 121A, which only punished those who would forcibly deprive the monarch of sovereignty.¹⁴ Mendicancy was acceptable; even imagining alternative possibilities, on the other hand, was punishable. Most Indian nationalists were not, however, fooled, or easily available for sowing dissension on this basis – at least not immediately. Gandhi – no communist sympathizer and himself the frequent subject of communist criticism – was prompted to note that the 'farce of a trial' had exposed the British colonial government's 'red claws which usually remain under cover'.¹⁵ Nehru, who would become involved in the international Meerut campaign, observed trenchantly: 'this cry of communism is meant to cover a multitude of sins of the Government'.¹⁶ Hutchinson noted that serious riots broke out, and that 'the peasants became restive and began to demand the initiation of a movement for refusing to pay rents and taxes, a movement that would have changed the whole basis of Indian nationalism'.¹⁷

What had perhaps not been anticipated, however, was the scale of the negative reaction to the trials in Britain itself over the course of a case that lasted four years – one defendant, D. R. Thengdi, even dying in jail over that needlessly protracted period. (The accused endured especially uncomfortable conditions, including nine hours of manual labour a day.) The Meerut episode served to amplify and embody the two points that Saklatvala had repeatedly been making in and out of parliament: that there was serious resistance to the Raj, and that it was being crushed on a regular basis. It therefore provided the first major interwar colonial flashpoint around which efforts to mobilize criticism of empire more widely in Britain were undertaken – criticism based on solidarity with protests rather than on paternalism. It was also, of course, a test case for international anticolonial alliances in more than one sense. With three Britons among those targeted by the prosecution, the dragnet of state persecution had been deliberately thrown around 'those who linked India with a wider world and with solidarities beyond the boundaries of India or the British Empire'.¹⁸ The dogged judicial persecution of the Meerut defendants also constituted, of course, official recognition that anticolonial networks were spreading beyond the boundaries of specific colonies. With the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party often, though not always, on board, the League against Imperialism (LAI) and the Meerut Defence Committee organized hundreds of public meetings and demonstrations. Saklatvala spoke at many of these, using the occasion – as the defendants also did – to stage 'a form of political theater'.¹⁹ If the Meerut Conspiracy Case was an attack on left-wing internationalism from the perspective of the state, it paradoxically provided internationalists with a real opportunity to organize and proselytize in the cause of making cross-border alliances against imperialism. In that sense, the Meerut Defence Committee and allied activities mark an important moment in the history both of British anticolonialism and of internationalism more broadly. In more systematic and illustrative

ways than in the past, perhaps, it allowed for the case to be made that what happened to British subjects in the colonies – punishment for ordinary activities like trade unionism and demands for labour rights – could boomerang, and have equally sinister consequences at home. This chapter explores one significant episode in the internationalizing of British anticolonialism – that of the global defence campaign for the Meerut prisoners – and an important institution in the history of internationalism – the League against Imperialism – which participated in the Meerut campaign. Both were part of the ongoing unlearning of paternalism as an anticolonial disposition in favour of constructing working solidarities.

In parliament, questions about the length of the trial, its unsound basis, and the treatment of prisoners were routinely raised by many MPs, including Fenner Brockway, Joseph Kenworthy, Philip Oliver, Peter Freeman, David Kirkwood and John Kinley. Some suggested that it was the labour movement as a whole that was being attacked in the name of fighting global communism.²⁰ Certainly, as Hutchinson – whose mother, Mary Knight, a British communist, campaigned vigorously on behalf of the prisoners – noted with satisfaction, ‘statesmen in foreign countries made sarcastic comments on British justice in theory and in practice ... and the much-vaunted traditions of British justice were shown to be hollow and public opinion was alarmed’.²¹ The Independent Labour Party also voiced bitter parliamentary criticism of the trials through Brockway, while condemnatory statements were issued by a diverse range of public figures. As Harold Laski would note in his preface to Hutchinson’s memoir, the Meerut prosecution pointed to the continuity of imperialist repression across party lines, since ‘the responsibility for undertaking it lies at the door of a Tory viceroy, that for its continuance ... to a Socialist Secretary of State’, with the greater moral culpability upon the latter for betrayal of principles.²² Protest resolutions flooded the India Office, particularly once the draconian sentences – years of imprisonment and transportation for most of the defendants – were announced in January 1933. The *Daily Herald* described the trial process itself as ‘one of the greatest judicial scandals in the history of the Empire’, while the *Manchester Guardian*, though typically scornful of the far-left politics of the defendants themselves, noted the tenuous nature of the evidence presented for the existence of a conspiracy, and deemed the affair ‘a long-drawn scandal of British justice in India’.²³ Even as it deprecated the fact that this extended ‘unpleasant episode in the history of British justice’ was ‘giving Communism an unexampled advertisement’, it was, the liberal newspaper also opined, ‘an evil thing to prosecute men for their opinions’ – or to be seen to be doing so.²⁴ A critical statement calling for justice for the prisoners was issued by a joint council representing the Trades Union Congress, the Labour Party and the Parliamentary Labour Party.²⁵ Indeed, the pressure of British public opinion – particularly after the sentences ‘raised a storm of protest’ in both India and Britain – did eventually lead to the sentences being reduced considerably.²⁶ As one historian of the episode has remarked, the Meerut Conspiracy Case has no parallel in Indian history; given the relative anonymity of the defendants, ‘the extraordinary amount of international attention which the case received puts it into a special category of historical significance’.²⁷ Meerut, much like the Scottsboro case of a few years before, and through overlapping activist circuits, ‘became a global passion among the committed, the presence of three Englishmen among the defendants eliciting

special curiosity and sympathy among anticolonialists in the metropole'.²⁸

The moment of Meerut also takes on significance as yet another colonial juridical crisis – arguably the first in the twentieth century – which provided a means for the voices of anticolonial resistance, this time also inflected by international communism and communist internationalism, to be heard in the British public sphere. Developments in travel and communication technologies enabled both the swift dissemination of news and propaganda and actual communication links between metropolitan and colonial activists. The letter in the *Manchester Guardian* co-signed by H. G. Wells, Harold Laski, R. H. Tawney and Walter Walsh had urged that the prisoners be given the 'elementary rights of British citizens on trial', such as bail and trial by jury, and, equally significantly, suggested that the views of 'the leaders of Indian political opinion', calling for amnesty, be heeded.²⁹ Such views – and the more militant ones of other sections of the Indian political spectrum – were, indeed, registering on the British political scene. In producing its pamphlets, the Meerut campaign deliberately used the Meerut prisoners' individual testimonies, less perhaps to 'humanize' the defendants through eliciting sympathy, as Pennybacker argues, than to allow for more radical anticolonial voices in India to emerge in the British public sphere on their own terms, making claims upon human solidarity.³⁰ The articulate and defiant statements of the Meerut accused became central to the British Meerut Defence Committee as voices that could and would represent themselves. These were voices and views that also resisted cooptation by the more acceptable face of nationalism speciously lauded by the Meerut prosecutors. As Gandhi toured England during the Second Round Table talks in 1931, to considerable adulation in liberal circles, voices from Meerut also made clear that politics in India went beyond the remit of Gandhian nationalism, and that other questions were being asked, not just of the colonial government, but also of the Indian capitalists, landlords, upper castes and political elites. Once again, it became clear that the colonized, a heterogeneous group, were in fact capable of representing themselves robustly in more than one sense.

One of the more audacious such acts of self-representation was that undertaken by Shaukat Usmani, the journalist (he edited an Urdu working-class paper) and trade unionist who, from his jail cell in Meerut, contested British elections twice as a candidate for the Communist Party of Great Britain – once in Spenn Valley in 1929 against John Simon himself, and once in St Pancras in 1931 (where he won 75,000 votes). Like Saklatvala, Usmani sought to make himself a presence in the British public sphere with the help of the CPGB, drawing attention to both British misrule in India and the injustices of the Meerut case. Sharp and cogent, Usmani's statement, an explicit defence of communism, was the first extracted and included in a section called 'The Prisoners' Reply' in *The Meerut Prisoners and the Charge against Them*, a pamphlet published by the Defence Committee that carried extensive extracts from the prisoners' defence statements.³¹ His electrifying inaugural gesture queried the very terms of the charge of attempting to undermine the 'sovereignty' of the king-emperor:

There is nothing like a sovereign under the sovereignty of capitalism. The sovereignty of the British Empire to-day belongs to the omnipotent Big Five (Banks), who not only forge methods of exploitation in India but are as ruthless in Britain, too. The British working class, which is our ally, is as much their victim as the Colonial peoples.³²

If there was any ‘conspiracy’, Usmani averred, it was that instigated by finance capital ‘against the rising forces of revolution throughout the colonial world’, which included those in China, Indonesia, Iraq, Syria and Morocco.³³ Dharni Goswami, a member of the Workers and Peasants Party (WPP), was another of the Meerut accused who evinced a remarkable defiance of tone in his defence statement.³⁴ He had become a member of the party, he notes, almost scornfully, for self-evident reasons: ‘the WPP is the only party in India that stands for complete independence from British Imperialism and the thorough democratisation of India based on economic and social emancipation and political freedom of men and women’.³⁵ Goswami’s experience as an organizer with jute workers gave him unique insight into an industry that had begun as a heavily colonial enterprise, but now saw Indian capitalists also ‘appropriate the huge profit that comes out of this industry’, at the expense of the sweated and the starving.³⁶ While refusing to distance himself from the work he himself had done, for instance, in organizing a Scavengers Union, Goswami pointed out that collective resistance also had been undertaken independently of him and other labour organizers, when its members went on strike without waiting for a formal decision. This was one instance among many of the oppressed castes undertaking resistance independently of both Gandhi and the Communist Party, which was itself heavily populated by members of the dominant castes, like Goswami himself.³⁷ His point was partly that the resistance was organic and self-sustaining even in the face of constant repression and punitive action; he and other communists only sought to give it organizational form.

One of the most striking aspects of the Meerut detainees’ statements is the combination of their willingness to criticize both imperialism and the limits of the mainstream nationalist response to it. While the language of Marxism explicitly facilitates and anchors such analysis, one defendant noted that it was the experience of being a colonial subject that had led him to Marxism, rather than the other way around. ‘It was my studies and experiences and the objective conditions in a colonial country that made me a Communist by conviction’, insisted Gopal Chandra Basah of the Bengal Textile Union, a youth organizer, ‘and I am sure that any radical young man given the same chances and conditions would develop similarly’.³⁸ In other words, in the context of imperialism’s constitutive entanglement with capitalism, Marxism and communism provided a common global language in which both the identification of oppressive structures and liberation from them could be articulated. Another organizer in the jute industry, R. R. Mitra, announced that he saw no contradiction in claiming to be at once an internationalist and a nationalist, the latter as a necessary vehicle of anticolonialism: ‘As an internationalist I stand for a free federation of all the peoples of the earth, but that cannot be achieved unless all are freed from the yoke of subjection and all stand on a free and equal footing.’³⁹ The point of the conspiracy charges, Mitra averred quite rightly, was not so much to remove thirty-one individuals from the field of action as ‘reading a lesson to all who would follow the line of the mass revolutionary struggle in future’.⁴⁰ His point was further fleshed out by Gopendra Chakravarty, an official of the East India Railway Union, who noted that the conspiracy case mounted by the British government of India was also a warning shot across the bow of the bourgeois nationalists about ‘the dangers of appealing to the masses, owing to the risk it involved of letting loose the class struggle’.⁴¹

‘Red Scares’, he observed shrewdly, had already shown their electoral utility in Britain. Meanwhile, Gautam Adhikari, a scientist by training, in fierce words that would be repeatedly cited in pamphlets, quite simply turned the charges against the imperial government, boldly accusing the prosecution benches of representing class crimes:

Who are the social criminals? I ask the bloodthirsty imperialists who carried fire and sword through entire continents, who have instituted a colonial régime of blood and terror, who have reduced the toiling millions of these continents to abject poverty, intolerable slavery and are threatening them with mass extinction as a people; or the Communists, who are out to mobilise the revolutionary energies of the toiling masses of the whole world and hurl it against this wretched system based on ruthless oppression and brutal exploitation, smash it and create in its place a new one ... ?⁴²

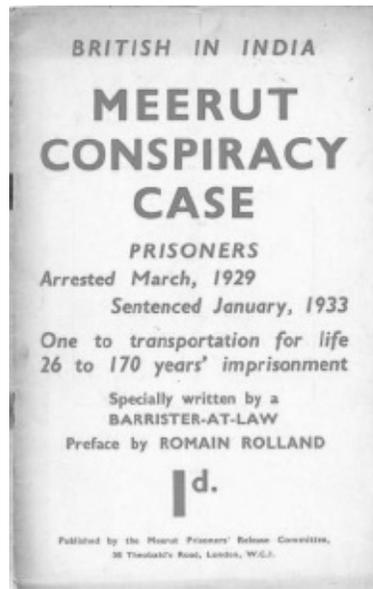
Such analysis – and the repeated insistence that the enemy was British finance-capital rather than the British people – enabled the Meerut campaign in Britain to make connections between an apparent crisis of Britishness and Britain’s own traditions of vernacular radicalism. It was a point, as we have seen, that Saklatvala had repeatedly emphasized in trying to forge common cause between British and Indian labour. ‘The complaint is essentially that of “incitement of antagonism between capital and labour,” a phrase carrying us back to the old anti-combination laws in Britain 100 years ago’, the preface to *The Meerut Prisoners and the Charge against Them* pointed out, again stressing that the attack was a more general one against all anti-capitalist organizing.⁴³

Picking up on these connections, in *Meerut*, a Workers Theatre Movement play that toured Britain in 1932, the players-as-prisoners warn their audience: ‘Those who have jailed the workers in India are the men who cut your wages and enforce the Means Test in Britain.’⁴⁴ The play itself is perhaps, like much agitprop, more powerful in the performance than read, taking the form of a mass declamation. What is striking in the directions for actors is the emphasis on voice as the vehicle for expressing solidarity, also symbolized by extended ‘hands across the sea’: ‘Inflection of the voice is most important.’⁴⁵ The guidelines are, perhaps somewhat predictably, gendered, the emphasis on muscularity: ‘Pretty girlish voices must be cut right out, but a strong feminine voice vibrating with the conviction of the message can be just as effective as a masculine one.’⁴⁶ The directions are specific as to when whispers, staccatos, mass speaking, contrasts, inflections and crescendos are to be deployed. ‘This sketch offers most unusual opportunities for voice-acting’, the directions note, going on to suggest: ‘Get the utmost out of words – these and your faces are your only means of expression.’⁴⁷ Of the play itself, which began with the shout, ‘Murder! Murder! MURDER! MURDER!’, one actor recalled: ‘At the time, it was quite the most exciting bit of theatre I had ever seen and, looking back over the fifty years that have slipped by since then, I find it still has the power to move and excite me.’⁴⁸ With a handful of actors using ‘poles’ dexterously – vertically and horizontally – to represent prison bars, the play also relied on powerful visuals. The attempt was to offer a swift education in ideologies of colonial rule and labour exploitation: ‘They foster our religious differences in order to divide us, so that they can extract their millions yearly in profits and taxation ... They tell you we are religious maniacs.’ In a sign of the official jitters occasioned by the Meerut protests in Britain, performances of the play, which lasted only five or six minutes, often commanded a strong

police presence, and some were proscribed entirely.

The most powerful words on Meerut from the camp of Western critics of imperialism eventually came from the pen of French antifascist writer and Gandhi's biographer Romain Rolland, who wrote a short polemic for the British Meerut campaign after draconian jail and transportation sentences were announced for the majority of the Meerut convicts in 1932.⁴⁹ For Rolland, who was clearly influenced by the Meerut testimonies, the moment had universal import; the protests around the Meerut trials and sentences presented a challenge to those who 'renounce the struggle in advance' by contenting themselves with 'the miserable excuse for not acting, that what is has always been and that one cannot change it'.⁵⁰ While oppression may always have been a feature of human life, the last half-century had also been unique in the 'degree of deliberate organisation' with which nine-tenths of humanity was being crushed by the 'imperialism of money': 'Menaced by the trembling of the capitalist economy, which in its difficulties plunges to madly destructive courses, shaken by the revolts which to-day like earthquakes stir the enslaved peoples, this hideous oppression manifests itself yet more brutally, employing to an extent and with a rigour unexampled, the most monstrous means ... By terror it was established and is maintained.'⁵¹

If British India offered an exemplar of most 'gigantic proportions', the phenomenon Rolland described extended well beyond it and Britain to the Dutch Indies and French Indochina – and that was not counting Italian, Belgian, Portuguese and US imperialism, not to mention the instances of South Africa, South America and Japan. What had changed with Meerut? As long as the oppressed responded to exploitation 'only by intermittent and piecemeal spasms of revolt', coercion was able to prevail 'swiftly and noiselessly'.⁵² Gandhi's large-scale organization of the masses saw the colonial system begin 'to lose all measure of restraint', but it was reassured nonetheless by the way in which 'the genius of one man' was able to hold back the wave.⁵³ But with the moment of Meerut, in which the rebellion of labour exceeded the 'magnanimous opposition' of those like Gandhi, Rolland contended, a 'new era has opened in the revolt of the oppressed world', met of course by repression, 'immediate and implacable'.⁵⁴ Rolland's analysis here, startling in some ways coming from so well-known a partisan of Gandhi, was explicitly inflected by that of prominent Meerut prisoner R. S. Nimbkar, whom he cites on the English brand of liberalism, as 'not only powerless to repair the verdict' but 'incapable of conceiving either the illegal proceedings which have become current or the exceptional laws which the imperialist terrorism of Great Britain applies to six-sevenths of the people of its Empire, to one-sixth of the population of the world'.⁵⁵



Cover of Romain Rolland's pamphlet for the Meerut case

Ultimately, Rolland pronounces, the Meerut Conspiracy Case – not least because of the fierce attacks on it by the accused – had ended up becoming ‘the trial of the system of government which has passed judgement on them’.⁵⁶ Meerut was also a call to British workers to stop being passive accomplices in the oppression of Indian workers:

They are for us the living symbol of those thousands of victims in the great combat which to-day is being fought throughout the world to break the yoke of imperialism. All those victims make a victory, for they bear witness to the iniquity which is crushing them, and to the irresistible rising of the new revolutionary forces which are awakening mankind.⁵⁷

In the end, the Meerut Conspiracy Case, with its protracted unfolding, volumes of testimony, and draconian sentences followed by commutation, resulted not in the extinguishing of either protest or communism in India, but a greater surge in both, ‘a sudden revival of interest and activity’, as one police report in 1934 put it.⁵⁸ It certainly provided both a national and an international platform for the articulation of anticolonial views – which was openly used as such by the defendants.⁵⁹ ‘What had been intended as propaganda against communism’, observed Hutchinson, ‘had turned into propaganda for communism’, the government of India not playing the role of saviour it had hoped for, but rather ‘unexpectedly [finding] itself actually playing the part of the villain of the piece amid hisses and boos of the audience’.⁶⁰ Whether it made clear to a British public the truth that ‘the whole of Asia was seething with revolt’, the Meerut case clearly brought home the fact of imperialism being challenged, as the prisoners’ general statement put it, ‘from the dock’.⁶¹

Like Saklatvala, many of those involved in the Meerut Conspiracy Case were deeply influenced by the seismic impact of the October Revolution in 1917; the testimonies of the Meerut accused make clear how compelling it was to find a language of emancipation that both enabled a critique of empire and offered a vision for restructuring decolonizing societies in radically egalitarian ways. We also know that communists in Britain brought to ‘metropolitan anti-imperialism a level of commitment, intellectual consideration and

organisation that it had usually lacked, even if this fell considerably short of the task and their own ambition'.⁶² British communists like Bradley and Spratt, among the Meerut accused, were less successful as organizers in India faced with a political terrain of enormous and shifting complexity, a radically unfamiliar social order in which the agrarian was key, and a repressive colonial administration.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to situate the moment of Meerut in relation to the specifically communist idea of a revolutionary international alliance against both capitalism and imperialism. It was an idea that caught on, laden with the 'contagion' dreamed of by Ernest Jones and denounced by the Meerut prosecutors, exercising enormous power and imaginative reach not always fully realized in organizational efforts. Founded in March 1919 with the aim of fomenting world revolution, the Comintern, before it fell into notorious disarray, 'was a significant force in inter-war politics, able to command the loyalty of millions of militants and sympathisers'.⁶³ The aim, as Lenin put it, was 'a repetition, on an international scale, of what has taken place in our country'.⁶⁴ The First Congress of the Peoples of the East, held in 1920 in Baku, brought together representatives of Asian communist parties with Soviet leaders; acknowledging the upsurge of anticolonial struggles across Asia, it would assert the need for 'united action against British imperialism'.⁶⁵ As has been noted by others, the 'unprincipled zigzags of Soviet and Comintern policy' (see [Chapter 9](#)) should not entail a wider forgetting of the latter's many accomplishments before it was disbanded.⁶⁶ Even when it took the form of dissent and disagreement, anticolonialism in the interwar period was ineluctably shaped by dialogues, real and imagined, with communist internationalism. At the Comintern's Second Congress in 1922, Lenin and M. N. Roy famously debated colonialism, resulting in the 'Theses on the National and Colonial Questions', which incorporated the latter's 'Supplementary Theses' as amendments.⁶⁷ Roy succeeded in enshrining the analysis that the fight against colonialism was key to 'the downfall of the capitalist order in Europe' not least because the 'super-profits' from colonialism enabled the 'labour aristocracy' in the metropole to be given concessions.⁶⁸ In essence, then, the Comintern committed to extending its field of activity through alliances with 'revolutionary liberation movements' in the colonies while keeping in view the need to organize peasants and workers 'in common revolutionary struggle to overthrow the landowners and bourgeoisie'. Although Lenin's theses were modified by Roy so that the Comintern was urged to support 'revolutionary movements of liberation' rather than 'bourgeois-democratic liberation movements', in practice, uncertainties and differences on this question would emerge periodically.

In trying to contain the implications of the Meerut case, colonial officials frequently described events in terms of machinations of Western communists causing trouble where there would otherwise have been none.⁶⁹ In fact, it was often the other way around, as Hutchinson's lively and witty memoir attests:

I had come to India five years before full of romantic illusions and a novice in the game of life. I had lost these illusions, but had gained many things in their stead. I had been caught in a wild current of conflicting forces and had managed to keep my head above water; I had been given the opportunity to study India from a new angle; and I had shared the misfortunes and slavery of a great people. And all my experiences are the grim realities of the everyday life of a vast and oppressed population ... Experience provides a certain cure, and as we learn by experience to face

and even to appreciate realities, the further we are away from the self-deception of romanticism. I was leaving India definitely cured.⁷⁰

One of the insights that Hutchinson, the son of communists who was not himself a party member, had gleaned from witnessing both resistance and repression in various contexts was that imperialism had perforce to use different tactics in Britain and India, even though the 'same oligarchy' ran both countries: 'But this oligarchy employs methods in India, which it does not dare employ as yet in Britain'.⁷¹ The latter elicited greater open brutality, 'white terror', because of what was at stake: 'A single spark in India may cause a conflagration which might well be the end of Imperialism altogether'.⁷² With the Meerut Conspiracy Case, the oligarchy's ways had been exposed in India, where it was forced to make use not just of fraud and deception, as it did in Britain, but also of 'the Iron First of open terrorism'.⁷³ Given that young men were in jail 'for doing nothing more than holding opinions distasteful to the Executive', asks Hutchinson, in what respects did 'the legislation of British Imperialism differ from that of Fascist Terrorism in Italy?' His answer is bald: 'In no respect.'⁷⁴

British communists like Robin Page Arnot were among those who observed that the severity of the Meerut sentences had more than a little to do with the fact that the activities and beliefs of the defendants betokened a degree of class-political solidarity between empire and metropole, breaching a racial cleavage that usually benefited colonial rule. Arnot, clearly drawing on Roy's Supplementary Theses, also noted in his essay on the Meerut sentences that the Indian working classes, being themselves the 'source of super-profits', could not be 'bribed as were sections of the English working class in the later nineteenth century by crumbs from the rich man's banquet'.⁷⁵ In some sense, the Indian working classes, as an organized force, were thus British imperialism's 'deadliest enemy'.⁷⁶ Arnot was scathing about those elements of the British trade union movement who, he claimed, 'would not raise a finger to release the men who were organising trade unions in India'.⁷⁷ He may have been making a point that was familiar not least from Saklatvala's parliamentary speeches, but it was one on which the Meerut campaign based its call for solidarity:

Not only is it true that a nation that oppresses another cannot itself be free; but the same Imperialist class that is oppressing India, is oppressing and robbing the workers of this country by wagecuts and speed-up, tariffs and taxes, is taking the bread out of the mouths of the workers' children, depriving them of the benefits of education, insurance and all other social services, and casting into gaol Tom Mann or any other leader of working-class revolt. The railwaymen facing a wage-cut, the busmen on strike against speed-up, the Lancashire workers suffering under the Midland Agreement, are fighting the same class that would deny the Indian workers the right to organise.⁷⁸

This is perhaps the real significance of the Meerut controversy as it played out in Britain. Pointing to Englishmen and Indians standing in the dock together and all articulating vehement critiques of both capitalism and imperialism, it was possible, as Arnot did, to call time on 'the jingo picture of "black men" versus "white men," of "Asiatics against Europeans" ' which worked in favour of the powerful who peddled it.⁷⁹ This would, as it turned out, be no simple matter in the face of tenacious cleavages. But attempts would be made from this point on to organize across racial and national boundaries, and it is to one such attempt that I now turn.

‘A parliament of mankind’: The League against Imperialism

It was attended by delegates from all over the world, who comprised a sticky conglomeration of Hindoo students and intellectuals, American ‘parlour’ Bolsheviks, Chinese Nationalist Generals, British Socialists and Communists, discontented French bourgeois, German professors, coloured agitators from all parts of Africa, and Mexican and South American nationalists.

John Baker White, president of the anti-socialist Economic League, in a letter to the *Morning Post*

While I was in Berlin, I came into contact with the Head Office of the League Against Imperialism. I did not, as the Prosecution allege, do any work for the League nor was I a member of it. I was merely there as a sympathetic observer, because I realised that the League Against Imperialism – which, by the way, is not a Communist body – was doing splendid work on behalf of the oppressed millions in the colonial and semi-colonial countries.

Lester Hutchinson, *Meerut*, 1929–1932

The end of the Meerut trials, and the handing down of ‘savage sentences of transportation’ for what were essentially thought crimes deemed a ‘conspiracy’, had the effect of disquieting more than a few in the mainstream of British politics and opinion-making.⁸⁰ For some on the British left, however, it came as bitter vindication of an analysis they had been advocating for some time. The Communist Party of Great Britain’s organ, the *Daily Worker*, opined that, while the punishment of hurling the convicted into ‘living death’ by transportation to a penal island was clearly intended to squash the ongoing labour unrest, it had generated a ‘wave of indignation’ among British workers that would lead to a sense of common struggle.⁸¹ Whether or not that was the case, the unease around the Meerut sentences certainly enabled the case for joining the cause to be made more widely in Britain. One of the organizations most active in campaigning for the Meerut prisoners was the British Section of a recently formed international organization known as the League against Imperialism (LAI), which had published the pamphlets discussed in the previous chapter. In an interview with the *Daily Worker*, Reginald Bridgeman, who was one of the LAI’s principal organizers in Britain and who in 1922 spent some time in India, where he would have witnessed labour unrest, explained that the LAI in Britain would, in its campaigning work on behalf of the Meerut prisoners, ‘couple the arrest of the leaders of the unemployed in Britain with the conviction of the workers and peasants on India’.⁸² He wrote to the German communist Willi Münzenberg, who promised ‘a large campaign ... in support of the arrested in Europe while London would be the centre for campaigning’.⁸³ Sunday 19 April 1931 was designated ‘Meerut Day’. Demonstrations were organized across Britain, and money raised for the Prisoner Relief Fund; a demonstration was also made in the House of Commons on 4 May 1931, from which one demonstrator was ejected.⁸⁴ Questions were prepared for the House of Commons, and MPs associated with the LAI, including Fenner Brockway, posed them from the floor.⁸⁵

A member of the Labour Party who would be expelled from it in 1930 for working with the LAI – though he would later rejoin – Bridgeman had fought tenaciously, if unsuccessfully, to get the party’s rank and file to oppose the Labour government’s complicity in the Meerut prosecution as vigorously as they might oppose Labour ‘effecting national economies at the expense of the unemployed’.⁸⁶ ‘The British people’, Bridgeman wrote in an open letter to party members, ‘were given to understand that the régime of brutal exploitation

of the colonial peoples would cease with the assumption of office by a Labour Government in 1929'; in fact, repression, with 'the buckshot, the batonings and the deliberate destruction of food and private property', had worsened.⁸⁷ Throughout the Meerut campaign, Bridgeman addressed meetings, lobbied the influential, wrote frequent letters in the press, and collected material support for the prisoners.



The League against Imperialism canvassing at Trafalgar Square in London in August 1931

We do not know very much about Reginald Francis Orlando Bridgeman, or what led to his conversion to passionate and lifelong anticolonialism. The grandson of an aristocrat, with aristocratic cousins who were high-level Tory politicians, Bridgeman, like Wilfrid Blunt (with whom he also apparently shared sartorial panache – 'the greatest dandy in Europe', sniffed the *Evening Standard*, which also described him as 'Byronesque'), started off as a diplomat, and conducted his career on traditional lines, becoming known as a 'glutton for work'.⁸⁸ According to John Saville, the author of Bridgeman's entry in the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, while it is unclear what brought about his conversion to left-wing socialism, the change appears to have taken place between 1919 and 1922 – a period which saw him posted in the British embassy in Tehran and visiting India, Muscat, Bahrain, Kuwait and Iraq.⁸⁹ During this period, in the heady wake of the 1917 October Revolution, Bridgeman, already drawn to socialism during his time in Vienna, maintained friendly relations with the Russians, much to the disapproval of his Foreign Office superiors. Recalled from Tehran, Bridgeman was retired on 1 July 1923. Getting involved in local Labour politics, and later standing unsuccessfully as a parliamentary candidate for Uxbridge, Bridgeman (who had been a Gold Staff Officer at the Coronation of George V in 1911) excited a certain amount of interest in the British press not least because of his aristocratic political family connections; his cousin, Viscount Bridgeman of Leigh, was a dedicated empire man serving as personal secretary to the secretary for the colonies, Lord Knutsford. Much was made of Bridgeman's personal style – 'His tastes are decidedly aesthetic',

pronounced the *Star*, while the *Daily Record* and *Daily Mail* claimed that he wore red gloves as a political signifier.⁹⁰ Bridgeman also engaged with Chinese affairs through the London Trades Council and the Chinese Information Bureau, which investigated working-class conditions in East Asia. While never himself a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, and emphatic, as were many others, that the LAI was not affiliated to them, Bridgeman did not tend to voice public criticism of the Comintern or the CPGB, though he did occasionally challenge officials on specific strategies. Bridgeman's activities around Meerut were quite clearly the most impactful of his career with the LAI, while later on he would become a vigorous critic of Zionism and an advocate of justice for the Palestinian Arabs; he would be re-admitted to the Labour Party after the LAI folded in 1937.

Any engagement with Britain and anticolonialism must necessarily pause on the LAI, a relatively short-lived but symbolically important formation which signalled, in one sense, the formal institution of a collective politics of solidarity between European (including British) and colonial critics of empire, as well as between various anticolonial movements.⁹¹ Bridgeman's writings and notes, now preserved at the University of Hull, make clear that he had come to understand anticolonialism as a shared enterprise with the common interests of both colonial and metropolitan people at its heart, rather than one of philanthropic humanitarianism. (Bridgeman's personal copy of Stafford Cripps's *Empire*, issued by the India League, underlines with a question mark the phrase 'whereby a true trusteeship of such colonial territories is carried out during their minority'.)⁹² He would also write to Labour MPs like Philip Noel-Baker expressing concerns that the party was supporting the implementation of the Mandatory system in India and Burma without the consent of those who would be subject to it.⁹³ Both personally and in his capacity as secretary to the British Section of the league, he would attempt to disseminate such anticolonial insights more widely. Bridgeman himself gave a prodigious number of talks on a variety of topics, including empire and anticolonialism, in forums as diverse as the St Clements Political and Social Council, the Marx Memorial Library, the St Michael Men's Discussion Group ('The Empire – Whose Responsibility?'), the Association of Engineering and Shipbuilding Draughtsmen, the St Albans Labour Party, the Hendon Central Women's Co-operative Guild and the 4th Harrow Rover Crew.⁹⁴ The recognition that the principle of 'tutelage' had to be erased on the left as much as in the mainstream was also articulated by Clemens Dutt, the British communist who had been active in the Meerut campaign and was a member of the LAI. Dutt vociferously criticized the Labour and Socialist Second International's own reformist paternalism: 'A large section of the colonial peoples are not considered to have "reached the standard" for self-government, they are not fit to be free and they must be educated and led for their benefit by the kindly tutelage of the superior civilising imperialist power.'⁹⁵ As resistance was met by 'bloody repression, hangings, shootings and air-bombings' in places such as Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Samoa and New Guinea, it was possible to assess 'what an invaluable experience in imperialist tutelage their inhabitants are receiving'.⁹⁶

Tutelage, of course, had been enshrined as a core principle in Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations:

To those colonies and territories which as a consequence of the late war have ceased to be under the sovereignty of the States which formerly governed them and which are inhabited by peoples not yet able to stand by themselves under the strenuous conditions of the modern world, there should be applied the principle that the well-being and development of such peoples form a sacred trust of civilisation and that securities for the performance of this trust should be embodied in this Covenant. The best method of giving practical effect to this principle is that the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility, and who are willing to accept it, and that this tutelage should be exercised by them as Mandatories on behalf of the League.⁹⁷

The League against Imperialism, in name and in conception, offered itself as a conscious counterpoint to the League of Nations and its complicity in revitalized structures of post-war imperialism – in particular through the Mandates system that gave various European ‘mandatory powers’ continued control of overseas territories without the appearance of direct annexation.⁹⁸ Colonialism, in other words, was made more legitimate and ‘humane’ for the twentieth century, or, as Bridgeman described the Mandatory system, ‘an imperialist system exercised collectively ... without any previous consultation of the opinion of the mandated people’.⁹⁹ As one LAI document described it, the word ‘mandates’ was arrived at because ‘the Great War had been fought by the Allies on specific pledges against all annexations’.¹⁰⁰ The pretence now was that ‘the “trustees” [were] seeking only the welfare of backward peoples’. Whatever purpose the Mandates system served, ‘extending the right of national self-determination was not one of them’, Susan Pedersen observes, and, as a result, populations placed under it ‘responded by resisting its imposition’.¹⁰¹ If the Mandates system was ‘the site and stake of a great international argument over imperialism’s claims’, as Pedersen has it, the LAI sought to become the terrain on which anticolonialism would coalesce and challenge those claims.¹⁰² In the years to come, both tutelage and the idea that it could underpin a more gently paternal and ‘humane’ form of colonial rule would be fiercely challenged both within the colonies and by exilic intellectuals in imperial metropolises, with self-emancipation placed at the ideological centre. The LAI and its offshoots can be seen as a preliminary attempt to make an international anticolonial field of sorts; within it, the colonized did not just ‘stand by themselves’, but seized the initiative.

The league itself had been initiated by a German communist by the name of Willi Münzenberg, along with the peripatetic Indian communist Virendranath Chattopadhyaya (‘Chatto’), initially as the ‘League against Colonial Oppression’ (Liga gegen koloniale Unterdrückung). The actual organization of the first conference in the Palais Egmont, Brussels, which took place on 10–15 February 1927, involved the efforts of a vast number of individuals and organizations belonging to the broader left, including, from Britain, the Labour Party, the CPGB, the Workers Welfare League and the ILP. A truly astonishing range of politicians, intellectuals and campaigners from the colonial world also attended the conference, including, most famously, Jawaharlal Nehru (India), Lamine Senghor (Senegal), James La Guma (South Africa), Sukarno (Indonesia) and Diego Rivera (Mexico). The league’s own statistics recorded nearly 200 delegates representing 134 organizations from thirty-seven countries. To give just a small sampling, affiliated organizations included the San Francisco–based revolutionary Hindustan Ghadar Party, the Indian National Congress, the Workers’ and Peasants’ Party of Punjab, the Persian Socialist Party, the Egyptian National

Party, the National Radical Party of Egypt, the African National Congress, the Arab Workers' Union, the Jewish Workers' Party, the Étoile Nordafricaine, the All-America Anti-Imperialist League, the Anti-Imperialist Federation of Ireland and the All-Russia Federation of Trade Unions. The LAI 'was a network which, in turn, twirled around a complex set of other networks', its principal constituents sharing a belief in the struggle against imperialism, with many (though not all) also committed to communism.¹⁰³ Other global luminaries associated with the LAI included Romain Rolland, Albert Einstein and Madame Sun Yat-sen. The idea was to bring together 'the friends and sympathisers of the oppressed peoples' with the delegates of mass organizations involved in anticolonial struggles, some numbering several thousand members.¹⁰⁴ It was not a communist, but the Labour politician George Lansbury, who was elected the league's first international chairman, and when he resigned, he was succeeded by the Independent Labour Party MP James Maxton. When a British Section was formed at a meeting in the House of Commons a few weeks later, Brockway was elected to the chair and Bridgeman made secretary, while Saklatvala was one of the Executive Committee members, along with fellow communist Harry Pollitt. In 1930, the National Meerut Prisoners' Defence Committee transferred its work to the LAI, and asked local Meerut committees to form league branches.¹⁰⁵



Members of the British Section of the League against Imperialism. Middle row (left to right), James Maxton (second left) and Shapurji Saklatvala (third), Reginald Bridgeman (sixth). It is not clear who the two women are.

It would be easy to dismiss the LAI – and most histories of the period do give it relatively short shrift – as an organization of little consequence that died a swift death as a result of internecine left-wing battles and the Comintern's own vacillating colonial policies. While that is certainly one aspect of the story, and a tragic one, the league's emergence internationally, as well as its British operations over the next decade, nonetheless remains a 'significant event in the history of anti-colonialism'.¹⁰⁶ At its best, the league functioned in its early years and for nearly a decade after, albeit mainly in Britain, as a terrain of debate on the question of how to organize more effectively against empire. It was terrain on which the

Comintern sometimes prevailed, but at other times was more marginal. Michele Louro, for whom the emergence of the league and the Meerut campaigns were deeply intertwined, has argued that the league ‘attracted a robust and equally balanced membership of communists and noncommunists who sought alliances to challenge imperialism’; indeed, Münzenberg ‘failed to garner much attention or financial support from Moscow until after the Meerut case began, while noncommunists took up the lead in the formative years of the LAI’s existence worldwide’.¹⁰⁷ The league’s establishment was widely reported in Indian newspapers, and the British Indian government was quick to proscribe its literature; its documents were also produced as evidence of ‘conspiracy’ by the prosecutor in the Meerut case.¹⁰⁸ The league certainly worried authorities enough for Saklatvala, Bridgeman and James Maxton to be intercepted and detained overnight in Ostend, Belgium, as they were travelling to the league’s Frankfurt conference in 1929; the incident caused a mini-scandal. (When they returned, Bridgeman and Saklatvala addressed a meeting in London at which an effigy of Lawrence of Arabia was burned – another incident reported in the British press.) It is perhaps more helpful to think about the moment and afterlife of the LAI less as a failed or short-lived institutional achievement than as an acknowledgement from within the heart of the metropole that, in the wake of the last war, something had shifted globally in relation to the imperial project, and demanded networked action. The centre of gravity had shifted to the colonies, and the agency of the ‘darker races’ would henceforth be integral to conceptualizing the end of empire; freedom would be the result of pressures from below, and not freely bestowed from above.

The most important aspect of the LAI’s early congresses and constitution was the extent to which it showcased nationalist and left-wing leaders from Asia and Africa; in doing so, the LAI put both resistance movements in the colonies and international networks of solidarity at the heart of its vision of decolonization. Several of the speeches made at the Brussels Congress, which remains a landmark occasion in the history of global anticolonialism, made clear that the era of paternalism was definitively over. The fiery Senegalese campaigner and intellectual Lamine Senghor, who had previously set up the Comité de défense de la race nègre (CDRN) on explicitly self-emancipating grounds, spoke of it as ‘not a minstrel show managed by some humanitarian white politician, but a universal race movement’.¹⁰⁹ At the first LAI Congress, where Senghor represented the CDRN, he also warned in a resonant metaphor: ‘The Negroes have slept too long. But beware, Europe! Those who have slept long will not go back to sleep when they wake up.’¹¹⁰ Josiah Tshangana Gumede, the ANC leader and delegate to the congress, hailed the event as a ‘new era for the oppressed peoples’.¹¹¹ Read as an aspiration rather than an achievement (though it is all too easy to diminish the latter), the LAI embodied the growing understanding in the metropole that colonial subjects should not be seen as a humanitarian ‘problem’ to be rescued from their situation, but as partners in a struggle that was necessarily collective, and the outcome of which would have resonances for ordinary citizens of Europe as well. As the British communist J. R. Campbell would put it some years later, while introducing an anti-war resolution at one of the British Section’s conferences, and noting that repressive legislation was now rife in dealing with great mass movements of resistance,

it is not a question of treating India as a problem or Africa as a problem, it is a question of asking ourselves, what are we, the British working class, going to do in relation to those living movements which are struggling for independence for the colonies at the present moment ... The same capitalist class which is holding down India is holding us down here. And the stronger the Indian people's struggle, the stronger we become in this country ... It is not for us to determine whether the Indian people are ripe for self-government. Who are we that we should set ourselves up to judge?¹¹²

The Labour MP and chairman of the International League, James Maxton, described the LAI's view of itself as an organization 'within which the peoples of the oppressing and of the oppressed nations can meet on common ground and pursue in common the task of emancipation'.¹¹³ This call for common ground was also met by an insistence – and there is no reason to believe it was not made in good faith – on cooperation between different political tendencies that shared a belief in anticolonialism. And so, Münzenberg again:

Every Communist or Syndicalist who joins the League today must be prepared to cooperate with the Socialists of the British Independent Labour Party. But every Socialist or bourgeois intellectual who enters the League must remember that he can only do so, if he is seriously prepared to work together with Communists.¹¹⁴

It is fair to say the LAI did indeed briefly succeed as a forum 'enabling actors holding different political points of view to stand on the same political platform around a common cause'.¹¹⁵ Solidarity rather than charity, and common cause rather than paternalism, would be the order of the day.

Integral to the emergence of this understanding was the presence of large numbers of delegates from Asia and Africa, who voiced an uncompromising refutation of paternalism, striking an anticolonial keynote for the decades to come. These numbers certainly made a great impression on British delegates to Brussels; both Lansbury and Brockway came away from the founding LAI conference profoundly impressed, clear not only about the need for a global anticolonial partnership but also that the fulcrum of 'freedom' had moved eastwards. As Brockway would enthuse in an editorial he wrote for the *New Leader*, it was an 'extraordinary association' for its potential to 'lead to a worldwide movement of significance' which was not dominated by white campaigners. The new leaders were people of colour: 'I have attended many conferences which have been described as "International," but only one of them was international, in fact. The white peoples do not represent, I suppose, more than one-fourth of the human race. Yet at most international conferences one looks almost in vain for any but white faces.' This lamentable situation, however, changed in early 1927: 'But one international conference, in my experience, placed the whites in their proper place. It was held at Brussels last February. From the platform the conference hall was a remarkable sight. Every race seemed to be there ... in proportionately greater numbers, the races of Asia, Africa and America.'¹¹⁶

But beyond the 'Parliament of Man' that Brockway excitedly hoped would emerge out of this gathering, the congress had made crystal clear that it was now 'coloured workers' who were at the helm of a struggle for political and economic equality, which might unfold as 'the biggest human event of the next 20 years'.¹¹⁷ No communist himself, he was nonetheless justifiably impatient with anti-communist sectarianism in the organizations he was affiliated to, the Socialist International and the Labour Party, warning strongly later that same year that

it would be ‘suicidal’ for socialists to stay away from the LAI on grounds (spurious, in his view) that it was funded by ‘Moscow gold’.¹¹⁸ He urged fellow British socialists in the Independent Labour Party and Labour Party not to lose an opportunity to bring together ‘all sincere anti-Imperialists in Europe with the rising Liberation Movement of the subject races of the world [which] may easily prove to be one of the most significant movements for equality and freedom in human history’.¹¹⁹ In an unsigned editorial, Brockway suggested that the league also provided a forum in which nationalist movements might themselves be radicalized: ‘Some Nationalists are as Capitalist as the Imperialism which they oppose; all they seek is the right freely to exploit their own peoples’; here was a chance to weave nationalisms into ‘a wider Internationalism’.¹²⁰ Brockway would reiterate the insight that ‘economic emancipation’ was as vital as political freedom, noting too that the league’s twenty-six associated organizations representing national or working-class movements across the globe made for a historic network of ‘rapid international links’.¹²¹ He also chided fellow Labour Party members ‘suffering from the Communist complex’ and being ‘careful’ about association with the LAI:

Of course Scotland Yard has its eye upon it. A movement which sets out to unite and strengthen the subject peoples of the world in their struggle against Imperialism is not likely to be overlooked by the Secret Service of the most powerful empire in the world! But we are in a bad way indeed if such attention deters us from sympathy and activity.¹²²

The transformative impact of an organization not driven by white leadership is evident even in the observations of progressive, but not radical, Labourites like George Lansbury MP. To him, the league represented both actual historical resistance and an imaginative political possibility ‘for the final and complete emancipation of all those races in the world which capitalist governments pleasantly label as subject races’.¹²³ In an article titled ‘A Great Weekend at Brussels’, Lansbury, no communist by a long shot (his tenure as international chairman of the LAI would be brief thanks to a Labour whip which debarred members from working with communist organizations), was vociferous about defending what he called the ‘spontaneity’ of the gathering in Brussels against charges of following a Comintern line.¹²⁴ Going so far as to call it the only conference he had attended that was not dominated by a ‘machine-made cast-iron set of resolutions pushed down the throats of delegates’, Lansbury, like Brockway, apostrophized the enormous diversity of the ‘anti-imperialist international’, listing not only the multifarious nationalities present – ‘men and women speaking in various languages and divers tongues’ – but also describing a wide political spectrum, from nationalists and communists to trade unionists and socialists: ‘Negroes and Riffis, Indians and Japanese, Chinese and Egyptians, Italians and French, Russians and Germans, British and Irish, Mexicans and Dutch, Belgians and Scandinavians’.¹²⁵ For Lansbury, the LAI was distinguished from all prior organizations by being the first ‘specifically and without qualifications [to challenge] the right of the white races to dominate, control and exploit the races which are described as backward’.¹²⁶ The organization’s constitutive repudiation of paternalism was clearly pivotal here – with a remarkable degree of self-reflexivity, Lansbury acknowledges that, even among socialists, the historical tendency had been to go along with

the claim that ‘white men organise and control coloured people for the good of those controlled’.¹²⁷ This unexamined belief shored up the idea that imperialists were ultimately ‘philanthropists, bringing the blessings of civilisation and religion to the uncultured, uncivilised heathen’.¹²⁸ The league, on the other hand, ‘does without reservation challenge that whole doctrine’.¹²⁹ That so self-reflexive an insight had something to do with the influence of Asian and African anticolonialists is made clear by Lansbury’s reference to the prominent presence of China, Japan and India at the conference, which had the effect of ‘making every one understand that these great nations were determined to throw off the yoke of Imperialism and band themselves together in defence, not merely of Nationalism, but Internationalism’.¹³⁰ The dawn, he pronounced, citing Edward Carpenter, regarded by many as a critic of empire, was rising in the East. Europe would not, could not, lead a global movement towards freedom.

Lansbury’s and Brockway’s acknowledgement of the importance of non-European and non-white voices and leadership is especially significant against the backdrop of the League of Nations’ elision of those very voices. We know, for instance, that there were ‘very few black delegates at the League Assemblies between the wars’, and that this was a time when only Liberia and Abyssinia were free of white rule in sub-Saharan Africa.¹³¹ The haphazard petition process which had ‘brought the voices of the system’s subjects – albeit muted, ventriloquized, and distorted – into the rooms in which their fates were determined’ and allowed for claims to be made, ultimately foundered on the paradox that these had to be made through government channels; complainants had to ‘communicate their grievances to the very persons of whom they complain’.¹³² The LAI, in complete contrast, attempted to level racial hierarchies, putting resistance at its core and calling for engagement rather than petitioning. As Pedersen notes, the League of Nations’ petitioning process failed partly because the founding assumption of the Mandate system was that the petitioning parties could not ‘stand by themselves’, which meant that nationalist claims or those based on self-determination were not sustainable under its terms.¹³³ Those making the complaints or claims had already been deemed childlike and ‘incapable of knowing their own minds’.¹³⁴ The LAI, on the other hand, was founded on the fact of the right to equality, and on taking resistance to imperialism as a historical given. The League of Nations sought to preserve the Mandatory powers; the LAI put on the table a vision of the end of empire, signalling the eclipse of an apparent consensus around the durability and legitimacy of European power. If, in decades past, and certainly in the nineteenth century, the episodic metropolitan crises generated by the resistance of the colonized had only hinted at the eventual end of European supremacy, the moment of the League against Imperialism was one that signalled a decisive fracture in the hegemon.¹³⁵ It was a fracture that would be enlarged and deepened by the decade of actual rebellion – and repression – that would follow.

Spurred by these new insights, the British Section of the LAI drew them out in several magnificently trenchant analyses of imperialism itself, some produced and distributed as pamphlets and tracts. One of the most brilliantly pithy and powerful, probably written in 1931, was authored by the ‘Red Vicar’, Father Conrad Noel (1869–1942), a Christian socialist who was chairman of the LAI for some time, and ‘whose place has always been in

the thickest of the fray'.¹³⁶ Noel's elegantly written fifteen-page tract, *The Meaning of Imperialism*, is a brilliantly pithy yet concrete but far from abstract distillation of the workings of empire, specifically Britain's.¹³⁷ As his damning account sweeps across various geographical and historical moments, Noel proffers a forensic analysis of 'humanitarian cant' or the mythology that an empire of this magnitude can be 'based not on force but on goodwill'.¹³⁸ To Noel, the clergyman, the development of British self-regard based on the notion that the nation held paternal sway over humanitarian empire was a form of 'collective pharisaism'; just as the biblical Pharisee thanks God he is not like the others, imperialists of every political persuasion insist 'that our Empire exists not for the purposes of conquest or exploitation or power' but with liberty as 'its binding principle'.¹³⁹ Noel was only too happy to remind his readers that, from the Roman to the German, and from the American to the League of Nations-sanctioned Belgian one, all empires declared themselves for 'humane and benevolent purposes'; such 'moral apologies are as old as the hills'.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, the bullish vicar headed straight for the mother lode of humanitarian myth-making, the story told on each Empire Day, that 'the British Empire has the proud distinction of being the first to abolish slavery', a story that has much to say about abolition and a lot less to say about slavery:

You would hardly gather from that that till almost within living memory the British Empire was the largest slaving association in the world; that the cities of Bristol, Glasgow and Liverpool were built upon the colossal profit of the trade in the human flesh; that from the sixteenth to the middle of the nineteenth century not thousands, but millions, of people have been torn from their homes, transported under conditions of unspeakable devilry to other parts of the Empire, there to provide cheap labour for the dominant race.¹⁴¹

In fact, Noel asserts, the facts are against the British abolition myth: Denmark abolished slavery in 1792, and the Northern States of America in 1794, while in 1807 only the trade was abolished by Britain, and not slavery itself. Nor, when compensation made abolition effectual after 1833, were the slaves themselves compensated in ways that might have given them some 'economic freedom', so as to avoid 'the meshes of slavery of another kind'.¹⁴² The latter was a fate, as we have seen, that the Morant Bay rebels were determined to avoid.

The other noteworthy emphasis in Noel's tract – one very much of the LAI moment – is on the relationship between imperial exploitation in the colonies and the condition of working people at home. If the celebrations of the much-vaunted British abolition of slavery took no cognizance of 'English slavery', or the pauperized conditions in which many worked in the mines and factories of England, it took still less interest in how much worse were 'the conditions of the coloured people whom we own and exploit' in the colonies.¹⁴³ While evoking the land-grabbing and forced labour in regions like Southern Rhodesia and Kenya – which, he notes, even some of the least Bolshevik and most imperialist of figures have themselves deprecated – Noel returns to the question of how exploitation in the colonies is inextricably entangled with the undermining of British labour. In ways that are evocative of Saklatvala's speeches and writings, Noel (drawing on the work of the communist Rajani Palme Dutt) observes that the half-starved and ill-paid workers of the Bombay textile and Calcutta jute mills are wretched on their own terms, but also that 'when labour can be had for

next to nothing’, it ‘will drive down the British workers to increasing slavery and starvation’.¹⁴⁴ He then makes a compelling observation: ‘You cannot be a patriot and a capitalist imperialist. You must either love Scotland and hate the Empire which is ruining it, or fight imperialism for the love of England or Scotland, and put an end to the Empire which is ruining the home people body and soul’.¹⁴⁵ The argument that ‘without her Empire, Britain is nothing’, which an Empire Day pamphlet propagated, is in fact the most unpatriotic of claims.¹⁴⁶ Noel also takes heart from the fact that Britain is heir to a tradition of truth-telling about empire, pointing, among other texts, to Edward Thompson’s *The Other Side of the Medal* and Justin McCarthy’s *History of Our Own Times*, in addition to those criticizing Britain’s depredations in Ireland, such as G. K. Chesterton, and even Gladstone in his time. At the heart of British anticolonialism, as Noel delineates it, is the demolition of self-regarding cant. He cites the Indian historian Professor Panniker, as cited by Noel’s fellow churchman, C. F. Andrews: ‘Great Britain ... certainly does not stand for freedom and national life for the great majority of non-European people. What it stands for is a white oligarchy exploiting coloured nations.’¹⁴⁷ The failure to recognize this is puts Great Britain in danger of becoming ‘a kind of riviera [sic] for the plutocrats’, where ‘such English workers as are lucky enough to find any work at all [will be] engaged in parasitic employments, tending the rich masters as “slaves of the palace”’, while the ‘extortion’ of workers in the colonies continues apace.¹⁴⁸

Peppered throughout the LAI’s documents are insights that would gain traction in the run-up to the Second World War. Introducing a resolution on war and imperialism during the British Section’s conference in 1934, the communist J. R. Campbell noted that only two things were considered ‘above party’ in Britain, seen as unquestionably good: the monarchy and the British Empire.¹⁴⁹ Out in the Empire, meanwhile, great mass movements were being met with fierce repression of the kind – and here is a nod to Meerut – that would have made ordinary trade union activity illegal. The existence of such mass resistance to colonial exploitation would be a running theme in league discussions. In 1931, another league document (issued by the International Secretariat and influenced at this point by the Comintern line) would speak of its own development as contingent on ‘the tremendous wave of struggle for national freedom in the colonies ... gradually reaching its culmination and shaking the foundations of imperialist dominance’.¹⁵⁰ Citing insurrections taking place in Egypt, Syria, Palestine, China, India, Indo-China, Morocco, Africa and Latin America, a resolution passed at a meeting of the LAI’s Executive Committee in Berlin in June 1931 noted that repression in the British Empire – now, ironically, under Ramsay MacDonald’s Labour rule – was ferocious and bloody:

The so-called ‘Labour’ Government under the leadership of MacDonald uses every possible method of oppression against the Indian national-revolutionary struggle for freedom. It bombs Indian villages slaughtering men, women and children, it arrests and hangs Indian revolutionary leaders, it sends punitive expeditions to Burma to exterminate the native revolutionaries, it sends British warships up the Chinese rivers to bombard the Chinese revolutionary forces. MacDonald’s government is doing its best to drown the revolutionary struggle of the Egyptian and Arabian peoples in blood. Slavery in South Africa finds a powerful supporter in Macdonald and his friends.¹⁵¹

The resolution records struggles by Indian workers and peasants ‘in spite of bombing,

machine-guns, police violence, shooting, floggings and innumerable imprisonments'; 'shooting down of Nigerian peasant women', strike-breaking in the Gambia and armed attacks on miners on the Gold Coast, as well as peasant revolt in the Tharawaddy district of Burma.¹⁵² In 1932, the British Section's annual conference passed a resolution describing the Scottsboro case as an exemplar of the desire 'to crush the growing spirit of revolt among the Negro toilers', but once again the emphasis was on the 'fighting spirit' of black Americans, to which the league would offer its fullest support, as also to 'the struggles of the Negro workers in Africa, and the West Indies for complete freedom and self-determination'.¹⁵³ It would also contribute to domestic struggles against racial discrimination, such as 'the alien registration scheme which deprived coloured British-born seamen of the right of British nationality'.¹⁵⁴

While the LAI did not ultimately make the transition from a sympathizing organization into the centre of a mass global movement – ultimately becoming a victim of its own central fracture corresponding to that between the Comintern's changing imperatives and those of various non-communist anticolonial and socialist organizations – it nonetheless symbolized a decisive shift in how anticolonial organizing was conceptualized as necessarily transnational.¹⁵⁵ It is possible to regard the LAI as a 'failure', but it is important to acknowledge that it was a symptomatic embodiment of both the possibilities and difficulties inherent in the attempt to forge internationalism within a crucible of diverse political affiliations.¹⁵⁶ Despite the promising coalitional beginnings, it would not be long before both the ILP and the Labour Party expressed hostility towards and refused to affiliate with the LAI, on the grounds that it was a communist front organization. In turn, the LAI's British Section expelled Maxton, and Lansbury would also resign eventually. The 'harsh radicalism' of the Comintern's 'new line' was, of course, detrimental to wider international and internationalist linkages, advocating as it did the 'class-against-class' doctrine instead of 'collaboration outside the communist movement'.¹⁵⁷ In November 1933, the league's international headquarters moved from Berlin, where the Nazis were now in power, via Paris, to London. Bridgeman became its international secretary, and its chief guiding force. The league itself would fold within the decade; Bridgeman proved unable to carry on without sufficient resources, and the organization was plagued by internal Comintern politics, policy vacillations and attempts to make ideological 'corrections' to the course of anti-imperialism – an impossible task given the diversity of actors. Many of its prime movers – not least Münzenberg, who was found dead in France in 1940 – would also fall victim to Stalin's Great Terror of 1937. For all its failures and tragically short life, the LAI, particularly the Brussels conference, would remain a key symbolic point of reference for anticolonial campaigners and Third World leaders in the years to come and following decolonization. From this point, however, linked-up agitation, networks and alliance would be the hallmark of anticolonialism in Britain and beyond.