


TRICONTINENTALISM BEFORE THE COLD WAR? MEXICO CITY'S ANTI- IMPERIALIST INTERNATIONALISM

Thomas K. Lindner^a

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1392-6377>
Email: thomas.lindner@uni-rostock.de

^a University of Rostock, Historical Institute, Rostock, Germany

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how anti-imperialist thought in Mexico City inspired internationalism in the 1920s. It uses the concept of “tricontinentalism” to refer to the idea that Latin America, Africa, and Asia should stand in solidarity with each other and argues that tricontinentalist thinking originated not in the Cold War, but in the aftermath of the First World War. The Mexican and the Russian Revolution had demonstrated that radical social change was imaginable. Together with the First World War, which for many in the Americas signaled the demise of European global hegemony, these revolutions represented a new era of political possibilities as well as a tectonic shift in global politics. Consequently, many anti-imperialists in Mexico looked to “the East”, drawing inspiration from the anticolonial revolutions in Africa and Asia. The central question of this article is how anti-imperialist political activists, intellectuals, and artists engaged in tricontinental thinking by writing about China and Morocco. The examined transnational interactions constitute a radical version of an imagined internationalism in the 1920s.

KEYWORDS

Tricontinentalism. Anti-Imperialism. Transnational Radicalism.

After the First World War had shuttered European supremacy over global politics, the system of colonialism seemed badly shaken. The Russian Revolution had created a new regime that presented itself as an anti-colonial force in the world, while US president Wilson promised national self-determination and emphasized his own country's history of anticolonialism. The abolition of colonialism, it seemed at the beginning of the 1920s, would be the defining development of the still young century. An anti-colonial atmosphere was especially palpable in the Americas, where many believed that Europe was the continent of the past, while Africa, Asia, and the Americas would be the places of the future. In Latin America, thinking about Africa and Asia had been *en vogue* since the middle of the nineteenth century, but after the First World War, Africa and Asia remained culturally interesting, while becoming politically relevant. The idea of a cooperation between Latin America, Africa, and Asia towards national self-determination and independence from "the West" was often framed in the language of anti-imperialism and anticolonialism — ideas that Latin Americans were familiar with given their own struggles one hundred years prior.

This article examines how ideas about cooperation with Asia and Africa were created and used by anti-imperialists in Mexico City after the First World War.¹ In the 1920s, Mexico City was a global hub of anti-imperialism, of transnational media networks, and one of the birthplaces of early tricontinentalism. The concept of tricontinentalism implies a radical vision of social change on a global level and is thus more suited to describe the form of radical internationalism than other terms such as "Global South" or "Third World" (YOUNG, 2001, p. 5). The name tricontinental was popularized by the "Tricontinental Conference" that took place in Havana in 1966 and is thus traditionally associated with Cuban foreign policy and the Cold War context (GRONBECK-TEDESCO, 2008; SEIDMAN, 2012). In this article, tricontinentalism is defined as a broad movement that united anticolonial, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist thought across Africa, Asia, and Latin America (RODRIGUEZ, 2006; MAHLER, 2018). Tricontinentalism's history, its discourses and practices thus predated the Cold War and the Cuban Revolution. The involvement of Latin Americans in the movement, too, dates back at least to the interwar years (PITMAN; STAFFORD, 2009, p. 197-198). And while the term "tricontinentalist" did not exist prior to the Cold War, its core idea of criticizing global capitalism through a focus on racial inequality and a shared colonial past already existed prior to the Cold War. Any history of the "Third World project" would be incomplete without acknowledging the importance of the interwar period (PRASHAD, 2007).

Why was anti-imperialism essential for tricontinental thinking? Especially in the 1920s, anti-imperialism became a gateway to imagine internationalism and anticolonialism. Fighting imperialism now explicitly meant fighting for the global project of decolonization. Anti-imperialists from Mexico City admired anticolonial fighters like Mahatma Gandhi or Abd el Krim because their struggles in India or Morocco were interpreted as a part of the fight for the abolition of colonialism *and* imperialism. In the 1920s, anti-imperialist imaginations of internationalism thus functioned as powerful resource of tricontinental thinking. Often, solidarity was framed in relation to the "Orient", a notion that included the countries of Northern Africa, Persia, Syria, China,

¹ This analysis focuses on Spanish-speaking anti-imperialists whose networks rarely included Brazilians. For a discussion of the concept of "Latin America" and its relation to Brazil, see Tenorio-Trillo (2019).

India, Japan, and, occasionally, Russia. But thinking about Asia and Africa was less abstract as the terms tricontinentalism or anti-imperialism suggest. Rather, it was tied to concrete events and movements like the Shanghai Massacre of 1927 or the Rif War in Morocco. By discussing these events, anti-imperialists imagined internationalism before it became visible on the levels of politics or policies. In short, anti-imperialist activists in Mexico City created and tested tricontinental internationalism long before the term entered the global stage.

Most Latin American anti-imperialists had since the mid-nineteenth century insisted that their continent suffered from imperialist oppression, but they faced an intricate situation after the First World War: They saw the power of global anticolonialism, but they also had to acknowledge that Latin American countries, mostly independent nation-states by the 1920s, had unique aims and unique histories that did not automatically include them into the anticolonial project. This tension could not only be addressed, but to a certain extent be bridged by anti-imperialism. In Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*, Argentina was included as an example of a "semicolony". With the category of semi-colonialism, Latin American anti-imperialists gained a powerful tool to integrate their fight into the global anti-imperialist, communist, and anticolonialist struggles of the 1920s (LENIN, 1916; NEARING; FREEMAN, 1925).

The historiography on the origins of cooperation between Africa, Asia, and Latin America is increasingly emancipating itself from the history of the Cold War. While the term "Third World" only emerged in the 1950s, an older tradition of cooperation between Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans that went back to the nineteenth and early twentieth century existed. Still, overviews of the history of decolonization rarely address these important predecessors. Studies on Pan-Asian, Pan-Islamic, and Pan-African movements, on the other hand, are good examples of how historians are increasingly studying interconnections beyond continental boundaries (ESEDEBE, 1994; AYDIN, 2007). Scholars have emphasized how the Russo-Japanese War of 1904/05 and the First World War contributed to the delegitimization of European colonial rule and how these events helped create an emerging postcolonial identity (ADAS, 2004; KRAUTWALD; LINDNER; NAKAO, 2018). Most of these perspectives emphasize the role of transcontinental entanglements, many explicitly identifying the interwar period as a phase of increasing interaction between Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans. Increasingly, the Brussels Congress of 1927 is identified as precursor to tricontinental exchange in the 1920s, while other phenomena, such as migration into the colonial metropolises, are examined as part of the "seeds of third world nationalism" (LOURO; STOLTE; STREETS-SALTER; TANNOURY-KARAM, 2020; GOEBEL, 2015). This article seeks to add to the existing scholarship by highlighting the contribution of anti-imperialists from Mexico City to the development of tricontinentalism.

Case studies on (Latin) America and tricontinental thinking have mainly focused on events after the First Tricontinental Conference of 1966 (RANGEL, 1982; ESTRADA; SUÁREZ, 2007; DEVÉS-VALDÉS, 2017). However, in recent years, a growing body of scholarship has traced the emergence of tricontinental thinking in the Americas back to the First World War and the interwar period. Historian Martín Bergel examines how ideas about the "orient" became positively connoted after the First World War by drawing on Edward Said's concept of orientalism (BERGEL, 2015). Such an "inverted orientalism", Bergel claims, was born out of anti-imperialist and spiritualist ideas and constituted a movement with expansive global networks. Besenia Rodriguez traces



tricontinentalist thinking back to the first half of the twentieth century and identifies Afro-American thought as “staunchly anti-essentialist” notions of race within anti-imperialist ideology (RODRIGUEZ, 2006). These examples show that anti-imperialist ideas can be starting points to examine internationalist and tricontinental thinking in the Americas before the Cold War.

This article, too, traces the imaginations of internationalism by examining its origins in anti-imperialist and anticolonial thinking in the first half of the twentieth century. Especially the Mexican Revolution served as a lens through which the anticolonial struggles in Africa and Asia were viewed and evaluated. The lasting impact of the Russian Revolution of 1917 on tricontinental thinking can hardly be disputed, either. In the 1920s, the Soviet Union actively promoted the idea of a global alliance against imperialism and colonialism. In Mexico, the Comintern searched for ways to connect its aims to continental traditions and used anti-imperialism to encourage tricontinental imaginations. Taken together, the Mexican and the Russian Revolution provided an ideological basis and a global perspective on imperialism that allowed many political activists to connect their struggles to maintain national sovereignty to the fights to achieve national sovereignty in the colonial world. The idea that anti-imperialism in the Western hemisphere could draw inspiration from anticolonialism in the East, from Africa and Asia, gained momentum in the 1920s. Anti-imperialist actors in Mexico City were notably more interested in China and Morocco — the examples taken up in this article — than is usually acknowledged in historiography. After the end of the First World War, the search for alternatives to the recently disgraced Western modernity flourished and tricontinental imaginations were one way to engage with alternatives to the Western model of development (MILLER, 2008, p. 16-18).

The city of Mexico is a particularly interesting prism through which tricontinentalism can be observed. The city itself was, as historian Barry Carr has noted, embedded in transnational networks of “exiles, *émigrés*, refugees, revolutionaries and dreamers” and became one of the centers of radicalism in the Americas after the Mexican Revolution (CARR, 2011, 2012). After almost a decade of violent conflict during the revolutionary period, the city was quickly attracting migrants from all parts of Mexico and from almost all parts of the world in the 1920s. While the city’s boundaries expanded rapidly, the growing social divisions between poor and rich, old and new became increasingly palpable for its inhabitants. Foreign influences (investment, technology, design) and especially the expanding influence of the United States became more visible on the city’s streets. In short, Mexico City was “the modern capital of a modernizing nation” in which anti-imperialist thought in all its diversity could flourish (LEAR, 2001). The cosmopolitan city attracted political activists that took advantage of new technologies and were themselves agents of change in facilitating the flow of people and ideas across national borders. In Mexico City, like in other metropolises of the time, anti-imperialism became a universal language, a lingua franca connecting local, national, and continental struggles to a global problem: the existence of empire.

REVOLUTIONS IN MEXICO AND RUSSIA

Tricontinental thinking in the 1920s cannot be explained without the revolutions in Mexico and Russia. The notion that the Mexican Revolution was basically a local affair and that the Russian Revolution had little impact in the Americas obscures the crucial



role that an internationalist communism played in promoting the idea of cooperation and solidarity among Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans. The anti-colonialist trajectory of the Russian and the practical example of the Mexican Revolution deeply influenced internationalism in the 1920s and 1930s. The same is true for the histories of decolonization and the “Third World”. Explaining decolonization without reference to either of those two revolutions remains bound to a national narrative, ignores the structures of connectivity and knowledge transfers of the early twentieth century, or disregards Latin American agency right away. The 1920s and the interwar period were thus not just the “pre-” history of decolonization, but rather an essential part of its genesis as a global movement.

The Mexican Revolution strongly influenced how solidarity with Africa or Asia was imagined in Mexico City. The revolution ended the long-standing dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, a time characterized by a relentless modernization without democratization (KNIGHT, 1986). The social unrest and prolonged civil war in Mexico inspired tricontinental thinking, but it was itself inspired by revolutionary processes in Africa and Asia. Historian John Mason Hart has called the Mexican Revolution “the first great Third World uprising against American economic, cultural, and political expansion”. For Hart, the Revolution was inspired by the impact of the Iranian Revolution of 1905, the 1911 Chinese Revolution, and the Russian Revolution of 1905 (HART, 1987, p. 187-234, 362,). Its anti-imperialist origins made the Mexican Revolution a prism through which other revolutionary processes were interpreted. Additionally, revolutionary activists managed to create a transnational public sphere of pro-revolutionary voices in Latin America (YANKELEVICH, 2003, p. 123).

The Mexican Revolution could easily be linked to other utopian projects and critiques of Eurocentrism. In Argentina, the University Reform Movement combined the idea of continental unity with the belief in the revolutionary force of the Latin American youth. The First World War further enhanced the voices of the younger generation that was critical of Europe’s role in the world. The perception of Europe as a hypocritical continent preaching civilization while practicing barbarism confirmed the suspicions of many anti-imperialists, who, in the tradition of José Martí and José Enrique Rodó, had long preached that Latin America needed to emancipate itself from its European tutors and embrace Latin American values. As early as 1916, the Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio had attacked the cultural supremacy of Europe in his seminal work *Forjando patria* in which he laid out an all-encompassing critique of the idea of European cultural supremacy, writing that Europe imposed its culture “by force of canons, bottles of whiskey and suspicious smugglers in Africa and Asia” (GAMIO, 1916, p. 190, my translation). With this critique of European colonialism, Gamio connected his idea of a revaluation of indigenous civilizations to anticolonial movements, just as anti-imperialist intellectuals did in the 1920s.

Alongside events in Europe, the role of the US defined Mexican perspectives on internationalism. The cultural and economic power that Europe had lost during the First World War was often replaced by the growing influence of the United States. The Mexican Revolution gave rise to newly formulated critiques of American political, cultural, and economic influence in Latin America. Attacks on US imperialist ambitions in the second half of the nineteenth century had traditionally focused on the US presence in smaller countries of the Caribbean and Central America. Several violations of Mexican sovereignty during the War (most prominently the invasion of Veracruz in 1914 and the

Punitive Expedition in 1916-17) caused anti-imperialists to concentrate more on Mexico and its relation to the US in the 1920s.

Beside the Mexican Revolution, the Revolution in Russia created the basis for tricontinental internationalism. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was a global event that both fascinated and frightened millions, as people projected their own hopes, fears, and misunderstandings onto it. Throughout the 1920s, the Bolshevik Revolution remained significant in Mexico, not least because its interpretation always carried consequences for the relation to the US. After a brief Red Scare in 1919 and 1920 that saw the publication of numerous agitated articles about Soviet spies and imaginary Bolshevik plots, the quality of the press coverage improved; nevertheless, fears of a “Bolshevik threat” continued to be stirred up during the 1920s (SPENSER, 1999, p. 51-54). Whether in condemnation or praise, Bolshevism had been established by 1920 as a watchword in Mexican culture and politics.

When the agents of global communism arrived in Mexico, anti-imperialism was immediately used as the basis for tricontinental internationalism. A small but vibrant multinational communist community spread the seeds of tricontinental thinking in Mexico City, buoyed by their general excitement about the Russian Revolution. In the late 1910s and early 1920s, Mexico City hosted radicals, disillusioned liberals, and socialists from the United States, Europe, and Asia who sought contact to the local radical activists. Once again, anti-imperialism proved to be a resource that could put American slackers, Mexican radicals, and Comintern agents into contact. A key figure for the early anti-imperialist networks in Mexico City was the Indian anticolonialist Manabendra Nath Roy. Born in Bengal in 1887, Roy had partaken in the so-called “Hindu-German conspiracy” and became a key actor who co-founded the Mexican Communist Party and, with the support of Comintern agent Mikhail Borodin, was elected as the party’s first secretary general (KERSFFELD, 2012a, p. 73-74). At the Comintern’s Second World Congress in Moscow and Petrograd in 1920, Roy presented his “supplementary theses on the national and colonial question”, which gained him a worldwide recognition as a theorist of colonialism.

The Second World Congress of the Comintern in 1920 was an early opportunity to test tricontinental thinking as anti-imperialists from the Americas had to develop arguments that resonated with Africans and Asians. At the congress, Mexico was portrayed as semi-colonial victim of US imperialism. In September 1920, the Congress of the Peoples of the East took place in Baku, an event considered to be a de facto continuation of the Comintern Congress. The speech of American communist John Reed revealed some of the key problems facing tricontinental solidarity, paramount of which was the formal independence of the republics in the Americas. Reed interpreted the Mexican Revolution as an anti-imperialist uprising after which the people in Mexico “wanted to keep the wealth of Mexico for the Mexicans and tax the foreign capitalists” (REED, 1920). The two congresses of 1920 decisively influenced the approach that the Comintern would take towards Mexico and Latin America: the new official line dictated that the continent be portrayed as “semi-colony” to facilitate anti-imperialist alliances with Asian and African communists. With that directive, anti-imperialism moved to the center of communist activities in Mexico.

To establish the new strategy of cooperation with trade unions and non-communists, the Comintern sent the Italian-American Louis C. Fraina and the Japanese communist veteran Sen Katayama to Mexico City. Together with the American communist Manuel Gómez (pseudonym of Charles Phillips), Fraina and Katayama helped build communist

structures in Mexico City as well as a continental network of sympathizing organizations, thus laying a solid basis for tricontinental cooperation.² The role of communist networks exemplifies the complex relationship between communism and tricontinental thinking. In Mexico City, global communism was often the ideological driving force of solidarity with anticolonial movements in Africa and Asia. Like in Europe, the challenge for the Comintern was getting the local and national communist sections to embrace anticolonialism and placing a focus on African and Asian liberation movements. The communist party of Mexico, however, had their hands full with creating party structures and support among workers and peasants. In 1924 and 1925, the Comintern began directly supporting tricontinental thinking, through the creation of anti-imperialist organizations like the Liga Antiimperialista de las Américas (LADLA) (KERSFFELD 2012b). The LADLA and its magazine *El Libertador* openly connected Latin American anti-imperialism with anticolonialism and often reported about the Chinese Civil War or the status of Abd el Krim's liberation movement in Morocco.

DISCUSSING SEMI-COLONIAL CHINA AND THE GUOMINDANG

In the 1920s, China became a symbol and a test for tricontinental internationalism. For many anti-imperialists, China took on a significance that approached the ways communists stylized the Soviet Russia as a worldly paradise. Anti-imperialists in Mexico City attempted to give an already existing fascination for China a political meaning by focusing on its semi-colonial status that it shared with Mexico (and most Latin American countries). In this sense, the political interest in China was not just an Orientalist enthrallment with a foreign culture. Very concretely, solidarity with China meant taking an anti-imperialist stand against the political involvement of European powers in Asia.

Tricontinental thinking and the praise of Chinese anti-imperialism existed side-by-side with xenophobia against Chinese immigrants in Mexico where Chinese migrants had been arriving since the 1880s. Anti-Chinese riots, like the massacre of Torreón in 1911 when 303 Chinese migrants were murdered by revolutionary soldiers, were often sparked by local *ligas antichinas* and by the nationalist press (CHAO ROMERO, 2010, p. 145-190). While Anti-Chinese racism and an admiration for the Chinese nationalist liberation coexisted, anti-imperialists had a positive opinion of China, identifying it with the struggle for national liberation and the Guomindang. As anti-imperialist mass party, the Guomindang had brought together nationalists and communists in a united front and was regarded as intriguing project for "semi-colonial" Mexico.

News and opinions about the situation in China arrived in Mexico City through the international news agencies or through the transnational press network of the anti-imperialists and communists. *El Machete*, Mexico's communist newspaper, for example, regularly published the latest news about the Chinese Civil War based on news bulletins from Moscow. The reports about the Civil War in China, mainly in the period of the Comintern-supported united-front strategy between the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925 and the beginning of 1928, show how China became an important metaphor for anti-

² Both Katayama and Gómez/Phillips would attend the Brussels Congress of 1927 to cement tricontinental connections.

imperialists. The paper of the LADLA, *El Libertador*, had a clear anti-imperialist profile and kept its readership well informed about the ongoing civil war. After police forces in Shanghai's international quarter fired on protesting students on May 30, 1925, *El Libertador* dedicated its title page to the events to showcase solidarity with the Chinese anti-imperialists. The article contextualized the situation in Shanghai as part of a global wave of national liberation movements and blamed the foreign powers for exploiting China for its natural wealth: the Japanese, Americans, British, French and Germans had staged "a diabolic plundering of the defenseless country, internally rotten by the cancer of imperialism" (EL IMPERIALISMO..., 1 July 1925, my translation). The unknown commentator of *El Libertador* interpreted the uprising as epitomizing a new dimension of anti-imperialism and specifically compared the situation in 1925 to the events in China in 1900, when an international alliance of imperialist countries had crushed the Boxer Rebellion. Hopeful reasons why an international alliance of imperialist forces could not, like in 1900, crush the local anti-imperialist uprising were published: "From 1900 to 1925, twenty years have gone by. The World War [...] has awakened millions of people, has given them back the consciousness of their power and their needs, and they have found a guide and a flag in the Russian example" (EL LIBERTADOR, 1 July 1925, my translation). In other words, the First World War and the Russian Revolution stood in the way of history repeating itself: semi-colonial China was no longer alone in opposing the imperialist ambitions of foreign powers and Europe had lost all moral or material supremacy over the affairs of Asian countries. While 1900 was imagined as a year of global cooperation between empires, 1925 was depicted as a year of cooperation between those fighting against empire — a year of anti-imperialist solidarity.

Over the next years, China remained a topic of heated debate among anti-imperialists in Mexico City and was regularly used as an example of Western or European hypocrisy, decadence, and racism. In April 1926, the Cuban communist Julio Antonio Mella, exiled in Mexico City at the time, wrote about what he called the "civilizing diplomacy of Western canons" and extensively used the (very un-materialistic) notion of civilization himself when writing about the Chinese: "This great people of ancient, superior intellectual and moral civilization was a slave, a colony of the brutal capitalist civilization of the West" (MELLA, 11 Apr. 1926, my translation). For Mella, it was clear that, after the "Oriental Revolutionary Movement" had succeeded, "the new civilization will come from the Orient" (MELLA, 11 Apr. 1926, my translation). Like other anti-imperialists, Mella regarded the united-front approach of the Guomindang as future for anti-imperialism: unity between nationalists and socialists, nationalization of the economy, land distribution, and a geopolitical alliance with the Soviet Union. Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre, Peruvian exile in Mexico City at the time, famously called his movement APRA "the Guomindang of Latin America", as he saw the Guomindang as a model of a party "without European tutelage" (HAYA DE LA TORRE, 1977, 63, 136-141, my translation). Between the May Thirtieth Movement of 1925 and the outbreak of the Chinese Civil War in 1927, several anti-imperialists in Mexico City depicted imperialism in China as a cultural phenomenon, as a clash of civilizations rather than as a purely economic phenomenon.

In Mexico City, the anti-imperialist revolts in China were framed in positive, but mostly Orientalist terms. Often, the incidents were described metaphorically as the awakening of a sleeping giant.³ Describing China as a sleeping giant referred both to the

³ For this exact image, see *El Machete* (Apr. 1927).

country's civilization, viewed as having been suppressed since the arrival of the Western empires, and to the sheer population numbers of China. Almost no article in Mexico failed to mention the quantitative massiveness of the Chinese uprising: "200,000 labor union members", "half a million Guomindang members" and "400 millions of Chinese workers" — impressive numbers for the anti-imperialist radicals (LOS OBREROS..., 2 June 1925). For them, these numbers symbolized the lasting impact that any political change in China would have on the system of global imperialism. This line of argumentation followed the strategy of the Comintern in the mid-1920s to portray the Chinese anti-imperialist struggle as a global priority.

But the voices from Mexico City were not just reproductions of thoughts originating in Moscow. Quickly, anti-imperialists drew analogies between China and "semi-colonial" Latin America. In April 1926, Mella criticized Western hypocrisy and racism to draw analogies between China and Mexico. According to Mella, it was only the successful independence that put an end to the disparaging talk of "bandits", "thieves", and "savages". But Mella did not settle for analogies between China and Latin America. In the spring of 1926, the Cuban communist named the Chinese, the Moroccan, the Syrian, and the Mexican anti-imperialist movements as parts of the global anti-imperialist movement: "For all colonial and semi-colonial peoples, the Chinese Revolution is an example and a hope". Echoing the Comintern's global strategy, Mella used his own impatient staccato style: "China, India, Morocco, Syria, Russia! And America?"⁴ The last question mark was a message to Mella's anti-imperialist comrades in Mexico City and in Latin America: lamenting about US interventionism was not enough — anti-imperialist action needed to be part of a global movement or it would be doomed to failure. Mella showed a remarkable degree of global consciousness, making clear that China represented a model case for a globally conscious anti-imperialism in Latin America.

In 1927, the alliance between nationalists and communists in China broke apart — an event with massive consequences for anti-imperialists around the world. After nationalist and communist troops had jointly conquered Shanghai in April 1927, the nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek betrayed the communists, killing tens of thousands in what came to be known as the Shanghai Massacre. The betrayal meant the end of the united front in China and constituted a devastating blow to the idea of united-front movements in general. For communists worldwide, China after the spring of 1927 acquired a whole new significance. Now, referring to the Guomindang meant warning of the dangers of nationalism. Once again, the LADLA paper *El Libertador* was most interested in applying lessons from China. The Peruvian Jacobo Hurwitz, yet another exile in Mexico City, analyzed the changed geo-political situation in June 1927 by portraying Chiang Kai-shek as a sellout and beneficiary of the imperialist "politics of the dollar". Hurwitz insisted that the events in China should be viewed as a helpful lesson for anti-imperialists and opined that China remained "the Yellow Hope" for the global anti-imperialist movement. And yet, the real lesson was simple, a warning against those revolutionaries too comfortably viewing nationalists as anti-imperialist allies: "Beware of the right!" (HURWITZ, 1927, my translation). After the Shanghai Massacre, many communists rethought their alliances with nationalist anti-imperialists, even before the Comintern officially revised its united front policy and entered its so-called "Third Period" in 1928.

⁴ See *El Kuo Min Tang y la Revolución China* (MELLA, 11 Apr. 1926).

In the Third Period, the example of China became increasingly less interesting for anti-imperialists in Mexico City, although the Comintern and the communist press continued to report about China. What had made the example of China so captivating for anti-imperialists was not just the shared status of semi-coloniality, but also the united national movement against imperialism that had developed in the country. While the events of 1927 were a setback and a reason for disappointment, China did not disappear from the anti-imperialist discourse altogether. Viewed together with the reception of the anticolonial movements in Morocco and India, it becomes clear that the interest in China was part of a larger development, the emergence of a political tricontinental thinking in the 1920s.

REPORTING ON THE RIF WAR AND MOROCCO

Starting in 1925, the anticolonial Rif War became a topic of interest for anti-imperialists in Mexico City and an instance in which international solidarity was imagined and performed. Spanish and French troops fought against the local Riffian forces under rebel leader Abd el-Krim al-Khattabi in the mountains of northeastern Morocco. Abd el-Krim had proclaimed an independent Rif Republic, in part as reaction to the Paris Peace Conference that had cemented Spanish and French protectorates in Morocco. The Rif War, lasting from 1921 to 1926, had a unique significance for Latin American anti-imperialists, distinguishing it from other anticolonial fights. First of all, the Riffian rebels were fighting the Spanish, the former colonial power of most of the Latin American countries. The Rif War thus occasioned anti-imperialist actors in Latin America to rethink the role of Spain for post-colonial Latin America in the 1920s. Secondly, the rebel leader Abd el-Krim himself became a symbol of the global fight against imperialism, not unlike the Nicaraguan Sandino at the same time. Abd el-Krim was aware of his symbolic role and actively promoted the Moroccan anticolonial fight in Latin America. Thirdly, the Rif War sparked a discussion among Latin American anti-imperialists to engage in a discourse about race and the role of indigeneity in anticolonial fights. The Rif War, like the civil war in China, was an event that inspired tricontinental thinking and solidarity in Latin America.

In the summer of 1925, the newly founded LADLA in Mexico City began a publication campaign in favor of the anticolonial forces at the Rif together with other magazines across Latin America (*Renovación* and *Revista de Oriente* in Buenos Aires, *Repertorio Americano* in San Juan). The summer of 1925 became the peak of anti-imperialist euphoria in Mexico City. Numerous renowned intellectuals embraced the anticolonial fight of the liberation of the Rif and used the newly established transnational press networks to voice their positions. The anti-imperialist newspapers were themselves transnational networking tools that at times produced the news they reported about. What historian Kirwin R. Shaffer has stated about anarchist press networks in the Caribbean at roughly the same time is also true for anti-imperialist media: “newspapers were the cerebral cortex — key to perception, consciousness, communication, and memory retention” within the transnational media (SHAFFER, 2020). In Mexico City, *El Libertador* was the most important transnational magazine that best represented the multitude of voices within Latin American anti-imperialism.



In the summer of 1925, Abd el-Krim became the face of global anticolonialism.⁵ Abd el-Krim himself saw the globalization of his fight — making it part of a larger narrative of anti-imperialist dynamism — as a huge opportunity to direct global attention towards the Rif. Latin America was a particularly fertile ground for his anti-imperialist campaign, as Abd el-Krim spoke fluent Spanish and knew enough of Latin American history to appeal to the anti-imperialist traditions of the continent. In December 1924, Abd el-Krim responded to an invitation of the *Unión Latinoamericana* to attend the centenary celebrations of the Peruvian independence that he had received together with Indian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore.⁶ In his letter, Abd el-Krim presented himself as the perfect anti-imperialist ally for the Latin Americans, extensively referencing heroes of Latin American independence: “the heroic Moroccan people fight for the same ideals that impelled Miranda and Moreno, Bolívar and San Martín. [...] Like you a century ago [...] we are now willing to sacrifice life and property to become free peoples” (ABD EL-KRIM, 29 June 1925, my translation). Abd el-Krim framed his fight as a national liberation struggle directed against European imperialism rather than as a guerrilla war against the Spanish. The “provisional regent of the Rif Republic” asserted that Europe had been corrupted by the war and had lost the right to impose its will on other continents. But, Abd el-Krim continued, his fight was not motivated by hatred against Spain, “the cradle of our grandfathers”. The rebel leader envisioned a future in which “we too, after our own Ayacucho [...] will be recognized by Spain in our right to independence and we will reconcile with her as a well-loved old sister” (ABD EL-KRIM, 29 June 1925, my translation).⁷ Cautious to not appear anti-Spanish, Abd el-Krim thus created a shared history of Spanish-speaking America and Morocco based on the experience of Spanish colonialism and European — not Spanish — arrogance.

Enthusiastic responses to Abd el-Krim’s call for solidarity came from all over the Americas. In Lima, Marxist intellectual José Carlos Mariátegui, praised Abd el-Krim as an heir to Bolívar and San Martín and as a role model for the young Hispanic American generation: “Western civilization feels threatened by Abd el-Krim” (MARIÁTEGUI, 1970, my translation).⁸ But the center of the publication campaign remained Mexico City. In May of 1925, *La Antorcha*, a magazine published by José Vasconcelos in Mexico City, portrayed Abd el-Krim as a brave anticolonial hero who deserved every bit of solidarity: “Republican America would betray its very reason of existence, if it were to hypocritically turn a blind eye towards the fight that the admirable Riffians maintain against the decadent imperialisms of the Mediterranean, unfortunately represented by Latin people” (UN APLAUSO..., 16 May 1925, my translation). In this reasoning, history obliged Latin Americans to support anticolonialism, at least morally, even when that meant opposing the Spanish and their culture.

Apart from spiritual support and historical analogies, Mexican anti-imperialists soon wrote about more material interconnections between their continent and the fight at the Rif. Rafael Carrillo, Secretary General of the Mexican Communist Party, wrote a furious article about the recruiting methods of the Spanish Foreign Legion in Latin

⁵ In August 1925, Abd el-Krim’s face covered the title page of *Time* magazine.

⁶ Abd el-Krim’s letter was first published in the ULA’s paper *Renovación* in December 1924. In the summer of 1925, as the campaign against the Spanish accelerated, it was reprinted in other magazines, for example in the Costa Rican journal *Repertorio Americano* (ABD EL-KRIM, 29 June 1925).

⁷ All quotes are from Abd el-Krim (29 June 1925).

⁸ Mariátegui’s article was first published in Lima’s *Varietades* in August 1925, see Mariátegui (1970).

America, claiming that Spanish consuls had already convinced thousands of young men to join the Spanish Army by “encouraging the romantic eagerness of the American youth” (CARRILLO, 3 Apr. 1926, my translation). But while the young men were indoctrinated to believe they were fighting for “the civilization”, for “the liberty and honor of the white race” and “other nonsense from the imperialist handbook”, they were actually partaking in a war of domination and plundering (CARRILLO, 3 Apr. 1926, my translation). For the anti-imperialists, the recruitments not only put young men in danger; perhaps even worse, they made them complicit in the process of maintaining European dominance in Africa.

Peruvian anti-imperialist Haya de la Torre was as vocal in denouncing Spanish actions in Africa as he had been in praising the Guomindang. Still regarded as an anti-imperialist ally by the communists in 1925, Haya insisted that Spanish intellectuals had lost all moral integrity for not calling out the “crimes of Morocco” (HAYA DE LA TORRE, 16 July 1925, my translation). Haya, like Mariátegui, saw the rebels in Morocco (“los moros”) as an indigenous race who shared with Latin Americans a history of Spanish conquest.⁹ For Haya, Spanish militarism was “trying to criminally conquer another race, as indigenous and as heroic as our races”. By engaging with Morocco, Haya sharpened and propagated his own vision of Indoamerica — a future for the continent with a basis in pre-colonial thought. But Haya also connected US imperialism and European colonialism. Concerning the alleged presence of American air force pilots among volunteers of the Spanish forces in Morocco, Haya presented his own theory: “The Yankee pilots want to learn how to eradicate indigenous peoples in a mountainous, passionately defended region. Killing indigenous populations in the plains is of no interest to the Yankees: Mexico as well as all desirable countries in the Americas are mountainous” (HAYA DE LA TORRE, Feb. 1925, my translation). For Haya, Morocco was a symbol, it was “nothing less than the repetition of our past and the announcement of our future” (HAYA DE LA TORRE, Feb. 1925, my translation). Haya de la Torre echoed Abd el-Krim’s vague idea of a shared racial origin of Arabs and Latin Americans and thus used Morocco as a symbol for his own anti-imperialist vision.

The anti-imperialist campaign in favor of Moroccan independence was part of a much broader moment of anti-imperialist agitation, mainly carried out by transnational anti-imperialist press networks. The campaign churned out the by-then conventional wisdom that Europe was a continent in decline, a conclusion epitomized by the crumbling Spanish Empire. The pro-Morocco campaign invoked a remarkable level of solidarity among Spanish-speaking anti-imperialists, whose embrace of Abd el-Krim’s cause helped them unambiguously clarify where they stood, namely, on the side of the victims and enemies of colonialism and imperialism. The anticolonial fight in Morocco enabled anti-imperialists in Mexico City to reflect upon their own role in the global movement against imperialism. This does not mean that different strands of anti-imperialism were homogenized, as the fierce arguments between communist Mella and nationalist Haya de la Torre after 1927 exemplify (MELGAR BAO, 2013). But both used Morocco and China as examples to clarify their specific versions of anti-imperialism. After the Spanish-Cuban-American War in 1895, the role of Spain as an imperialist power had often been

⁹ Haya’s perspective on Morocco ironically mirrored the perspectives of the Spanish conquistadors vis-à-vis the indigenous population in the Americas. In their ignorance, the Spanish conquerors described the unknown peoples in categories they knew from the wars against the “infidel moors” (GRUZINSKI, 2010, p.132-144).



neglected by Mexican anti-imperialists who often, if implicitly, had appreciated Spanish culture as a counterweight to “Anglo-Saxon” materialism. This partly changed in 1925 and many anti-imperialists openly pronounced their rejection of Spanish cultural imperialism openly. In that sense, reporting about the Rif War, like reporting about China, led to significant changes within the anti-imperialist scene in Mexico City: arguments, alliances, and histories were globalized and made to fit with movements fighting imperialism in Africa and Asia.

CONCLUSION: IMAGINING INTERNATIONALISM

In the 1920s, anti-imperialists in Mexico City imagined a form of internationalism that was based on tricontinental thinking and the hope for a global anticolonial revolution. Inspired by the revolutions in Mexico and Russia, many ideologically diverse political activists, intellectuals, scholars, and artists increasingly looked towards Africa and Asia for inspiration as Europe had lost its status as a model of progress for the rest of the world. For anti-imperialists, looking East towards the Soviet Union, towards China and towards Northern Africa promised new inspiration for Latin America and for Mexico. The “East” represented an alternative modernity that relied on national self-determination and revolution rather than on Western liberalism and imperialism. The anti-imperialists’ ability to distinguish between these concepts ultimately remained insufficient and sometimes contradictory — and yet, the search for new inspiration beyond a Western model of development reveals a multitude of perspectives that were shaped by a desire to know more about the events, social conditions, and cultural horizons of other continents. This curiosity was amplified by an unprecedented degree of transcontinental interaction through travel and migration. Anti-imperialists pointed out similarities between Mexico and the East, be it the shared status as semi-colonial countries, as in the case of China, ethnic similarities, as in the case of the Riffians, or the shared history of Spanish colonialism, as in the case of Morocco.

Anti-imperialist imaginaries originating in Mexico City helped create a new vision of the world. Different anti-imperialists used what they perceived as a shared position in a global system as a resource of solidarity — Latin Americans, Asians, and Africans were seen as victims of global imperialism. Imagining anticolonial struggles in other continents was thus always a way to reflect upon one’s own position in an increasingly globalized way. Thinking, writing, and talking about China and Morocco thus caused a constant comparing, adjusting, and aligning of anti-imperialism in Mexico City. The communist Jacobo Hurwitz, for example, called the alliance between communists and nationalists in Latin America into question after the Chinese nationalists had betrayed the communists. The fact that Hurwitz’s article was already published in June 1927 showed that anti-imperialists in Mexico City did not wait for nor needed advice from Moscow and drew their own lessons from what they had witnessed in China. Ultimately, this modification of anti-imperialism via imagining anticolonial revolution made it more coherent with other ways to oppose imperialism and colonialism in Africa and Asia, but it did not homogenize the differences among different strands of anti-imperialism.

The fascination with Africa and Asia led to new ideas about tricontinental politics and new ways of reflecting on what it meant to be an object of geopolitical realities. In the process, anti-imperialists in Mexico City re-imagined global geography. Traditionally, many anti-imperialists in Mexico tended to emphasize the dichotomy North-South, in



which the Catholic, Spanish-speaking and spiritual Latin Americans of the South stood against the Protestant, English-speaking, materialistic Anglo-Saxons of the North. While these depictions remained powerful, new forms of expressing anti-imperialism in geographical terms emerged in the 1920s. A distinction between the West and the East supplemented the North-South divide. In this new imaginary division, the peoples of the East encompassed Africans and Asians while the West consisted of Europeans and North Americans. The stereotyped West stood for an imperialist modernity, while the equally stereotyped East represented self-determination and a path to modernity through national or social revolution. Many perceived connections to the East relied on a supposedly shared culture, a history of colonialism, and a similar position in the global system of imperialism. Some of these traits could potentially be used for the exact opposite argument — after all, the US had a history of anticolonialism, too, — but one has to keep in mind that, in the 1920s, these geographical imaginations were still young and vaguely expressed. Forty years later, these thoughts would be formulated as coherent, but also more orthodox Marxist ideologies.

South-South connections were imagined long before they were put into practice. Tricontinental thinking thus predated tricontinental action and was quite clearly more than just an imitation of European orientalism. Tricontinental imaginations were also more than just a localized version of Moscow's intention to cast the Soviet Union as the global champion of anticolonialism. Many non-communists were inspired by the Russian Revolution, borrowed communist ideas and creatively combined lessons from Russia with the aims of the Mexican Revolution. Especially when it came to criticizing the growing power of the United States, many Mexican nationalists viewed the Soviet Union as a potential counterweight to the US. A broadly understood anti-imperialism, not communism, was the ideological bridge between the Russian and the Mexican Revolution and anti-imperialists in Mexico City found numerous ways to connect the two revolutions to the ongoing anticolonial revolts in Africa and Asia. Rather than a consequence of the developments and repercussions of the Second World War, tricontinental thinking in Mexico City was already developed and imagined in the aftermath of the First World War. The 1920s were a time of imagining tricontinentalism and should thus be included as an important part of the global histories of decolonization and internationalism.

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

CORRESPONDING ADDRESS

Historisches Institut der Universität Rostock, Neuer Markt 3, 18055 Rostock, Germany.

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