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Between global aspirations and local realities: the global dimensions of interwar communism*

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Abstract

This article explores the global dimension of communism during the interwar period. It criticizes a literature that either depicts communist parties as small 'red armies' obeying any order from Moscow, or focuses exclusively on the local level and ignores any international aspects. The article first discusses attempts of communist leaders to create a 'world party' based in Moscow. It next analyses the conflicts between a globally acting communist leadership and rank-and-file members concerned about their local circumstances. Finally, it highlights the role that internationalism played on the local level. Such an approach – which locates 'the global' on the local level, both in terms of how internationalist ideas informed people's behaviour in local contexts and in terms of how they resisted forms of globalism – might provide a means for bridging the gap between global and local histories.

Keywords Comintern, communism, global/local, interwar period, microhistory

From its very beginning, the socialist (and later communist) working-class movement had, at least in theory, global aspirations. 'Working men of all countries, Unite!', the Communist Manifesto famously exclaimed. This internationalism was put into practice by the various Internationals: the First International, formally known as the International Workingmen's Association, under Karl Marx's leadership (1864–76); the Second or Socialist International (1889–1914);[1] and the Third, Communist International (Comintern), formed in 1919 and officially dissolved in 1943. Of all the Internationals, the Comintern tried to realize its

* I would like to thank Jennifer Amos, Ke-chin Hsia, Susan Gaunt Stearns, Elizabeth McGuire, Moritz Föllmer and Daniel Brückenhaus as well as the three editors of the Journal of Global History and the two anonymous reviewers for critical and helpful comments on various drafts of this article.

1 On the First and Second Internationals, see Henryk Katz, *The emancipation of labor: a history of the First International*, New York: Greenwood Press, 1992; James Joll, *The Second International, 1889–1914*, London: Routledge, 1974.

internationalist aspirations most rigorously.[2] National sections of the Comintern had to accept the authority of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), which frequently sent delegates to national sections to 'control' their work. Communists not only developed a 'vision of the world',[3] but also created global networks to act upon these global visions. The worldwide communist movement thus constitutes an important aspect of global history in the 1920s and 1930s.

Given the importance of communism in the twentieth century, it is not surprising that there is an enormous, yet somewhat problematic – especially regarding the global dimension of communism – body of literature on the subject. Most of the literature operates rather firmly within the confines of a methodological nationalism, with the exception of a few works analysing the Communist International as an organization.[4] Interestingly, however, the debates within these nationally confined literatures greatly resemble each other, which alone should encourage comparative approaches.[5] To generalize somewhat, the historiography of communist parties can be divided into two camps. On the one hand, some scholars have approached communism 'from above', examining (national) party leaderships and the influence that the Comintern could exert on them via guidelines, emissaries, or financial support. These scholars have depicted various national communist parties as thoroughly centralized organizations, which left little space for independent-minded local actors. The internationalism that these studies describe is strictly centred around Moscow, where, according to this literature, all important decisions were made.[6] On the other hand, there are historians who have approached communism 'from below', arguing that it is best

2 On the Third International, see Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: a history of international communism from Lenin to Stalin*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1997; Wladislaw Hedeler and Alexander Vatlin, eds., *Die Weltpartei aus Moskau: der Gründungskongress der Kommunistischen Internationale 1919: Protokoll und neue Dokumente*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2008.

3 Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, 'Introduction: competing visions of world orders: global moments and movements, 1880s–1930s', in Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, eds., *Competing visions of world orders: global moments and movements, 1880s–1930s*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 7.

4 Even most edited volumes on the Comintern consist of essays focusing on its national sections. See, for example, Norman LaPorte, Kevin Morgan, and Matthey Worley, eds., *Bolshevism, Stalinism, and the Comintern: perspectives on Stalinization, 1917–53*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008; Matthew Worley, ed., *In search of revolution: international communist parties in the third period*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2004; Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe, eds., *International communism and the Communist International, 1919–43*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.

5 An important exception is LaPorte, Morgan, and Worley, *Bolshevism*. Based on Hermann Weber's work on the German Communist Party and his 'Stalinization' thesis – which means, in Weber's understanding, that national communist parties were firmly controlled by Moscow – the volume's contributions seek to analyse national communist parties through the 'prism' of the 'Stalinization debate', testing its validity in different national contexts. For comparative studies, see also Norman LaPorte and Matthew Worley, 'Towards a comparative history of communism: a survey of the British and German communist parties to 1933', *Contemporary British History*, 22, 2008, pp. 227–55; Andreas Wirsching, *Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg? Politischer Extremismus in Deutschland und Frankreich 1918–1933/39: Berlin und Paris im Vergleich*, Quellen und Darstellungen zur Zeitgeschichte 40, Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1999.

6 For the German, French, American, and Chinese contexts, see Hermann Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus: die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969: Stéphane Courtois and Marc Lazar, *Histoire du Parti communiste français*, Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1995; Theodore Draper, *American communism and Soviet Russia: the formative period*, New York: Viking, 1960; Arif Dirlik, *The origins of Chinese communism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. For a much more nuanced perspective on the British Communist Party, see Andrew Thorpe, 'Comintern "control" of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920–43',

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understood at the local level.[7] Scholars such as Klaus-Michael Mallmann, Randi Storch, and Hans van de Ven have challenged the assumption that local actors blindly obeyed any order from party centrals in Moscow, Berlin, New York, or Shanghai.[8] In these accounts, however, the international aspects of communism often all but disappear.[9] In themselves, neither of these approaches does justice to the complexities of global communism. Drawing upon a well-developed literature, this article seeks to overcome both the national limitations of most of the literature on communism and the dichotomy between a history 'from above' and one 'from below'.[10] The challenge is to find an approach that integrates both the global aspirations of communism and its local realities. To this end, the article will ask what role the communist movement's internationalist dimension played for local actors.

An important feature that characterized communist parties in many countries around the globe was the numerous conflicts between leaders and local activists. The leadership was, to say the least, heavily influenced by the Comintern, and sought to implement strategies devised in Moscow. In contrast, local actors, trying to deal with the specific conditions in their neighbourhoods or factories, often ignored orders from above. However, rather than using the limitations of the leadership's power on the ground as evidence that the local level is most fundamental to understanding communism, this article argues that the conflicts

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English Historical Review, 113, 1998, pp. 637–62; idem, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920–43*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.

7 Daniel J. Opler, *For all white-collar workers: the possibilities of radicalism in New York City's department store unions, 1934–1953*, Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2007, p. 4.

8 For Germany, see Klaus-Michael Mallmann, *Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik: Sozialgeschichte einer revolutionären Bewegung*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1996. For the debate around Mallmann's book, see Andreas Wirsching, '"Stalinisierung" oder entideologisierte "Nischengesellschaft"? Alte Einsichten und neue Thesen zum Charakter der KPD in der Weimarer Republik', *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, 45, 1997, pp. 449–66. I find Mallmann's response highly convincing: see Klaus-Michael Mallmann, 'Gehorsame Parteisoldaten oder eigensinnige Akteure? Die Weimarer Kommunisten in der Kontroverse: eine Erwiderung', *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 47, 1999, pp. 401–15. For the US, see Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American communism at its grassroots, 1928–35*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007; Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the depression*, New York: Grove Press, 1983; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and hoe: Alabama communists during the Great Depression*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990. For France, see Annie Fourcaut, *Bobigny: banlieue rouge*, Paris: Editions ouvrières/Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1986; Jacques Girault, *Sur l'implantation du Parti communiste français dans l'entre-deux-guerres*, Paris: Éditions sociales, 1977; Jean-Paul Depretto and Sylvie Schweitzer, *Le communisme à l'usine*, Roubaix: EDIRES, 1984. For Great Britain, see Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscows: communism and working-class militancy in inter-war Britain*, London: Croom Helm, 1980. For China, see Hans J. van de Ven, *From friends to comrades: the founding of the Chinese Communist Party, 1920–1927*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991; idem, 'Introduction', in Tony Saich and Hans J. van de Ven, eds., *New perspectives on the Chinese communist revolution*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharp, 1995; Tony Saich, *The origins of the first United Front in China: the role of Sneevliet (alias Maring)*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991.

9 See John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, 'Some problems of communist history', *American Communist History*, 4, 2005, pp. 199–214; eidem, 'A peripheral vision: communist historiography in Britain', *American Communist History*, 4, 2005, pp. 125–57; Geoff Eley, 'International communism in the heyday of Stalin', *New Left Review*, 157, 1986, pp. 90–100.

10 For an example of thinking in such a dichotomy, see Brigitte Studer, 'Stalinization: balance sheet of a complex notion', in LaPorte, Morgan, and Worley, *Bolshevism*, p. 50; McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, p. xxi. In contrast to them, I agree with Randi Storch that thinking in such terms is not particularly productive, see Randi Storch, '"Their unCommunist stand": Chicago's foreign language-speaking communists and the question of Stalinization, 1928–35', in LaPorte, Morgan, and Worley, *Bolshevism*, p. 263. For a theoretical approach that seeks to integrate different dimensions, see Jacques Revel, *Jeux d'échelles: la micro-analyse à l'expérience*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996.

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between the rank and file and the communist 'avant-garde' constituted an important part of the *global* history of communism. In fact, to make sense of these conflicts, communism's international dimension is key, precisely because local actors resisted the global visions that leaders in Moscow had developed. These conflicts, the article proposes, resulted from 'clashes' between people thinking in different spatial horizons. What might have made sense from the global perspective of a world revolution and the defence of the Soviet Union that communist elites had in mind, often made no sense at all from the local perspective of the communist rank and file. Such an approach will produce a global history that is not concerned with large-scale structures[11] but with how actors create and resist 'globality' on the local level.[12] It allows for integrating micro-histories into global history, without merely attempting to 'populate' the 'big theories' with real people.[13]

The article begins with a brief section on the 'visions of the world' that communist leaders formulated in Moscow, and on attempts to implement these visions globally, not the least in the context of struggles against imperialism. The second, longest, section then discusses in detail the conflicts between globally thinking communist elites and the locally acting rank and file, which characterize interwar communism's local global history. That local actors rejected the 'internationalism from above' does not, however, mean that internationalist ideals and global developments did not matter on the local level; they did matter, albeit in a way that was not always in line with the visions developed in Moscow, as the third section, which analyses 'local internationalism', will show.

Visions of a world order: the Comintern and communist anti-imperialism

According to its own ideals, the Communist International was a global organization with a centralized leadership that left little room for differences between national communist parties. In reaction to the failure of the Second International to prevent the First World War, communist leaders believed that only a more centralized organization would be capable of actually making history. One condition for joining the Comintern thus famously stated: 'All decisions by the congresses of the Communist International as well as by its Executive Committee are binding on all parties.'[14] Initially, communists hoped that the revolution in Russia would spark an entire chain of revolutions in Europe, in particular in Germany.[15]

11 Jürgen Kocka has recently argued that the trend towards global history 'reinvigorates … attention for large-scale structures'. Jürgen Kocka, 'History and the social sciences today', in Hans Joas and Barbro Klein, eds., *The benefit of broad horizons: intellectual and institutional preconditions for a global social science*, Leiden: Brill, 2010, p. 63. See also Patrick O'Brien, 'Historiographical traditions and modern imperatives for the restoration of global history', *Journal of Global History*, 1, 2006, pp. 3–39.

12 In this context, see Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, 'Global history and the spatial turn: from the impact of area studies to the study of critical junctures of globalization', *Journal of Global History*, 5, 2010, pp. 149–70.

13 Tonio Andrade, 'A Chinese farmer, two African boys, and a warlord: toward a global microhistory', *Journal of World History*, 21, 2011, p. 574.

14 Quoted in McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, p. 228.

15 On the revolutionary movements in central Europe after the First World War, see F. L. Carsten, *Revolution in Central Europe, 1918–1919*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972.

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As these hopes failed to materialize, the Soviet Union increasingly became the centre of communist internationalism. In 1927, Stalin thus defined an 'internationalist' as someone who was 'ready to defend the U.S.S.R. without reservation, without wavering, unconditionally; for the U.S.S.R. is the base of the world revolutionary movement, and this revolutionary movement cannot be defended and promoted unless the U.S.S.R. is defended'.[16]

The centralized internationalism that the Comintern promoted was based on theoretical notions about the global state of capitalism and class struggles. The formulation of the so-called 'Third Period' strategy in the mid 1920s may serve as an example of how communist leaders derived global strategies based on local and national events. According to the communist theoretician Nicolai Bukharin, capitalism had entered into a new phase of crisis, and hence a new period of intensified class struggle was about to begin. Bukharin found evidence for this development all over the world: in Great Britain, the miners' general strike of 1926 proved that capitalism's 'imminent collapse' was close.[17] Further to the east, the dissolution of the Chinese Communist Party's alliance with the Guomindang convinced him that the 'Chinese revolution is one of the most important and powerful factors disrupting capitalist stabilisation'.[18] National parties were supposed to pursue policies based upon these global 'insights'.

The problem with this approach was that Comintern guidelines generally ignored specific national contexts. Having witnessed the destruction of the German working-class movement by the National Socialists after internecine struggles between social democrats and communists, as well as the popular demands for unity in France in 1934, Comintern leaders decided to abandon the 'social fascism' thesis that had declared social democracy to be the main enemy. Now, communists were supposed to form alliances with various reformist groups. In the South African context, this meant that they were expected to promote interracial collaboration against fascism, and thus to abandon the 'native republic' slogan. Existing racial conflicts were, at least in theory, no longer of importance for communist politics in South Africa and had to be subordinated to a struggle against fascism that came out of a European context.[19] Steven A. Smith makes a similar argument with regards to the situation in China, where, despite its considerable influence, the Comintern was never able utterly to control the communist party. The root for this failure was, according to Smith, the 'mechanical application to China of perspectives rooted in European experience'. In 1926, for example, Karl Radek, a former member of the ECCI and provost of the newly established Sun-Yat-Sen-University at Moscow, a school for Chinese communists, likened the Guomindang to Russian left-wing social revolutionaries. Smith claims that this was a totally inappropriate analogy. Focusing solely on class as a source for solidarity,

16 Quoted in McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, pp. 67–8.

17 Matthew Worley, 'Courting disaster? The Communist International in the third period', in Worley, *In search of revolution*, p. 5.

18 Quoted in *ibid*., pp. 5–6.

19 See Apollon Davidson et al., eds., *South Africa and the Communist International: a documentary history: vol. 1: socialist pilgrims to Bolshevik footsoldiers*, London: Frank Cass, 2003, p. 16; Jonathan Derrick, *Africa's 'agitators': militant anti-colonialism in Africa and the West, 1918–1939*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008, pp. 328–9; Robert Edgar, *The making of an African communist: Edwin Thabo Mofutsanyana*, Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2005, pp. 30–1, 38–9.

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a focus that was misguided even in Europe, the peculiarities of Chinese society (for example, the social cohesion created by secret societies) remained beyond Moscow's view.[20]

To implement this centralized internationalism practically, the Comintern not only wrote guidelines but also convened meetings of communist leaders in Moscow,[21] sent emissaries to oversee the work of national communist parties, supported them with money,[22] and trained cadres at the International Lenin School in Moscow.[23] In addition to delegates who lived permanently in the respective countries, the Comintern sent multiple emissaries to national parties. Between 1921 and 1939, the small Swiss Communist Party alone was visited by at least twenty emissaries.[24] In some countries, these emissaries even played a crucial role in the foundation of communist parties, particularly where the local working-class movement was relatively weak, for example in Spain, China, or India, in the last of which M. N. Roy, a former nationalist Bengali terrorist and a founding member of the Mexican Communist Party, played a central role in the foundation of the party.[25] If national parties failed to organize local workers and remained weak, Comintern leaders blamed a lack of desire 'to correspond with the ECCI' for these insufficiencies, as a report about the desperate situation of the South African party stated.[26] At least on the elite level, communists thus established transnational networks across continents, with Moscow as the centre, even though practical problems faced by emissaries and delegates when trying to cross borders put severe limitations on the effectiveness of Moscow's control.[27]

In practical terms, interwar communism was a highly Western phenomenon. Major communist parties existed only in Europe and the United States, with the notable exceptions

20 S. A. Smith, *A road is made: communism in Shanghai, 1920–1927*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000, pp. 210–13, 281, n. 3.

21 See Thorpe, 'Comintern', p. 644.

22 For Germany, France, the United States, Great Britain, and China, see Weber, *Wandlung*, p. 308; Victor Loupan and Pierre Lorrain, *L'argent du Moscou: l'histoire la plus secrète du PCF*, Paris: Plon, 1994; Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson, *The Soviet world of American communism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, pp. 107–13; Thorpe, 'Comintern', pp. 648–9; Smith, *A road is made*, p. 62.

23 On the International Lenin School, see Julia Köstenberger, 'Die Internationale Lenin-Schule (1926–1938)', in Michael Buckmiller and Klaus Meschkat, eds., *Biographisches Handbuch zur Geschichte der Kommunistischen Internationale*, Berlin: Akademieverlag, 2007, pp. 287–309; Kevin Morgan and Gidon Cohen, 'Stalin's sausage machine: British students at the International Lenin School 1926–1937', *Twentieth Century British History*, 13, 2002, pp. 327–55 (see also the debate in the subsequent volumes of the journal). In this context, see also, on black communists at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV), Woodford McClellan, 'Black *hajj* to "Red Mecca": Africans and Afro-Americans at KUTV, 1925–1938', in Maxim Matusevich, *Africa in Russia, Russia in Africa: three centuries of encounters*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007, pp. 61–83.

24 See Studer, 'Stalinization', p. 49. On the influence of Comintern delegates during the Spanish Civil War, see Gina Hermann, 'The Spanish Civil War and the routes of Stalinization', in LaPorte, Morgan, and Worley, *Bolshevism*, pp. 167–87.

25 See John Callaghan, 'Blowing up India: the Comintern and India, 1928–35', in Worley, *In search of revolution*, pp. 319–36; Hermann, 'Spanish Civil War'; Dirlik, *Origins*, pp. 191–216.

26 Davidson et al., *South Africa*, p. 220.

27 See, to give but three examples, Sophie Quinn-Juge, *Ho Chi Minh: the missing years, 1919–1941*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003; Davidson et al., *South Africa*; Otto Braun, *A Comintern agent in China 1932–1939*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982. Much of the historiography concerned with the international travels of high-ranking communists turns into a kind of secret-adventure literature. On the Comintern apparatus, see Peter Huber, 'Structure of the Moscow apparatur of the Comintern and decision-making', in Rees and Thorpe, *International communism*, pp. 44–5.

of China and, to a lesser degree, India. Theoretically, however, the colonial world played an immense role in communist strategies. At the Comintern's sixth world congress in July 1928, its Finnish secretary, Otto Kuusinen, stressed the role of the 'labouring masses in the colonies', which constituted the 'most powerful auxiliary forces of the socialist world revolution'. As Kuusinen believed that the colonies were the 'most dangerous sector of the imperialist front', he hoped that the masses in 'India, China and all other colonial and semi-colonial countries' would rally to the banner of communism.[28] It was particularly China upon which communist anti-colonialists placed their hopes. On the one hand, they seemed to be in utter ignorance of the crushing defeats that Chinese communists had suffered at the hands of Chiang Kai-shek in 1927. On the other hand, their hopes were perhaps not unreasonable, given that the Chinese Communist Party was, by 1932, the second largest non-Soviet section of the Comintern, numbering some 250,000 members.[29] The struggle against racism, within communist organizations also, was another important aspect of communist anti-imperialism. Black party members, for example, were to be promoted to leadership positions within their national sections, while racist attitudes of white members would be punished. Particularly in South Africa, this strategy attracted new members of colour to the communist party.[30]

Communists tried to put their anti-colonial internationalism into practice by agitating among anti-colonial movements and creating their own anti-imperialist organizations. In France, for example, leading members of the Ligue pour la Défense de la Race Nègre (LDRN), such as Lamine Senghor or Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté, joined the communist party.[31] At the same time, communists created their own organizations to fight against racism and imperialism, for example the 'International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers of the RILU', headed by the African American communist James W. Ford, which sought to organize black workers in the United States as well as in sub-Saharan Africa (in particular South Africa) and the West Indies.[32]

Another communist anti-colonial organization was the Berlin-based Liga gegen Kolonialgreuel und Unterdrückung (League against Colonial Atrocities and Oppression), formed in February 1926. It was transformed into the League Against Imperialism (LAI) after a congress in Brussels in February 1927, in which many non-communists participated.[33] In the wake of the congress, the LAI established various national sections – in Europe most

28 Quoted in John Callaghan, 'Storm over Asia: Comintern colonial policy in the Third Period', in Worley, *In search of revolution*, p. 28.

29 *Ibid*., p. 35. For China, see also, with further references, Patricia Stranahan, 'The Chinese Communist Party during the Third Period', in Worley, *In search of revolution*, pp. 301–18; Alexander Pantsov, *The Bolsheviks and the Chinese revolution, 1919–1927*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000; Smith, *A road is made*.

30 Callaghan, 'Storm over Asia', pp. 29–30. For the effects of the Comintern policy to promote African Americans in the communist party in Harlem, see Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, pp. 11–13.

31 On Senghor and Kouyaté, see Philippe Dewitte, *Les mouvements nègres en France, 1919–1939*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985, pp. 127–30, 174–7, and *passim*; Derrick, *Agitators*, pp. 216–26. Derrick also discusses communists' involvement in radical anti-colonialism more generally.

32 Imanuel Geiss, *Panafrikanismus: zur Geschichte der Dekolonisation*, Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1968, pp. 258–9.

33 John D. Hargreaves, 'The Comintern and anti-colonialism: new research opportunities', *African Affairs*, 92, 1993, p. 256.

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prominently in Great Britain, Germany, France, and the Netherlands – and engaged in propaganda campaigns. Outside Europe, it was present in the United States, Australia, Cuba, Brazil, and South Africa. The British section devoted most of its resources between 1929 and 1932 to the Meerut trial against (mostly communist) trade union activists in India, while the French section published two journals, the *Journal des peuples opprimés* and the Arabic *L'orient arabe*.[34] Secretly, the Comintern sought to establish total control over the LAI, but publicly the LAI portrayed itself as a 'tolerant and liberal' organization, opening its ranks to prominent non-communists in order to disguise the communist influence. The result was, as Daniel Brückenhaus has argued, that 'the LAI did indeed become what it tried to appear to be', at least before 1929.[35] Even on the elite level, these anti-colonial activities, coordinated in Berlin or London, indicate that Moscow was not the sole centre of international communism.

Willing soldiers? Local realities of communism worldwide

Comintern leaders hoped to create a hierarchical organization, in which the rank and file all over the world would swiftly put into practice any order received from Moscow. Much of the historiography on interwar communism has, at times rather uncritically, reproduced this image. Taking the communist elites' ideal for reality, Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, for example, claim that the Comintern was able 'to command the loyalty of millions of militants and sympathizers who, rightly or wrongly, regarded the Soviet Union as the beacon of humanity'.[36] Hermann Weber, historian of the German Communist Party (KPD), similarly claims that German communists were nothing but 'auxiliary forces for Stalin's foreign policy'.[37]

Research on communism at a local level has called this image into question, not least because of the many practical limitations that party officials faced when effectively trying to 'control' local branches.[38] Scholars such as Klaus-Michael Mallmann, Randi Storch, and Hans J. van de Ven have emphasized the multiple conflicts between the party leadership and its rank and file. They and others have thus argued that local circumstances were much more important for understanding communists' actions on the ground than party strategies devised somewhere far away, in Berlin, Paris, New York, or Moscow. Accordingly, historians have argued, as in Daniel J. Opler's formulation with regard to communism in New York's department store unions, that 'the history of communism and anti-communism must be

34 On the LAI, see most recently Daniel Brückenhaus, 'The transnational surveillance of anti-colonialist movements in western Europe, 1905–1945', PhD thesis, Yale University, 2011, pp. 280–331. See also John Saville, 'Reginald Bridgeman', in Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville, *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, London: Macmillan, 1984, pp. 44–5; Geiss, *Panafrikanismus*, pp. 253–8. A second congress was held in 1929: see Callaghan, 'Storm over Asia', p. 30.

35 Brückenhaus, 'Transnational surveillance', p. 292.

36 McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, p. xvii.

37 Weber, *Wandlung*, p. 307. For a similar argument regarding Comintern strategies in the colonial world, see Callaghan, 'Storm over Asia', p. 18. For the French case, see Stéphane Courtois and Annie Kriegel, *Eugen Fried: le grand secret du PCF*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1997.

38 See, with regard to Germany, Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, pp. 149–54.

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placed firmly within a local context'.[39] If local contexts did indeed matter most, the history of interwar communism would have to be written as a mere multitude of local histories, rather than as a global history.

I caution against such an approach. Rather, this article proposes that these conflicts constitute an essential part of communism's *global* history, not least because they were common in all countries in which a significant communist party existed. More importantly, the conflicts between rank-and-file activists and their leaders should be interpreted as instances in which global history took place, so to speak, on a local level, as local activists resisted a leadership that wanted them to subordinate their local concerns to global strategies.

Communist leaders clearly recognized that their underlings did not think as globally as they should. The German party leader Ruth Fischer complained in 1925 that 'One of the major inherited diseases [*Haupterbkrankheit*] [of the party] is its particularism. The party member first and foremost feels as a member of the local group, but not as a member of the district or even the International.'[40] A *Report on organisation* of the British Communist Party from 1922 echoed these concerns: 'A member should not think of himself as a member of the XYZ Branch or Local (with the suggestion of local separatism) thus given; he is a member of the Communist Party, working in such and such a group or nucleus.'[41] In China, Chen Duxiu, head of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), complained along similar lines in June 1923 that 'party members often do not have complete faith in the party', meaning the central organization.[42] However, no party was ever really able to overcome this 'separatism' and implement the 'iron discipline' that it demanded in theory, as the work by Mallmann, Morgan, Cohen and Flinn, and van de Ven makes clear.

Conversely, rank-and-file communists claimed to understand their particular local situations better than the central organizations, which is why they did not follow party orders. Steve Nelson, a Croatian immigrant to the United States and communist water worker, recalled struggles about how much emphasis should be placed on the accomplishments of the Soviet Union in shop papers. Projecting the 'Soviet Union as a model of socialism' did not 'cut with a lot of men in the shop', he noted. 'Those inclined to argue for general socialist propaganda and publicizing the accomplishments of the Soviet Union were more likely to be full-time staffers for the Party with fewer day-to-day connections in the factories. When you work in a Party office all day and never talk to anybody but other highly politicized people, it distorts your view of reality.'[43] Two horizons clashed here: one that reached out towards the Soviet Union and one that was focused on the factory. Similarly, workers in the metal factory of Unruh and Liebig in Leipzig refused to present an 'independent' (that is, independent of the reformist trade unions) list for factory council elections in March 1930, arguing that in '*their* factory, their actions had been correct'. Internationally, the new 'Third Period' strategy that demanded communists to eschew any

39 Opler, *For all white-collar workers*, p. 4.

40 Quoted in Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, p. 154.

41 Quoted in Kevin Morgan, Gidon Cohen, and Andrew Flinn, *Communists and British society, 1920–1991*, London: Rivers Oram Press, 2007, p. 60.

42 Quoted in van de Ven, *From friends to comrades*, p. 90.

43 Steve Nelson, James R. Barrett, and Rob Ruck, *Steve Nelson: American radical*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981, p. 40.

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kind of collaboration with social democrats might make sense, but in their particular factory, it did not. They would have only embarrassed themselves, given that the mood among workers was very passive.[44]

In other cases, however, communists grudgingly obeyed orders from above, even if they harmed their local position. During a dockworkers' strike in Bremen and Hamburg, for example, the party ordered communist workers to load ships destined for the Soviet Union, and thus to effectively act as scabs. This was much to the dismay of local communists, not least since National Socialists could exploit the incident: 'The Communist Party places the profit interests of the Soviet Union above the bread-and-butter interest of German proletarians!'[45]

British communists experienced similar difficulties when they tried to agitate among textile workers during the great strike in Lancashire in 1929. Matthew Worley notes somewhat sarcastically that 'we can only imagine how the Huddersfield workers greeted the young cockney Walter Tapsell as he endeavoured to explain to them the intricacies of the woollen industry and its relationship to the "international political situation"'.[46] These examples indicate that communist leaders and agitators thought in international terms. They tried to place local events in global frameworks, and sought to impose strategies decided in Moscow on local conditions. Rank-and-file communists, in contrast, had their particular local situation in mind, and cared little about global conditions.[47] Interestingly, leading communists in Great Britain were well aware of this problem: 'We … know most aspects of the international situation; but when the average worker wants to know anything about getting unemployed benefit … he does not come to us, he goes to the hated Social Fascist bureaucracy', the communist *Daily Worker* noted in September 1930.[48]

Confronted with orders from the top that they did not accept, local party leaders sometimes reacted with utter defiance. The case of Willi Goeß, one of the founders of the communist party in Langenhorn–Hamburg, is telling. When the KPD's central committee decided to support the campaign, initiated by the radical right, to overthrow the social democratic government of Prussia in July 1931, Goeß took a match and ignited the letter announcing the decision. He declared: 'I like my arse too much to use the paper for wiping it.'[49] Harry Jackson, the leading spokesman of the Marine Workers' Industrial Union (MWIU) on the American west coast and involved in the general strike of maritime workers in 1934, reacted similarly to an order from party superiors. An energetic communist organizer, he could nevertheless (as William McCuiston, of the MWIU and later an anti-communist, claimed) 'jump on the Communist Party's policies … where other people would get expelled for the same thing'. Allegedly, he once responded to a particularly inappropriate

44 Bundesarchiv Berlin (henceforth BArch), RY 1/I 3/8–10/155, Bl. 247 ff.

45 Jan Valtin, *Out of the night*, New York: Alliance Book Corporation, 1941, p. 255.

46 Matthew Worley, *Class against class: the Communist Party in Britain between the wars*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2002, p. 171.

47 For the French context, see the methodologically inspiring Marie-Paule Dhaille-Hervieu, *Communistes au Havre: histoire sociale, culturelle et politique (1930–1983)*, Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2009, pp. 19–21.

48 Quoted in Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists*, pp. 212–13.

49 Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, p. 163.

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order from the party secretary, Earl Browder, with a telegram that read: 'Dear Comrade Secretary Browder: Kiss my ass!'[50] In Guangdong, Chen Gongbo, a local party leader, was indeed expelled in 1926 when he refused to cut all ties with the local warlord Chen Jiongming, for he was, after all, his paid labour bureau chief. Yet his fellow communists in Guangdong then broke with the central bureau in Shanghai. As elsewhere in the world, rank-and-file communists in China remained loyal to their local leader rather than to the party's central leadership.[51]

It was often local factors rather than global visions that attracted workers to the communist party. For George Cullinan, for example, it was not the Soviet Union that made him join the communist party in the United States but the 'honest guys' of the MWIU whom he encountered in the port of Tacoma. They 'talked', he recalled, 'about the issues, about things that affected us [as seamen]'. Another seaman similarly stated: 'If these people were communists, that's what I wanted to be, and I'd never read a bit of literature.'[52] In Germany, too, Klaus-Michael Mallmann argues that it was often the popularity of a local workers' association leader upon which the party's power rested.[53] What mattered was that local communists could address local problems effectively. In both Harlem and Chicago, for example, communist parties were successful, in particular among African Americans, when they campaigned against rent hikes and forced evictions during the Great Depression or supported workers suffering from unemployment.[54] A similar argument can be made with regard to the final years of the German Weimar Republic, when communists succeeded in organizing workers for highly localized struggles against the Nazis.[55]

These examples indicate not only that the influence of communist leaderships was severely limited on the ground but also that rank-and-file communists refused to subordinate themselves to 'visions of a world' developed far away in Moscow. For example, the 'Third Period' policy, which called for a radical break with reformist organizations, had little to do with their daily realities. In Chicago, the people who 'identified themselves as communists', Randi Storch notes, 'lived within the party on terms different from those laid out in New York or Moscow. Chicago's leaders regularly battled the reality that their members came to Communism for various reasons'.[56] Communist party leaders in Chicago were frequently frustrated with rank-and-file disregard for party guidelines, and their utter refusal to do any work. Confronted with this negligence, section leaders would simply 'shrug [their] shoulders and say what can I do?'[57]

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50 Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the waterfront: seamen, longshoremen, and unionism in the 1930s*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 110–11.

51 Van de Ven, *From friends to comrades*, pp. 102–3.

52 Nelson, *Workers*, p. 88.

53 Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, p. 176–7.

54 Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, pp. 19–23, 41, Storch, *Red Chicago*, pp. 99–129.

55 On violence between communists and national socialists, see Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the fascists? The German communists and political violence, 1929–1933*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983; Pamela E. Swett, *Neighbors and enemies: the culture of radicalism in Berlin, 1929–1933*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

56 Storch, *Red Chicago*, p. 64.

57 Quoted in *ibid*., p. 85.

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Strict party discipline – in theory one of the central elements of the organization – was never as rigorously enforced as the image of small communist 'armies' might imply. Communist parties could simply not afford to expel hard-working, successful, and powerful local members, especially desperately needed skilled workers, who could agitate inside factories. In Köslin, a village in German Pomerania close to Breslau, a strong and well-organized communist group existed. Local communists sold party brochures, were all members of local trade unions, most of them regularly attended party meetings – a rather exceptional situation – and none of them drank alcohol. Yet the group was only sixteen members strong, as party superiors noted in frustration, despite the fact that it could easily have had two hundred. The reason was that Köslin's communists preferred to stay 'pure', rather than admit less committed people into their party. They therefore refused to follow the party line to agitate among sympathetic workers and to include them in the party. Despite this open, and at times explicit, defiance, however, for a long time party superiors did not dare to expel the insubordinate communists of Köslin.[58]

The situation looked similar in Chicago, where Trotskyites, who were expected to be expelled, could often remain in the party if they did promising work. Some even called for 'full freedom' to express Trotskyite views in the party. At least in Chicago, the party rarely expelled rank-and-file members, with the exception of one who was known as a 'nut' to everyone.[59] Moreover, communists in publicly exposed positions were not always promptly thrown out of the party for defying party policies. Thus, the first (and for a long time only) communist member of the British parliament, Shapurji Salkatvala, frequently acted contrary to the party line. Though a 1924 report described him as a 'Party man, last, not first', it took until 1928 for the Comintern formally to expel him.[60] He was not an exceptional case in Britain, where insubordinate party members, especially if they were industrial workers, were rarely expelled, as they were simply too valuable to the party.[61] This is not to claim that expulsion from the party never occurred, for purges were indeed frequent. Yet, particularly in places where the party was weak and could not afford loosing active members, expulsions were not the norm.

In China, too, communists openly defied commands from the top, even those coming directly from Comintern agents. Believing that the nationalist Guomindang (GMD) was a revolutionary party struggling for an 'independent Chinese republic', the Comintern's Executive Committee ordered Chinese communists in 1922, via its representative Hendricus Sneevliet (aka Maring), a Dutch communist, individually to join the GMD. However, Chinese communists feared that such a move would destroy their reputation. But, despite these worries, Maring succeeded in convincing the party's leadership of the Comintern's position. Believing that the party worked in a centralized Leninist fashion, he expected the policy to be implemented unconditionally in the entire party. Yet the results were meagre. A report from Beijing, for example, stated that 'at first, it was ineffective because many

58 Ulrich Eumann, *Eigenwillige Kohorten der Revolution: zur regionalen Sozialgeschichte des Kommunismus in der Weimarer Republik*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007, pp. 90–3.

59 Storch, *Red Chicago*, pp. 94–5.

60 Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists*, pp. 136–7.

61 *Ibid*., p. 135.

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members had doubts about the policy and also because they had arguments with nationalist comrades and because some people in the KMT [that is, the GMD] branch used comrades to create disturbances'. A report from Hunan failed to mention the issue at all. Hans van de Ven concludes that, lacking powerful institutions, the Central Committee had few opportunities to enforce the implementation of the policy ordered by Moscow.[62]

Unfortunately, van de Ven's study ceases to investigate the internal functioning after 1927, when the CCP had finally become a mass party, counting some 58,000 members, compared to less than 1,000 in January 1925.[63] By then, he argues, 'party discipline was carefully defined, and extensive and powerful supervisory institutions were set up to enforce party discipline and monitor the behaviour of cadres'.[64] However, it remains unclear how successful these institutions were with a mass of 58,000 members. Van de Ven himself remains somewhat sceptical, noting that not every communist obediently followed commands from the party's central leadership.[65] A slightly earlier report by the Central Executive Committee, dating from 1926, highlighted this point. Analysing the failure of setting up a peasant movement, it noted that some communists ran their associations 'as a private kingdom without involving peasants in the association's management'.[66] Unfortunately, we do not know how the communists on the ground, against whom these accusations were made, justified their behaviour. From the leadership's perspective, they were simply corrupt, but the reality may well have been more complex.

The case of communist anti-colonialists in France offers another example of how limited the power of party leaders was, not only vis-à-vis the rank and file but also with respect to communists in leading positions in formally independent organizations. In January 1930, the communist leader of the LDRN, Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté, was sent by both the LDRN and the Colonial Section of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF) to Marseilles, Bordeaux, and Le Havre, to form local chapters of the LDRN. Soon, Kouyaté defied party orders, and formed independent black dockworkers' and mariners' unions, first in Marseilles and then in Bordeaux, which stressed distinctly black interests. In Bordeaux, these unions even provided employers with strike-breakers, while metropolitan workers were on strike. Given that metropolitan unions so often neglected black workers' interests, Kouyaté apparently did not hesitate to collaborate with the 'class enemy'. Quite strikingly, the PCF was so desperately in need of colonial agitators that it did not dare to expel Kouyaté.[67] In this case, the clash was not between local and global frameworks but between different understandings of how suppression in the world functioned. While communists subsumed all conflicts under the fundamental struggle between the proletariat and capitalists, anti-colonialists such as Kouyaté regarded racism as an independent problem, and argued for race solidarity (instead of class solidarity) that would overcome class differences. In a way, different visions of the world clashed.[68]

62 See van de Ven, *From friends to comrades*, pp. 105–8.

63 *Ibid*., p. 162

64 *Ibid*., p. 219.

65 *Ibid*., p. 237.

66 *Ibid*., p. 173.

67 Dewitte, *Mouvements nègres*, pp. 197–206.

68 See, for different examples, Derrick, *Agitators*, pp. 208, 302–3, and *passim*.

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That local contexts mattered more to the rank and file than visions of a world revolution and the defence of the Soviet Union was indeed only one factor explaining their refusal to subordinate themselves to global strategies devised in Moscow. Other factors contributed to such conflicts, for example personal squabbles between (local) communists. Yet it is telling not only that similar conflicts existed in all major communist parties, but also that rank-and-file communists around the globe explicitly claimed to understand their local situation better than their party superiors. This suggests that merely locating these conflicts in the local or national histories of the specific communist parties does not suffice. They were a crucial part of the *global* history of interwar communism.

One argument that historians have made about the independent-mindedness (*Eigensinn*, in the German context) of many communists deserves particular attention.[69] Kevin Morgan, Gideon Cohen, and Andrew Flinn, for example, argue that communist parties attracted people who had always questioned authority, and who spoke up against teachers or bosses. When they entered the communist party, however, they were expected to be loyal and obedient within this specific sphere. This was bound to create tension, even in the party's highest circles. Marian Jessop, a member of the British Communist Party's executive committee, reacted to the Comintern's orders after the publication of the Hitler–Stalin pact in a way that exemplifies this point: 'When the bosses have spoken to me that, either accept these conditions or … I have always challenged the "or" and I feel very much like that in this situation.' And yet, he did accept the orders from Moscow.[70] Another factor that might explain the insubordination of rank-and-file activists is that factory workers viewed party bureaucrats sitting behind desks with a certain disdain and distrust. Harry Hynes, an immigrant from Australia, and first secretary of the MWIU until the communist party judged his temperament 'ill suited for the responsibilities' of the position, offers an example. He once told his fellow communist Bill Bailey, as Bailey recalled: 'You're the guy that's out there in contact with the enemy every day, while they [the communist party bureaucrats] are snug and safe behind a desk. Don't let [them] browbeat you when you think you're right.'[71] In Leipzig, rank-and-file members accused party officials of being fat cats (*Bonzen*) who were not even 'real' comrades but tried to bribe fellow communists with beer.[72] These examples suggest that class tensions existed within communist parties, too.

What Randi Storch has noted about communists in Chicago, in a way echoing Klaus-Michael Mallmann, is thus true for many parts of the world. As this discussion of local perspectives on communism in different national contexts has suggested: 'Instead of acting as a small army whose members followed orders without question, Chicago's party operated on a more contingent base, with its leaders having to take account of their members' varied backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs.'[73] The Comintern's self-image as a 'world party' that was led from Moscow, frequently reproduced by historians, does not hold true if we analyse communism on the local rank-and-file level. Hopes of party leaders, like Harry Pollitt of the

69 See Mallmann, 'Gehorsame Parteisoldaten'.

70 Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists*, p. 135.

71 Nelson, *Workers*, p. 90.

72 BArch, RY 1/I 3/8–10/154, Bl. 149 ff.

73 Storch, *Red Chicago*, pp. 97–8.

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British Communist Party, that one day the party would be strong enough not only to have its people elected into union positions but also to 'smash' them when they would not 'conform', were never realized, as Morgan and his co-authors note.[74] Yet, this does not mean that one can easily dismiss the global dimensions of interwar communism. The Comintern's ideal of a highly centralized global organization is crucial to an understanding of communism, not because it represented reality but because it produced countless conflicts within the communist movement, which makes these conflicts an essential part of communism's global history that took place on the local level.

Communist internationalism among the rank and file

Even if local actors refused to obey orders from above, internationalist ideals and dreams that often, though by no means exclusively, centred around the Soviet Union, informed communists' everyday lives, imaginations, emotions, and practices, as this final section will show. These local practices, too, are part of communism's global–local history. The Soviet Union took a central place in the imaginary of the rank and file, not as a place from where to receive orders but as a socialist dream come true. The autobiographies of German communists examined by Ulrich Eumann provide a glimpse into the communist mind-set. Mischket Liebermann, for example, had purchased a photo of Lenin during a memorial held in 1924. On its back, she noted: 'Rarely had I felt so deeply moved [*ergriffen*]. I had a sad and raw feeling [*ein wehes und wundes Gefühl*].' Another communist, Georg Fischer, stressed in his autobiography that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was their 'great role model'. While such sentiments of admiration were probably widespread, some – particularly elderly – communists in Germany also felt a certain guilt for not succeeding in revolutionizing their country. Günther Reimann wrote: 'My friends and I, we felt we were guilty for the misery in the Soviet Union … We in Germany had "failed". Left alone, Lenin and the Bolsheviks were bound to end up in such a horrible situation.'[75] Countless lectures, books, films, and, most importantly, articles, above all in Willi Münzenberg's tabloid *Arbeiter Illustrierten Zeitung*, were intended to educate communists about the 'new America'.[76]

It remains difficult to assess how much of an impact this propaganda had. At least some former communists recount how lectures about the Russian Revolution, organized by the paramilitary Rotfrontkämpferbund (League of Red Fighters), provided them with examples of how the working class 'could and would be victorious'.[77] Chicago's communists expressed similar feelings. Ben Gray, for example, a Ukrainian Jewish immigrant cited by Randi Storch, considered it necessary to defend the Soviet Union 'because it was the only socialist country in existence at the time and … because [of] the constant danger that

74 Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists*, p. 135.

75 For these quotes, see Mischket Liebermann, *Aus dem Ghetto in die Welt: Autobiographie*, Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1977, p. 59, Georg Fischer, *Vom aufrechten Gang eines Sozialisten: ein Parteiarbeiter erzählt*, Bonn: Dietz, 1979, p. 63. All are quoted in Ulrich Eumann, '"Kameraden vom roten Tuch": die Weimarer KPD aus der Perspektive ehemaliger Mitglieder', *Archiv für Geschichte des Widerstands und der Arbeit*, 16, 2001, pp. 125–6.

76 On Willi Münzenberg, see Sean McMeekin, *The red millionaire: a political biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow's secret propaganda tsar in the West*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003.

77 Eumann, 'Kameraden', pp. 125–6.

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the Soviet Union was in of being attacked by the imperialist world in the actual sense'.[78] Clearly, these communists felt a deep emotional commitment to the USSR. The 'success' of the Russian revolution gave meaning and, importantly, hope to their own political activities.

Communist internationalism played a similarly significant role in the United States. African Americans who had joined the communist party early on cited its internationalist ideas, crossing racial boundaries, as an important factor that attracted them to the party. As Harry Haywood, one of Chicago's leading black communists remarked, the communist party 'comprised the best and most sincerely revolutionary and internationally minded elements among white radicals and therefore formed the basis for the revolutionary unity of Blacks and whites. … [I]t was part of a world revolutionary movement uniting Chinese, Africans, and Latin Americans with Europeans and North Americans through the Third Communist International.'[79] In his study of communism in Harlem during the Great Depression, Mark Naison similarly emphasizes the importance of the Soviet Union as a place that seemed to have overcome racial prejudices: 'If the Soviet Party could overcome age-old divisions in the Russian Empire, might not it be possible for the American Party, ethnically fragmented though it was, to ultimately transcend American prejudices and fight aggressively for black concerns?'[80] The attraction of these perspectives can only be understood in the light of the local conditions of black communists in Harlem, who were isolated from their white comrades. Naison argues that they explain why black communists embraced the 'bolshevization' of the party: 'In an organisation where support for black activities tended to flow from the top down, blacks found little reason to defend the principle of rank-and-file control, and aligned themselves with the centralisers in the Party leadership.'[81] Not only did internationalism and anti-racism attract black workers to the party, but it also made them support the party leadership. Global ideals of a world without racism informed local practices.

Making sense of local communist histories thus requires placing them within the global context of communist ideals. This anti-racism professed by the communist party appealed even to non-communists, as a reader of the African American newspaper *Chicago Defender* explained: 'My knowledge of Russia convinces me that the Negro element can more easily fit in there than it can in this land of sainted bigots and thinly veneered barbarians who appreciate us only when we are in our places, wherever that may be.'[82]

Cultural and social practices on the ground equally reflect admiration for the Soviet Union among the communist rank and file. In Germany, for example, communists eagerly bought busts of Lenin and Stalin, or named their sons 'Lenin-Adolf' and 'Iwan', thus indicating their admiration for the Soviet Union.[83] The Chicago communist and writer Richard Wright, to give another example, recalled how black communists tried to mimic Lenin. They 'turned their shirt collars in to make a V at the front, and turned the visors of

78 Storch, *Red Chicago*, pp. 69–70.

79 *Ibid*., p. 51.

80 Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, p. 11.

81 *Ibid*., p. 12.

82 Storch, *Red Chicago*, p. 78.

83 Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, p. 232.

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their caps backward, tilted upward at the nape of the neck'; 'When engaged in conversation, they stuck their thumbs in their suspenders or put their left hands into their shirt bosoms or hooked their thumbs into their back pockets as they had seen Lenin or Stalin do in photographs.' Some party members even 'rolled their r's and mispronounced some words, like … they heard in the Party'.[84] Having just returned from a trip to the Soviet Union, Lovett Fort-Whiteman, a Harlem communist and organizer of the American Negro Labor Congress in the fall of 1925, underlined the communist dominance of the organization 'by his choice of costume – a Russian rabochka – and of entertainment – a Russian ballet!'[85] Such practices made the Soviet Union part of the cultural everyday life of local communists. That said, using communist jargon could cause significant confusion. For example, the Chicago communist Carl Hirsch recalled a party leader talking 'a good part of the evening … about something he called BoorGois'. He 'talked and talked about the BoorGois and nobody in the room knew what the hell he was talking about'.[86]

Faith in the revolution and admiration for the Soviet Union also shaped private lives. The belief that a global revolution was to take place shortly, possibly even within a few years, was so acute that individual communists delayed important personal decisions. Hirsch said that 'It was as though any day now life was going to change so drastically. … So don't plan … what you're going to do in 10 years from now or 20 years from now. There were few … committed Party people who had insurance – or who bought homes or anything of that nature'.[87] On a maybe more positive note, communist internationalism also resulted in marriages across continents. Black communists from Harlem found their wives during stays at the International Lenin School in Moscow, as did some Chinese students.[88]

Personal exchanges across borders were an important means to put communist internationalism into practice, not only on the leadership level but also among the rank and file.[89] The most important destination for mobile communists was the Soviet Union. Communists organized trips to the 'Fatherland of Socialism', which were also meant to attract workers from beyond the boundaries of the party. Indeed, communists sometimes succeeded in this endeavour. For example, returning from the Soviet Union, a social democratic factory council member from Essen praised the Soviet Union's secret police, the Cheka, as an instrument against 'counterrevolution, usury, and corruption'.[90] In case of a revolution in Germany, he recommended creating a similar institution. Blind to the harsh realities of the Soviet Union, probably owing to ideological assumptions that were difficult to question, a strictly controlled programme during the visit, and the impossibility of

84 Richard Wright, *Black boy: American hunger*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1993, pp. 346–7, quoted in Storch, *Red Chicago*, p. 66.

85 Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, p. 14.

86 Storch, *Red Chicago*, p. 67.

87 *Ibid*., p. 69.

88 Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, p. 16. For the Chinese students, see the forthcoming work by Elizabeth McGuire.

89 It would certainly be interesting to compare communists' journeys to Moscow with religiously inspired travels, such as the *hajj* to Mecca, but this lies outside the scope of this article. See in this context McClellan, 'Black *hajj*'.

90 Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, p. 233.

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communicating in Russian, visiting communists praised life in the Soviet Union. A proletarian family had more meat to eat in one month than a German family had in six months, one communist reported back to Germany.

For other communists, however, a trip to the Soviet Union could become an eye-opener about suppression in the 'socialist fatherland'.[91] Many communists who returned from the Soviet Union enjoyed some prestige among their fellow comrades, but others were not welcome at home. Communist functionaries from Leipzig, for example, were treated with jealousy and distrust upon their return. They had gone, their fellow comrades claimed, with cheap paper cartons, but came back with expensive leather suitcases.[92] Trips to the Soviet Union could thus both reinforce beliefs that a utopia had come true and create disillusion among communists about these beliefs.

During the Great Depression, the Soviet Union's attraction reached its climax, when the 'Soviet Way' seemed superior to that of the 'West', which had resulted in massive unemployment and poverty. Communist meetings that praised the 'paradise' in Soviet Russia attracted numerous workers, even in areas hitherto relatively untouched by communism, such as Catholic regions in Germany. Facing unemployment, skilled workers from countries hit by the depression – such as Germany or the United States – increasingly sought to move permanently to the Soviet Union, where they believed that they would participate in building socialism. While some of them reported back positively, painting life in the Soviet Union in brightest colours, others quickly returned, disillusioned about the harsh realities of life in the USSR.[93]

The Soviet Union did not welcome all those (proclaimed) communists who wanted to come. Especially in countries with weak communist parties, party leaders urged communists to stay, and even prohibited them from moving to the Soviet Union. Chicago's party leaders declared that 'While the Soviet Union needs a few skilled mechanics, they are not in need of communists. Therefore if you happen to be a good mechanic and also a communist, then you stay in the USA', and therefore developed an elaborate application procedure that would discourage communists from going. However, rank-and-file members sometimes tried to find ways to circumvent these restrictions.[94] Even though communists were not a 'small army' readily obeying any order from Moscow, the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union still played a crucial role in their imaginary, as something to imitate, or as a place to move to.

Moscow was by no means the sole destination for rank-and-file communists participating in transnational networks and exchanges. In 1924–25 alone, for example, communists of St Pancras, in Britain, could, if they wanted to, listen to speakers from communist parties in Germany, Australia, America, and the Soviet Union, though some scepticism about workers' interest in foreign events is certainly appropriate.[95] Another way to engender international contacts among communists was through sporting events. As early as 1924, the communist-controlled British Workers' Sports Federation undertook a football

91 *Ibid*., pp. 233–4. For an example, see Valtin, *Out of the night*, pp. 261–84.

92 BArch, RY 1/I 3/8–10/154, Bl. 149 ff.

93 Mallmann, *Kommunisten*, pp. 233–4.

94 Storch, *Red Chicago*, p. 68.

95 Morgan, Cohen, and Flinn, *Communists*, p. 213.

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tour through Germany.[96] Even more attractive were matches with Soviet teams in 1926 and 1927 in Dresden, Leipzig, Hamburg, and Chemnitz, which the better-trained Soviet teams dominated in such a way that their German opponents felt ashamed. Communists tried to use these popular 'Russian matches' for agitation. Members of the Rotfrontkämpferbund, for example, welcomed the Soviet team at Dresden's main station.[97] However, the internationalism that these travels engendered should not be overestimated, as André Gounot has pointed out. During the Spartakiade in Lyon in 1932, the communist version of the Olympic Games, members of the French Fédération Sportive du Travail dubbed fellow proletarian athletes as 'dirty foreigners', lacking any sign of international solidarity.[98]

In countries with a significant immigrant population, such as France or the United States, communism also had an integrative function at times, uniting native and immigrant workers. In Harlem, it was the party leadership's efforts to overcome ethnic divisions within the party that resulted in interracial party structures. A campaign against fascist Italy's war in Abyssinia provided the ground for cooperation between black and Italian activists.[99] In Chicago, although conflicts between different (European) nationalities shattered the party's coherence, the diversity of its membership also 'confirmed to some [communists] that it was a truly international organization'.[100] In France, where there were many immigrant workers – both from other European countries and from France's colonies – the communist party consciously, and at times successfully, tried to agitate among these workers. Immigrant workers from Algeria, China, Hungary, Poland, Russia, and Italy constituted the backbone of a strike at the immense Renault factories in Paris. Chinese workers seem to have been particularly active: out of 600 employees, 200 went on strike.[101] Communists paid special attention to Czechoslovak workers, and charged a female delegate to agitate among them. In the eyes of the right-wing press, these workers, living in France 'without a family and without a home', constituted the communist party's 'red army'.[102] Later on, during the Popular Front period from 1936, communist anti-fascism helped to integrate Italian emigrants, who had often fled their home country for political reasons, into the French political scene.[103]

Communist practices reflected the party's anti-racism, an essential part of its internationalist ideology. In the United States, African Americans were consciously

96 See Worley, *Class against class*, pp. 199–200.

97 Frank Heidenreich, *Arbeiterkulturbewegung und Sozialdemokratie in Sachsen vor 1933*, Demokratische Bewegungen in Mitteldeutschland 3, Cologne: Böhlau, 1995, pp. 366–70.

98 André Gounot, 'Sport or political organization? Structures and characteristics of the Red Sport International, 1921–1937', *Journal of Sport History*, 28, 2001, p. 31.

99 Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, pp. 36–7, 40–1, 155–8, and *passim*.

100 Storch, *Red Chicago*, p. 86.

101 In this context, see also Marilyn Avra Levine, *The found generation: Chinese communists in Europe during the twenties*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1993.

102 Depretto and Schweitzer, *Communisme*, pp. 148–9. For communist successes in organizing foreign dock-workers in Le Havre, see also Dhaille-Hervieu, *Communistes au Havre*, pp. 45–6. On Chinese communists in France, see also Smith, *A road is made*, pp. 122–3.

103 See, for example, Pierre Guillen, 'L'antifascisme, facteur d'intégration des Italiens en France (1926–1939)', in Istituto socialista di studi storici, ed., *L'emigrazione socialiste nella lotta contro il fascismo*, Florence: Sansoni, 1982, pp. 209–20; Julian Mischi, *Servir la classe ouvrière: sociabilités militants au PCF*, Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010, p. 39.

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promoted to leadership positions within the party.[104] In Chicago, communists organized picnics and dances that attracted both blacks and whites, a rare occasion in the heavily segregated city, according to Storch. At a Young Communist League (YCL) dance in December 1933, a 'Negro girl were [*sic*] teaching a white boy a new step dance', party member P. Camel reported.[105] In Harlem, black communists even taught their white comrades how to dance, so that they would not feel ashamed asking black girls to dance.[106] Such social opportunities even resulted in interracial marriages. The black communist leaders 'David Pointdexter and Herbert Newton, for example, were both married to white women'. Newton's marriage with Jane Emery, the daughter of a wealthy family, caused so much stir that the couple and their two children eventually moved to the Soviet Union.[107]

This does not mean that communist parties were free of racism. In Chicago, the YCL had organized a dance, during which a leading white YCL member 'accused a white boy of "falling" for "crow jam" when he danced with a young [black] female member'. When the dance ended, the white YCL members insulted their black comrades and 'some of *our* old Party members had to guard these negro home [*sic*]'. What was most frustrating, however, for black communists such as Camel, who reported about the incident, was that he was afterwards told just to 'forget about it'.[108]

In South Africa, too, where the party had sought to attract black workers by promoting an 'independent native republic' during the mid 1930s, black communists accused their white party leaders of racism. During a meeting in August 1935, for example, Peter Ramutla, organizing secretary of the Gas and Power Workers' Union, yelled at the leading communists Issy Wolfson and Willie Kalk: 'They [white communists] treated the Natives like their servants and acted as bosses. All white men should be shot and the leadership was not native, but puppets carrying out instructions from overseas. … Because we have black skins, we are not allowed to collect money.'[109] Another black communist, John Gomas, expressed similar sentiments: 'Native Workers are a secondary consideration. … I have not the same status in South Africa as you Europeans.'[110] These examples show that communists' official anti-racism was not able to nullify existing racist prejudices. Charges of racism mixed with resistance to obeying orders coming from 'overseas'.

Workers who played a particularly important role in facilitating communist internationalism were dockers and seamen. The anti-colonial communist journals *The Negro Worker* and *La Race Nègre*, for example, were smuggled to various destinations by black seamen.[111] Hidden in bibles or disguised as Christian literature, the journal reached workers around the globe, even though the readership probably remained small. Advertisements from shops in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Paris, Nairobi, London, and Harlem indicate how

104 Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, p. 19.

105 Storch, *Red Chicago*, p. 78.

106 Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, pp. 137–8.

107 Storch, *Red Chicago*, p. 78.

108 Quoted in *ibid*., p. 89.

109 Edgar, *The making*, p. 36.

110 *Ibid*., p. 37.

111 Geiss, *Panafrikanismus*, p. 261.

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far it circulated.[112] Thematically, the paper focused mostly on revolutionary movements in Africa, reporting, for example, about a general strike in Nigeria in 1929, and the uprising of workers on the Congo–Ocean railroad in 1928. Other themes included 'The fight of the American CP against unemployment: significance to negro workers' (February 1931), an 'Appeal to black soldiers in France' (September 1931), and 'Religion in the service of imperialism' in Nigeria (September/October 1932), although it seems that these campaigns were not organized by communists.

Furthermore, communist marine workers engaged in practical acts of international solidarity. In the French port city of Le Havre, communist dockers were crucial in enabling the numerous and often clandestine international journeys of Comintern agents, and in supporting political refugees from Germany (after 1933), Spain, and Indochina. They also helped to smuggle weapons for Republicans during the Spanish Civil War of 1936–39, and prevented the transport of those intended for Franco.[113] Elsewhere, they prevented the movement of war material for fascist Italy's war against Ethiopia in 1935. In Cardiff,

> seamen boarded an Italian steamer and 'plastered her bulkhead with posters denouncing the fascist aggression'. On the East Coast of the United States, a Norwegian crew walked off the freighter *Spero* because it was being loaded with scrap iron destined for Mussolini's war against Ethiopia. … In San Pedro longshoremen and seamen … refused to load or man the *S.S. Oregon*, even though it was bound for Singapore, because of the possibility that the aviation fuel it was carrying could be transshipped to the war zone.[114]

In South Africa, too, black dock workers refused 'to handle Italian goods at Cape Town and Durban'.[115] It remains unclear whether all these seamen and marine workers were actually members of communist parties, though it seems plausible that they were at least inspired by communist anti-fascist propaganda. Be this as it may, such practices indicate that global events mattered for local actors and informed their actions, even without the Comintern giving explicit commands.

Finally, we need to turn to international solidarity campaigns that communists organized. One example concerned the Italian American anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, who were sentenced to death for robbing and killing two men in Massachusetts in December 1919, and executed in 1927.[116] Another campaign was for the defendants during the Meerut trials in India, a group of trade unionists arrested in 1929 under charges of conspiracy to organize an anti-colonial communist uprising.[117] Yet another defended the 'Scottsboro Boys', a group of nine young male African Americans accused of raping two

112 Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: race and political culture in 1930s Britain*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 74.

113 Dhaille-Hervieu, *Communistes au Havre*, pp. 57–58, 105, 112.

114 Nelson, *Workers*, p. 170.

115 Davidson et al., *South Africa*, p. 333.

116 Historians still do not agree about the guilt of Sacco and Vanzetti. For a brilliant account of the international solidarity campaign, see Lisa McGirr, 'The passion for Sacco and Vanzetti: a global history', *Journal of American History*, 93, 2007, pp. 1085–1115.

117 See Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich*, pp. 146–99.

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white women in Alabama in 1931, who were sentenced to death but not executed.[118] The campaigns for Sacco and Vanzetti and the Scottsboro Boys caused particularly massive protests around the globe, in which communists, liberals, socialists, and other radicals participated. They sometimes resulted in violent clashes between the police and protesters.

In this case, around the globe has to be taken quite literally. Protests against the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti took place in numerous cities across Latin America, in Europe, in Australia, and in colonial cities in Africa such as Johannesburg and Casablanca. They mobilized not only communists but also anarchists, who had formed their own transnational networks, especially in Latin America. The most severe riots occurred in Paris, where several hundred protesters battled the police for hours and attacked American nationals during the night after the execution on 23 August 1927.[119] The solidarity campaign for the Scottsboro Boys, too, reached 'from California to Sydney, from Montreal to Cape Horn, from Shanghai to Buenos Aires'.[120] In Beirut, six or seven men hurled stones against the US embassy from a passing car. Handbills attached to the stones, signed by a 'Central Commission Assistant Committee of Syrian Reds', protested against the Scottsboro verdicts.[121] In Germany, protesters in Berlin, Bremen, Dresden, Leipzig, and Cologne broke the windows of US diplomatic and trade delegations.[122] In Chemnitz, one protester was even shot dead by the police.[123] International solidarity could mobilize, in Europe alone, 'nearly half a million people', who participated in meetings to protest the scheduled execution of the 'Scottsboro boys', according to the American communist Louis Engdahl.[124] These campaigns indicate that international solidarity was taken seriously by rank-and-file communists and other radicals. It gave them the sense of belonging to a genuinely global movement.

Conclusion

Interwar communism was a deeply global movement. International communist leaders developed 'visions of the world', devised strategies that national parties were expected to implement, and often led highly transnational and mobile lives, thereby creating networks that spanned continents. If historians have addressed the global aspects of communism, they have mostly focused on this elite level. Yet the ideals of a centralized 'world party' that functioned in a strict top-down manner never materialized, the Comintern never being able simply to 'command the loyalty of millions', which has given historians reason to argue that communism is best understood at its 'local level'. But even on the local level, communism's global dimensions played a crucial role. Ideas of international solidarity and fascination with

118 On the Scottsboro case and the international support campaign, see James A. Miller, Susan D. Pennybacker, and Eve Rosenhaft, 'Mother Ada Wright and the international campaign to free the Scottsboro Boys, 1931–1934', *American Historical Review* 106, 2001, Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich*, pp. 16–65.

119 Brooke L. Bowler, *Becoming Americans in Paris: transatlantic politics and culture between the world wars*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 93–130.

120 Quoted in Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich*, p. 25.

121 *Ibid*., p. 26.

122 Miller, Pennybacker, and Rosenhaft, 'Mother Ada Wright', p. 401.

123 Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich*, p. 31.

124 Miller, Pennybacker, and Rosenhaft, 'Mother Ada Wright', p. 404.

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the Soviet Union informed rank-and-file communists' dreams and practices. They imitated what they believed to be 'Soviet' styles, moved to the Soviet Union, and engaged in other forms of international solidarity. However that does not mean that rank-and-file communists, and at times even national communist leaders, were 'willingly obeying party soldiers', as some historians claim. On the contrary, many communists had a 'kiss-my-ass' attitude with regard to orders from above, much to the frustration of the leadership. In their day-to-day efforts, rank-and-file communists had to be concerned about local circumstances, rather than about the defence of the Soviet Union or a worldwide revolution.

This article has argued that these conflicts between the rank and file and leaders should be considered part of communism's global history. They were common wherever communist parties with a substantial membership existed. Furthermore, *resistance* against the official Comintern internationalism 'from above', just like resistance against other forms of globalization, should be regarded as an integral part of global history. In fact, not only are the histories of communism in Harlem, Chicago, Leipzig, Le Havre, or the 'Little Moscows' in Britain, which Stuart Macintyre has studied, best understood on the local level, but this is also true of the *global* history of communism during the interwar years. This is precisely because the ideals of internationalism 'from above' reached their limits on the local level. Methodologically, I would argue that this approach that locates 'the global' on the local level, in terms both of how internationalist ideas informed people's behaviour in local contexts and of how those people resisted forms of globalism, might bridge the gap between global and local histories.

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