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Fighting Marginality: The Global Moment of 1917-1919 and the Re-Imagination of Belonging



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Résumés

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The transformation of the international order brought about by the First World War engendered strange bedfellows. At the end of the war, Pan-Africanists, Mexican anti-imperialists, and German colonialists all shared a sense of marginality, finding themselves excluded from the deliberations over the new world order. We take this shared sense of marginality as the starting point for an exploratory comparison of the three groups. All three appropriated globally-circulating ideas of liberalism and communism for their own ends in their desire to overcome their persistent or newly imposed marginal status. We argue that the ensuing processes of adaptation allowed these actors to form ideologically — and, at times, geographically — broader senses of belonging. Furthermore, we problematize the concept of global moments by highlighting how the three groups developed similar, if not necessarily congruous perceptions of the conjuncture of 1917-19

Au sortir de la Première Guerre Mondiale, on retrouve d'étranges analogies entre panafricanistes, anti-impérialistes mexicains, et colonialistes allemands. Alors qu'un nouvel ordre international se met en place, ceux-ci se sentent exclus de son élaboration. Nous prenons ce sentiment partagé de marginalisation comme point de départ pour esquisser une comparaison entre ces différents groupes. Afin de lutter contre leur position marginale, établie de longue date ou tout juste imposée, chaque mouvement s'approprie les idées qui circulent dans le monde, du libéralisme au communisme, et tente de les adapter en fonction de ses objectifs propres. Ce processus d'appropriation et d'adaptation a permis d'imaginer une appartenance élargie du point de vue idéologique mais aussi géographique. Il s'agit par ailleurs de démontrer l'utilité du concept de *global moment* en soulignant combien ces trois groupes ont développé des perceptions similaires, si ce n'est nécessairement concordantes, de la période critique de 1917-1919

Las transformaciones del orden internacional provocadas por la Primera Guerra Mundial generaron extraños paralelos entre grupos sociales muy distintos. Al final de la guerra, tanto los pan-africanistas, como los antiimperialistas en México y los colonialistas alemanes se sentían marginalizados, al verse excluidos de las deliberaciones sobre el nuevo orden mundial. Tomamos a esta percepción común de la marginalidad como punto de partida para examinar los tres grupos. Al querer superar dicha marginalización, estos tres grupos hicieron suyas ideas de circulación global y las emplearon para fines propios. Sostenemos que los procesos subsiguientes de apropiación transformaron las identidades de estos actores de manera profunda. Además, analizamos la utilidad del concepto de *momentos globales*, resaltando cómo los tres grupos desarrollaron percepciones similares, si no necesariamente



Entrées d'index

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Texte intégral

Introduction

- ¹ Towards the end of the First World War, West African Pan-Africanists, Mexican anti-imperialists, and German colonialists appeared to share a similar feeling. At a moment when imperialism still reigned supreme,¹ all were left frustrated by their unfulfilled hopes for the post-war order. Pan-Africanists' attempt to influence the Paris Peace Conference was thwarted by France and Britain, who wished to maintain their colonial empires. Mexican anti-imperialists witnessed growing US encroachment throughout the Americas. And German colonialists suffered the loss of their primary field of purpose. As a result, the three disparate groups perceived themselves as being left on the receiving end of unequal global power relationships. What appears to connect these cases, then, was a shared sense of marginality.
- ² We take this shared sense as the starting point for an exploratory comparison of the three groups. For each of the three, the war irrevocably changed the world order and their place in it.² For Pan-Africanists and Latin American anti-imperialists, the war's slaughter exposed Europeans' hypocritical claim to superiority and capitalism's inherent propensity for war and exploitation. For German colonialists, the war upended the racial order they had lived to uphold. Yet the three also refused to be left on the political sidelines. Indeed, they fought against what they considered their persistent – or newly imposed – marginality by engaging with and appropriating globally-circulating ideas. West African and African American intellectuals harnessed liberal and communist notions of self-determination in their struggle against colonial tutelage and racism. While fighting their own revolution, Mexicans combined the language of orthodox Marxism with their own tradition of revolutionary nationalism to contest growing North American hegemony. German colonialists attempted to reassert their political and cultural hegemony by relying on Wilsonian principles of liberal internationalism. We argue that this interplay between local actors and real, as well as imagined, global connections reconfigured actors' identities. By observing, addressing, and harnessing audiences beyond their immediate vicinity, each group made a bid to shape its future place in the post-war order.
- ³ Comparing these three disparate cases of marginality from a global perspective serves two purposes. First, we test the concept of "global moments" as a methodological tool.³ Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier suggest that between 1880 and 1930, technological innovation, increasing trade and rising migration produced a global consciousness that expressed itself in often-simultaneous yet divergent interpretations of key events around the world. One such moment encompassed the Russian Revolution, Woodrow Wilson's proclamation of the Fourteen Points, and the end of the First World War.⁴ By comparing cases across the ideological divide of imperialism, we gauge the degree to which our groups actually perceived these episodes as a watershed. We find that although all three recognized the import of the above events, they did not do so at the same time or to the same degree. Their reception followed multiple, rather than a single chronology. Speaking of global



4 The second purpose of our paper posits why this was the case. Here, we explore what we call the three groups' politics of appropriation – or their rationale for, and mode of, appropriating globally-circulating ideas. Analyzing these politics yields insights into the relationship between local actors and global events at a time of rapid historical change.⁵ Anchoring our analysis in the locally specific, we trace our cases' connections to other historical scales – the national, regional, and global. This helps us understand better how group identities are broadened beyond their immediate ideological or geographical vicinity.⁶ Rather than obscuring the locally specific, global historical approaches lend themselves to analyze *all* actors, be they dominant or marginal, itinerant or settled. Indeed, the issue at stake here is not to posit one analytical scale over another, but to recognize that historical reality arises from the analytic level we choose.⁷ In this respect, the random selection of our trio, which resulted from our respective areas of expertise, turned out to be an asset. It allowed us to showcase similar strategies of adaptation across vast ideological divides. Writing History collaboratively, then, encourages us to form new pairs – or trios – of comparison, enriching the discipline's methodology.

5 We understand marginality as a marker of both commonality *and* difference. First comes marginalization in the international arena and the imperial system. At the end of the First World War, all three groups were excluded from the decision-making processes in Paris that shaped the post-war order.⁸ Yet divergent pre-war status, access to global networks, language barriers, financial resources, and the mode of agitation all defined an individual group's ability to make itself heard and its degree of marginality vis-a-vis the two other groups. Second comes marginalization in the local public sphere. Whether in Accra, Mexico City or Berlin, the three had to compete with other vocal entrepreneurs of ideas. Each group remained a privileged minority that struggled to build popular support for its cause. Ultimately, invoking globally-circulating ideas was primarily a way by which these minorities sought to increase their often-precarious influence on a global and local level. The resulting effect on their identities was neither inevitable, nor planned or equal in its intensity, but remained an unfinished process, subject to continuous negotiation between actors themselves and different historical spheres.

6 That is *not* to say that the three groups used a similar language or had a similar vision of what marginality meant in practice. The single term marginality belies a plethora of motivations, phrasings, and practices that differed among our case studies. Taking their claims of marginality seriously does not mean we take them at face value. We also do not suggest that the histories of Pan-Africanists, Mexican anti-imperialists, and German colonialists should necessarily be analyzed together, nor that they were entangled in a profound way beyond their shared attempt to influence the postwar order. Except for individual German colonialists, the three groups did not recognize each other as suffering from a similar condition after the war. Our exploration is in no way an attempt to equate the political struggles of anti-imperialists and colonialists on a normative and moral level. The German colonialists discussed here were proponents of the economic exploitation and political domination of non-European peoples. In contrast, African and African American intellectuals as well as Mexican anti-imperialists sought to end this injustice and build a better, more equal world order. Rather than suggesting that the three groups experienced a singular form of marginality, we highlight that they pursued similar strategies to increase their influence by claiming marginal status. The First World War aligned the interests of Germany and colonized peoples in that both sought to subvert a world order built around the pre-eminence of Great Britain and, after the war, the United States.⁹ We propose a blueprint for juxtaposing our divergent actors' reaction to the aftermath of the war without forfeiting their specificity.

7 To make our case, we first examine African, Mexican, and German perspectives on 1917-1919, illustrating how this conjuncture challenged local actors' identities and fueled their sense of marginality. Second, we turn to the three groups' response to their continued or newly imposed marginal status. Pan-Africanists, Mexican anti-imperialists and German colonialists made globally-circulating ideas their own, weaving them into their local context. In doing so, the three groups defined themselves in ideologically and geographically more expansive terms. Finally, we sketch how these transformed identities translated into action. After all, Pan-Africanism, anti-imperialism, and colonial revisionism had to be *practiced* in order to gain currency.



One Moment, Three Perspectives

In Search of Political Rights

- 8 For Africans and people of African descent, the First World War certainly marked a watershed. While their service on the frontlines of Europe increased their political consciousness, the war's end also confronted them with their marginality. For one, their attempt to influence the Paris Peace Conference failed. Not only were they not invited to the conference, but the simultaneously-held first Pan-African congress was strictly monitored by both French and British authorities. Attendees had to accept a plethora of compromises and watered-down resolutions. With their contribution to the war trivialized or simply forgotten, many African veterans who stayed in the metropole suffered from poverty and discrimination. This sustained marginality was all the more frustrating as both Woodrow Wilson and the Russian Bolsheviks had appeared to promise colonized peoples and national minorities the right of self-determination. Moreover, the exclusion from the Paris negotiations mirrored Africans' and African Americans' local marginality, in which they were still subordinated colonized subjects and half-citizens. Until the war, both groups had struggled to gain more political rights at home. But while African Americans still lived under Jim Crow race laws, Africans continued to be ruled by despotic colonial regimes.
- 9 Although the war thus compounded these groups' marginality, it also marked the emergence of new political and intellectual elites in Africa. In West Africa, Europeans had developed a close relationship with local African agents before the onset of formal colonization. During the nineteenth century, as slave trading and slavery were gradually abolished, the shift towards more formalized colonial rule transformed the nature of power in local societies. Traditionally, power had resulted from the status a person either inherited or acquired by force. For individuals who lacked traditional sources of power, the only way to climb the social ladder and build their own status was through personal merit, especially in education. With the abolition of the slave trade, the state could no longer guarantee these statuses. As a result, traditional sources of power declined, opening up more room for individual initiative.
- 10 In the wake of the war, these new, status-hungry elites grew acutely aware of the double state of their marginality – and began working to overcome it. The establishment of the National Congress of British West Africa (NCBWA), which united intellectuals from all four British West African colonies, was significant in this respect. The idea of a united political movement in British West Africa was first conceived during the war and the NCBWA finally came into being in 1920.¹⁰ The increasing frustration of educated Africans over their marginality boosted their political consciousness and fed high hopes for a new post-war order. These status-conscious elites hoped that the peace settlement would reform the imperial system in their favor. It was in this vein that members of the congress wrote to West African governors, demanding a say in the peace negotiations so that the “voice of West Africa” would be heard internationally.¹¹ Within the British Empire, both the Indian National Congress and the recently founded Ceylon National Congress inspired West African political elites to demand representation in the international sphere. African elites grew even more impatient as they knew that Indians were invited to the peace conference.
- 11 In 1920, the NCBWA sent delegates to London to meet with the League of Nations Union.¹² During the meeting, J. E. Casely-Hayford, one of the founders of the congress, pointed to the ongoing constitutional reform in Ceylon and called for the same rights for British West Africa. His demand reflected post-war African discourse: “In this great war, we all united for the common cause in common sacrifice for common hopes, and, surely if this concession is made to Ceylon, why not to British West Africa?”¹³ Educated Africans' highly political consciousness accentuated the contrast between their expectations and the reality of the peace settlement, in which Africans were again relegated to the very bottom of the imperial hierarchy.
- 12 The principle of self-determination, as embodied in the programs of Woodrow Wilson, the Russian Bolsheviks, and in the peace treaty, stirred Africans' and African Americans' quest to gain a larger role in the political affairs at home and abroad. The idea of self-determination – which had simultaneously inspired anti-colonial uprisings from Egypt to Korea – offered these groups a language in which they could express their local struggles on a grander



scale.¹⁴ While Africans sought to improve their political representation at home through an increased presence of Africa in the international sphere, African Americans sought the right to full citizenship. For instance, the African American scholar W. E. B. Du Bois, who took part in the Paris Peace Conference as a journalist, suggested to French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau before the peace conference that “a great Independent State in Africa” should now “be settled and governed by Negroes”¹⁵. In particular, Du Bois’s vision concerned the future of the former German colonies in Africa. Having learned that Robert Cecil, one of the main protagonists of the peace settlement and a founder of the League of Nations, precluded a return of the German colonies, Du Bois renewed his demand to Wilson’s advisor George Foster Peabody:

If, now, a strong demand on the part of the Negroes of the world against the return of the colonies to Germany could be made, would it not tremendously strengthen the moral foundations of a just peace? [...] Would not this be in the hands of the Allies an effective weapon and on the other hand would it not be a heartening thing for Negroes to feel that they are being thus consulted and their wishes taken account of?¹⁶

- 13 Du Bois expressed the urgent desire of many Africans to take part in the post-war negotiations. Similarly, the NCBWA condemned the Anglo-French partition of Togo in the Treaty of Versailles without the consultation of its indigenous peoples. In 1920, Casely-Hayford presented the resolution of the NCBWA on this issue to the members of the League of Nations Union and added:

‘We had no fight against either Britain or France – they fought Germany, and we came to their aid and helped them. By what right can they come and partition our lands between them without consulting us?’ [...] But this we do say, Sirs, that the hope was held out to the whole of the peoples of the world as regards the right of individual peoples to self-determination. It is not fair, it is not right, it is not just, that these people should be handed over to Powers under whose flag they would rather not live. It is a crime, and it has shaken the confidence of the people very very greatly. And I ask you respectfully, Sirs, as the League of Nations Union, that you might well consider that matter and give the people an opportunity to make representations.¹⁷

- 14 Here, the feeling of injustice and the frustration over being excluded and marginalized came to its height. Disappointed but not deterred, African and African American intellectuals continued to address the international community. Several Pan-African congresses took place during the 1920s and put their claims onto the international scene. In 1923, the third congress in London demanded for the first time that people of African descent be represented in the Mandates Commission of the League of Nations and in the International Labor Organization. These congresses brought together militants from different places to meet and exchange ideas and thereby encouraged the formation of a global Pan-African network of political struggle.

Rethinking Anti-Imperialism

- 15 From a Mexican perspective, the events of 1917-1919 assumed only secondary importance behind the great upheaval taking place in Mexico itself: the Mexican Revolution, usually periodized from 1910 till 1920. The revolution profoundly transformed Mexican society, signaling that revolutionary social change was possible and could potentially alter a society’s structure rather than just replace its form of government, flag or leadership. Whether one interprets the revolution as a series of distinct rural uprisings or as one coherent national project, its preeminent role in shaping the lives of Mexicans cannot be denied.¹⁸ Indeed, the revolutionary constitution of 1917 promised to safeguard the core of the revolutionary program, especially land re-distribution. The adoption of the constitution triggered a new kind of nationalism that constantly demanded the fulfillment of the revolution’s promises and that in the 1920s merged with broader anti-imperialist discourses.

- 16 However, acknowledging the complexity and importance of the Mexican Revolution should not prevent us from investigating how global events were simultaneously interpreted and locally appropriated during the revolutionary period. One such event of global significance that reverberated throughout Latin America, and especially in Mexico, was the United States’ decision to enter the First World War. Voices warning the Latin American public of the growing danger of the “colossus of the north” had been rising since the turn of



the century. While many Latin American countries joined the war alongside the Allies and abandoned neutrality, Mexico refused to do so, partly out of fear of North American hegemonic ambitions.¹⁹ Mexican observers saw the United States' involvement in the global war as indication of U.S. ambition to gain a position of global hegemony that would be particularly tangible in – and detrimental to – Mexico. While this geopolitical premonition proved to be true, a simultaneous shift in the cultural sphere occurred. Until 1914, Europe had been Latin America's main cultural reference point. The obvious inability of the continent's leaders to prevent a devastating war, soldiers' apparent enthusiasm for self-sacrifice, and the news of committed atrocities had a disillusioning effect on the Mexican public. Disputes between supporters of the Allies and German-friendly forces barely obscured the creeping recognition that Europe had lost its claim to moral and civilizational superiority. From a Mexican perspective, the First World War provincialized Europe, literally.²⁰

17 As the U.S. occupation of the Mexican port town of Veracruz in 1914 had shown, Mexican fears regarding their northern neighbor were not unwarranted. Consequently, the negotiations in Paris were met with severe skepticism. Many Mexicans believed imperialism had not yet reached its climax. The peace treaty seemed to confirm this suspicion. While the British Empire achieved its largest territorial extent, the United States successfully assumed the role of arbitrator (and creditor) in the new international order. For Mexicans, the fight against imperialism and its recognition outside of the Americas carried an additional burden: the formal independence of Mexico and other Latin American nation states. Denouncing the economic, political, and military presence of British and U.S. American interests was thus significantly more difficult to communicate to the non-American public.

18 Although different parts of Mexican society acknowledged the salience of the Russian Revolution as a global event, interpretations varied widely. Writing from his exile in Los Angeles, the Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón, for instance, applauded Lenin for starting the “great world revolution”.²¹ Flores Magón's interpretation of the revolution as an anarchist achievement against “authority, capital, and clergy,” illustrates how Mexican anti-imperialists strategically embedded the Bolshevik takeover in local political traditions.²² In 1917, the Mexican working class mainly adhered to syndicalist and anarchist ideas. In contrast, orthodox Marxism struggled to gain a foothold amongst Mexican workers. The Russian Revolution changed this by allowing for the creative combination of its themes with existing Latin American ideologies. In particular, Lenin's concept of “semi-coloniality” resonated among Mexican leftists. The concept offered a coherent ideological toolkit to condemn what Mexicans had experienced ever since independence: the paradox of being a formally independent country subject to considerable foreign interference. Lenin's ideas thus appealed to a larger audience than the membership numbers of communist factions of socialist or anarchist organizations might suggest. Although Lenin's arguments were not entirely new to the Mexican working class, he provided a potential language in which their discontent could be expressed on a global, national, and local level at the same time. Combining the language of international communism with their own vocabulary of revolutionary nationalism, Mexican anti-imperialists actively appropriated the global conjuncture of 1917-1919. As an object of imperial penetration, Latin America – not unlike Africa or Asia – was perceived to be in a marginalized position. Even though the geopolitical balance of power after the First World War had changed, Europe and the United States firmly held on to the center, relegating the rest of the world to a position of marginality. Anti-imperialists in Mexico recognized this asymmetry while simultaneously articulating a nationalist language to denounce it. Global and national forms of anti-imperialism were not mutually exclusive but could reinforce and stimulate each other.

19 Aside from its ideological vocabulary, the Russian Revolution brought revolutionary agents to Mexico, who were supposed to promote communism and gain governmental support for the struggling Soviet state. In 1919, the first Comintern agent arrived in Mexico City. Mikhail Gruzenberg, a Belarusian communist who had taken up the alias of Mikhail Borodin, had been living in exile in the United States and had returned to Russia after the revolution. Borodin's task consisted of establishing relations between the Mexican and Soviet governments while simultaneously founding a communist party behind the former's back. Borodin gained entrance to the circles of English-speaking socialists in Mexico, which brought him into contact with likeminded activists such as the Indian nationalist Manabendra Nath Roy. Borodin convinced his comrades to transform the Mexican Socialist



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Party into a communist one with affiliation to the Third International.²³ Borodin and Roy exemplify the transnational character of the anti-imperialist movement in Mexico and its ties to international communism. During their stay, both activists became convinced that simply transferring European Marxism to post-colonial Mexico would not suffice. Over the following decade, communists in Mexico tied their struggle to globally circulating ideas and ideologies, integrating revolutionary nationalism into their ideological repertoire. The resulting combination of nationalism and communism resulted in a globally-oriented anti-imperialism.

Marginal Colonialists

²⁰ On June 28, 1919, German Colonial Minister Johannes Bell and Foreign Minister Hermann Müller signed the Treaty of Versailles in the palace's Hall of Mirrors. Both men thereby not only put an end to the First World War, but also relinquished Germany's colonial empire, making the nascent republic the first – albeit involuntary – postcolonial nation.²⁴ Article 119 of the treaty stipulated that Germany henceforth renounced “all her rights and titles over her overseas possessions”²⁵. Thus, the comparatively brief period of formal German colonialism, which had begun a mere thirty-five years earlier, appeared to come to an abrupt end.

²¹ For the leadership of the German Colonial Society (*Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft*, DKG), which was the biggest and most influential colonial lobby group of the empire, the episode epitomized a radical inversion of the nation's fortunes. In late 1917, the October Revolution, the resulting Russian withdrawal from war and the Italian defeat at Caporetto had appeared to offset the United States' entry into the war, putting an all-out victory within Germany's grasp. Although all German colonies had come under Allied control by 1916, the DKG's bourgeois members were convinced that a now imminent victory in Europe would not only return the colonies into the metropole's fold, but also put Germany in a position to implement plans for a massive expansion of the overseas empire – a so called *Mittelafrika* from Senegal to Madagascar – at the expense of the Allies.

²² What followed in quick succession, instead, was the rapid downfall of the Empire and its overseas ambitions. On September 29, 1918, the Supreme Command revealed to the Reichstag that the empire stood at the brink of military collapse. A few weeks later, mutinying soldiers and dissatisfied workers overthrew the Hohenzollern monarchy in the November Revolution, doing away with the institution that had underpinned German colonialism. On November 9, workers and soldiers took Berlin. The next day, they elected a revolutionary government from among the Social Democratic Party and the far-left Free Social Democrats. Both parties were either staunchly anti-colonial or had been critical of German colonialism. Two days later, the new government signed the armistice at Compiègne, dashing the DKG members' hope for the immediate restitution of the colonies. Instead, Article 12 compelled the last German colonial fighting force – General Lettow-Vorbeck's embattled guerilla in East Africa – to lay down its weapons.²⁶

²³ The colonialists were dismayed. In their view, defeat, revolution and the armistice resulted from a betrayal by the democratic parties, which had supposedly backstabbed an undefeated army through infiltration. Whereas the Russian Revolution had initially seemed to work in the colonialists' favor, it now threatened to spread to Germany. With Berlin under the control of workers' and soldiers' councils, a communist takeover right in front of the DKG headquarters loomed. And even if such a takeover could be prevented, the society could no longer count on the social democratic government to insist on colonial restitution at the upcoming peace negotiations. Without an emperor intent on *Weltpolitik*, the colonialists reckoned, the war-torn German public would quickly discard its hitherto limited support for the colonial project.

²⁴ While defeat and revolution challenged state and public support for colonialism, the global nature of the war upended the racial order the DKG members had lived to uphold. Emboldened by Woodrow Wilson's rhetoric of self-determination and their participation in the war effort, colonized peoples – ranging from Duala notables to Indian nationalists – used the watershed at the end of the war to press for self-government.²⁷ In Africa, Asia, and Europe, German soldiers and settlers found themselves under guard by French, British and Belgian colonial troops. The armistice eventually brought the same African and Asian



25 This state of marginality took several forms. On a political level, the revolution deprived the colonialists of the authoritarian structure that had underpinned German overseas ambitions, exposing the bourgeois DKG members as the elite minority lacking popular support that they were. On a moral level, Allied war propaganda indicted German colonial administrations for their brutality, denying Germany and its self-styled colonial vanguard the capability to colonize. The colonialists' self-image went from that of eminent members in the family of 'civilized' nations, which had supposedly brought peace and order to the colonized world, to that of outcasts at the back end of a new emerging world order. One irritated member of the society lamented that the Allies were turning Germany into a "moral pariah" for its colonial failings.³⁰ On a spatial level, the erstwhile colonial masters were confined to Germany. Neither could they travel to Paris to make their case heard, nor could they return to the colonies for the foreseeable future. Instead, German businessmen, missionaries and settlers were expelled from the colonies and their property was seized by the new administrations. On an ideological level, the war isolated the society by cutting its ties to other European colonial organizations. At home, the DKG faced criticism by smaller, newly founded rival organizations over its alleged inadequate efforts for colonial restitution and relief for German colonists during the war.³¹

26 To be sure, German colonialists' marginality proved both more transient and less intense compared to that of West African intellectuals and Mexican anti-imperialists. The repurchase of former German farms and plantations began already in late 1919. After their wartime vilification and expulsion, settlers were gradually welcomed back into some of the former colonies in Africa, practically reinstating them into the privileged status of white colonizers. In Namibia, the South African government sought the German community's support as allies against the African majority population, recognizing its political, economic and cultural rights in 1923. British-administered Tanganyika allowed German settlers to return two years later.³² Nevertheless, the suddenness and singularity of marginality challenged the identity of German colonialists in a way unmet since the nation's founding in 1871, fueling both their intransigent denial of Germany's defeat and incessant demands for colonial restitution after the war.³³

Reconfigured Identities

A Greater Cause: Pan-Africanism

27 Despite its disappointing outcome, the First World War certainly marked a turning point for Africans, who became more conscious of the impact of global forces on their lives and increasingly recognized the global interconnection of the continent. In the wake of the war, they increasingly harnessed the global arena as a stage for negotiation and lobbying. While the desire to overcome marginality thus awakened the political – and to some extent, national – consciousness of West African intellectuals, Pan-African activities led by African Americans gave them a sense of belonging to a greater cause. Although this struggle developed according to the different socio-political contexts on both sides of the Atlantic, it converged through the circulation of ideas and peoples that formed a vast network between Africa, the Americas and Europe. This personal and ideological network constituted the prerequisite for formulating and expressing Pan-African claims of solidarity.

28 Pan-Africanists were conscious of the import of uniting different movements. The NCBWA, for instance, simultaneously worked for constitutional reforms in the British West African territories and attempted to reach out to African students in Britain, encouraging them to exert pressure on the colonial government. These African students then mobilized themselves, forming one of the most active African students' organizations: the West African Students' Union (WASU).³⁴ WASU and NCBWA supported their respective political actions from the very beginning and shared the same discourses. The NCBWA not only looked to the



metropole but also to the other side of the Atlantic to further its cause. For example, Casely-Hayford read the works of black thinkers around the world, including W. E. B. Du Bois, with whom he corresponded. Introducing his own works to Du Bois, he added that “it occurred to me that if leading thinkers of the African race in America had the opportunity of exchanging thoughts with thinkers of the race in West Africa, this century would be likely to see the race problem resolved.”³⁵

- 29 Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) also played an important role in Pan-Africanist networking. Garvey’s movement was brought to West Africa particularly by African American soldiers who took part in the First World War. UNIA gained a sufficient foothold in West Africa for police and colonial governments to become concerned about the expansion of the “subversive” movement.³⁶ UNIA’s presence radicalized parts of the local elite. Kojo Touvalou, an aristocratic intellectual who had settled in France, discovered the movement in Dahomey through its journal *The Negro World*. After participating in the war as an army doctor, his contacts with UNIA transformed Touvalou, who had faced discrimination in the metropole, into an anticolonial activist. In 1924, UNIA invited him to its annual congress in New York. In his remarkable speech, Touvalou called for the self-determination and unity of Africans:

Africa, the oldest of all the continents, is very much capable of self-determination, more legitimately than those ghosts of nations created by the Wilsonian hallucinations. The Black race who populates it and who has spread to all the continents aspires to her unity. [...] Before being Americans, English, French, Belgians, we are Negroes, we are Africans. [...] Africa for Africans, such must be our rallying cry, henceforth, from all the surface of the globe. [...] But let me remind you: union makes power (*l’union fait la force*). It is through the solidarity of all the fellow creatures of our race, it is through union that we shall win the final victory.³⁷

- 30 Here, the commonality of discourse shared over the Atlantic is striking. The experience of war and the injustice faced by African and African American veterans fed these activists’ sympathy and solidarity towards other people in similar situations.

- 31 Apart from the idea of self-determination and trans-continental solidarity, communism also exerted a strong influence among colonized people and many Pan-Africanists. While the immediate impact of the Russian Revolution on the continent appears to have been slight, some Africans traveled to the Soviet Union during the 1920s. Rather than adopting the orthodox scheme of a party-led mass revolution, Pan-Africanists assimilated communist discourses for the purposes of anti-imperial solidarity. A case in point was the use of black troops during the First World War, which was discussed by the Comintern-sponsored Conference of the League Against Imperialism (LAI) in 1927. The conference was held together with the fourth Pan-African Congress in order to associate the respective movements.³⁸ Lamine Senghor, a war veteran from Senegal and member of the French Communist Party’s (PCF) Union Intercoloniale which brought together indigenous representatives from France’s colonies, participated in the conference. There, he denounced colonization as “the violation of a people’s right to self-determination as it sees fit.”³⁹ Senghor participated as representative of the Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre (CDRN), which soon became the more radical Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre (LDRN).

- 32 However, the CDRN was more than a Pan-African organization. The committee’s activism addressed the plight of the working class, of people of African descent suffering from racism, and went against the imperialist world order. In the first issue of its mouthpiece *La Voix des Nègres*, the Comité appealed to “all the Negroes of the World” but also to “all the humanitarians of the world” to heed their call and allow African nations to “take up again their place among the councils of all peoples” so that their *voices* be heard.⁴⁰ The CDRN and later the LDRN extended their branches to Africa. The Pan-African triangle between Africa, the Americas, and Europe, which emerged at the turn of the century, thus developed through the same networks, which made Pan-African claims more visible in the international arena.

Re-Imagining Latin America

- 33 The Mexican Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and the First World War created a new horizon of possibility in Mexico. A new sense of malleability arose as new fathomable political alternatives to existing political and societal systems multiplied. One such



alternative was a globally-informed anti-imperialism rooted in local struggles. Yet a tradition of anti-colonial thought and a general suspicion of being exposed to foreign influence had already existed in many parts of Latin America during the nineteenth century. José Martí's famous conception *Nuestra América*, coined in 1891, had explicitly excluded the United States and can be considered "the first Latin American anti-imperialism".⁴¹ The Spanish-American War of 1898 and the increasing imperial ambitions of the United States in Middle America and the Caribbean seemed to confirm that the United States' new imperialism constituted a dangerous threat to the independence of Latin American countries, especially to neighboring Mexico. Established patterns of 'othering' and anti-imperialism could thus be mobilized in new contexts. The revolutions of the first two decades of the twentieth century created the necessary window of opportunity, bringing new impulses to anti-imperialist ideologies and enabling actors to modify their argumentation and language in the face of a new world order.

34 Mexico's political situation in the early 1920s was characterized by the eagerness of the post-revolutionary administration to consolidate state power and secure stability through a broad project of nation-building. Being able to integrate nationalist aims into their argumentation, anti-imperialists gradually gained support among the urban middle classes of intellectuals, journalists, artists, and teachers. Albeit to a lesser degree, the labor movement and peasant organizations also ascribed to the anti-imperialist program. The general idea of creating a class-transcending popular front, which included communists, socialists, and progressive nationalists, was not just a Mexican phenomenon. The Moscow-directed Comintern made the forging of broad coalitions against colonial and imperial powers an integral part of the "colonial question," which had been discussed as early as 1920. The Second World Congress of the Comintern adopted Lenin's maxim of building strategic societal coalitions within colonial and semi-colonial societies against the vigorous opposition of communists from the Global South.⁴² The new popular front strategy was adopted globally and applied to the situation in Mexico, where anti-imperialism proved to be the most effective slogan used across different classes and groups.

35 By the middle of the 1920s, anti-imperialism had become *en vogue* in Mexico. In February 1924, the first continental organization committed to anti-imperialism in the Americas was established: the Anti-Imperialist League of the Americas (*Liga Antiimperialista de las Américas*, *LADLA*). Financed by the Comintern and founded in Mexico City, LADLA symbolized the implementation of global communism's popular front strategy. It brought together diverse societal groups, social movements, and nationalities under its umbrella. For a communist organization, LADLA allowed its associates a remarkable degree of freedom of expression, at least in its first years of existence. By encapsulating the different strands of contemporary anti-imperialist thought, it represented the novel ways of identity formation encouraged by the 1917-1919 *caesura*. The league was devised as a transnational organization to encourage Latin American cooperation against the imperial powers. Quickly, national subdivisions sprang up in almost every country of the Americas, including the United States.⁴³ The organization created its own magazine and "official organ," which it named "El Libertador" after Latin American independence hero Simon Bolívar, underlining the league's claim to represent the whole of Latin America. As a transnational project, LADLA modified existing notions of continental American solidarity, adjusting them to the changed circumstances of the 1920s. Unlike during the nineteenth century, anti-imperialism was on the rise globally, at least in the view of the Latin American anti-imperialists. More importantly, fighters against the imperial powers had new means of communication, support and exchange at their disposal. Technical innovations, such as steamships and improved communication channels, had laid the foundation for cross-continental solidarity and imagination. The league's publications and actions thus reflected and contributed to a rising global consciousness after 1917-1919.

36 Interest in anti-imperialist struggles in other parts of the world remained high during the 1920s. The summer of 1925 in particular captured activists' imagination. The May Thirtieth Movement in China, the Great Syrian Revolution and the Rif War in Morocco seemed to confirm that imperialism as a global system was undergoing a crisis of unprecedented proportions. These events inspired activists in Mexico, who showed a remarkable degree of interest in the state of national liberation movements in Africa and Asia. Mindful of global developments, many anti-imperialists also began to re-imagine the role of their own movement and its relation to other continents. The status of marginality became a key factor



37 One of the strategies used to emphasize Latin America's marginality consisted in invoking history. Anti-imperialists employed marginality as an argument to strengthen their own position by means of historical analogies and the evocation of historical heritage. Anti-imperialists frequently portrayed the Americas as fundamentally anti-imperial continents. Specific historical figures, such as Bolívar, were portrayed as anti-imperial fighters whose historical obligation was not to be betrayed. Latin America's own anti-colonial history became a source of pride, while the current, semi-colonial status of the continent demanded that the fight be carried on. One actor who employed historical metaphors and analogies extensively in his speeches and writings was the Cuban communist Julio Antonio Mella, a symbolic figure for the anti-imperialist fight in Latin America, who was exiled in Mexico City. One of Mella's articles analyzes the status of semi-colonialism in China in 1926 and draws parallels between contemporary Chinese independence movements and those of Latin Americans one hundred years earlier. According to Mella, both were subjected to racism, arrogance, and similar power structures: "Like in America, the best instruments of foreign rule were the rulers themselves. There [in China] the emperors with a Mandate of Heaven, here the secular tyrants".⁴⁴ Historical duty, Mella asserts, carried the obligation to seek solidarity between all colonized peoples: "For all the colonial and semi-colonial peoples, the Chinese Revolution is an example and a hope"⁴⁵. This cross-continental solidarity especially implied a mission for Latin America, or, as Mella concisely put it: "China, India, Morocco, Syria, Russia! And America?"

38 The orientation of anti-imperialism in Mexico towards Latin American unity and cross-continental solidarity during the 1920s is remarkable. Claiming that this orientation arose primarily as a result of the conjuncture of 1917-1919 would go too far. The social transformations caused by the Mexican Revolution were too complex and far-reaching. But it would also be misleading to dismiss any global influence on the identity formation of Mexican anti-imperialists per se. The Mexican Revolution, the Russian Revolution, and the post-war geopolitical situation encouraged local actors to creatively modify their identities and alliances. One result of such a modification was the orientation of anti-imperialism towards Africa and Asia. The new world order and the novel global ambitions of communism offered nodal points to communist and nationalist anti-imperialist struggles across the world. A sense of simultaneity coalesced with the feeling of one's own marginality.

Democratic Colonialism

39 The conjuncture of 1917-1919 upended the colonial order and threatened German colonialists' self-image as agents of civilization. But the colonialists refused to settle for the impending loss of the overseas empire. In the wake of the revolution, *Kolonialzeitung* editor Otto Karstedt himself called on his colleagues to "Work, and Not to Despair." Although he despised the revolutionary overthrow, Karstedt urged the DKG members to take the initiative and influence the new Germany in the making for the sake of the colonial cause. His appeal invoked the society's long-fostered ideal of itself as a national vanguard. In this view, the Colonial Society was a non-partisan organization committed to providing the basis for a future expansion of Germany's economy and population. The society, Karstedt argued, now had to defend colonialism all the more to ensure the nation's postwar recovery.⁴⁶

40 His call did not go unheeded. By December 1918, the society's leadership recognized that in order to survive, German colonialism had to be adapted to democratic rules. On the one hand, the advent of parliamentary democracy required that the hitherto elite society be transformed into a popular organization. On the other hand, defeat and the conditional prolongation of the armistice necessitated that the colonialists frame German colonialism in a globally intelligible language. Above all, they needed to underline their ostensibly non-expansionary, civilizational mission to the associated powers and the international and German public. Democratizing German colonialism, therefore, had two sides, one local, one global. To the colonialists, the key to both lay in Woodrow Wilson's program of peace. In early 1918, Wilson had outlined his plans for a post-war settlement in his widely circulated Fourteen Points Address. In point five, the president demanded an "impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon a strict observance of the principle that ... the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable government whose title is



to be determined. Wilson also called for an end to secret diplomacy and the establishment of a League of Nations, which would henceforth ensure peace.⁴⁷

41 The DKG members seized on Wilson's rhetoric, refashioning themselves as democratic colonialists. The society leadership pointed out that the Allies had accepted point five of the Fourteen Points as a basis for peace in the final American note to the German government on November 5. As a result, they interpreted point five in their favor, constantly demanding Allied adherence to its clauses with regard to the German colonies. The colonialists emphasized that a revolutionary, democratic Germany no longer posed a threat to international peace and instead merely wished to safeguard its economic development and fulfill its cultural duty to 'civilize' colonized peoples. To counter Allied allegations of colonial misconduct, they cast France and Great Britain as colonial oppressors intent on illegally usurping Germany's colonies to the disadvantage of local populations, emphasizing the contrast between their wartime secret treaties on the disposal of the German colonies and Wilson's program of peace. At the same time, DKG propaganda painted the Allies as violators of international law that had jeopardized Wilson's plans for a new world order. By extending the war to Africa, the colonialists alleged, the Allies had broken the General Act of the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, which had declared the area of the Congo Basin neutral in case of conflict.⁴⁸ Finally, the colonialists invoked Wilson's rhetoric in order to present themselves and the nascent republic as a force of order in the struggle against the spread of communism, warning that "when bolshevism has torn down the German order, no power in the world will be able to stop it".⁴⁹

42 Above all, DKG members criticized that the Entente's use of colonial troops had forever changed the rules of colonialism. A case in point was the economist and member of the German peace delegation Moritz Julius Bonn (1873-1965). In one of three pamphlets on Wilson, which was entitled "Justice" (*Gerechtigkeit*), he criticized the Entente for extending the war to Africa, which had "unsettled" the very foundations of colonialism and caused "turmoil" among Africans.⁵⁰ Bonn was certain that as a result, colonial rule would become "more difficult and costly" to sustain. Henceforth, colonial powers would have to take into account the interests of the colonized to a hitherto unmatched degree. To ensure colonialism's survival, Bonn proposed a liberal program akin to Wilson's: the colonial powers should work out common principles for a "humane colonial policy," establish an international commission that would oversee their implementation and guarantee an economic open-door policy to ensure equitable exploitation of the "servile territories of the world." While he rejected colonized peoples' right for self-determination as premature, he reminded his readers that the colonies had not come into Europe's possession by moral right but rather by "historical coincidence".⁵¹

43 The colonialists' embrace of the president's ideals was no isolated affair, but was embedded in a broader Wilsonian movement in Germany.⁵² In the months preceding the announcement of the peace conditions, pacifists and bourgeois politicians of almost all parties seized Wilson's ideas in pushing for a peace settlement, domestic reform, and a different world order. Although members of the movement often agreed on political principles such as transparency and an end to aggressive warfare, the policies they advocated differed considerably. Thus, German Wilsonians included such disparate figures as the Socialist Mayor of Munich, Kurt Eisner, and the Bismarckian annexationist Maximilian Harden.⁵³ The movement reached its peak between September 1918 and May 1919, when the announcement of the peace conditions led to widespread disillusionment with the president. Until then, the German Wilsonians – including the DKG members – put their faith in the president's ability to influence the peace settlement in their favor. They thus vastly overestimated Wilson's power, but their appropriation nevertheless signified an earnest bid to influence the emerging world order. The DKG's engagement differed from other groups in that they combined calls for a liberal post-war settlement with concrete steps of internal reform. Democratic colonialism promised to prevent the impending loss of their *raison d'être*.

44 The DKG's embrace of Wilsonian rhetoric built on the reforms of German colonial rule under Secretaries of State Bernhard Dernburg and Wilhelm Solf after 1907.⁵⁴ In 1918-1919, the colonialists invoked this legacy to bridge the gap between their wartime support for colonial annexations and the ideal of a liberal post-war order. To be sure, far from all German colonialists turned into paragons of liberal internationalism and democratic colonialism. For many among the DKG's leadership, adopting Wilsonian ideals represented a



means to end. Framing German colonialism in Wilsonian terms simply offered the best way of salvaging what was left of the colonial project. At the same time, appropriation did not mean unconditional embrace. Many of Bonn's colleagues remained critical of Wilson and his program, particularly of the League of Nations, as an alleged Allied ploy to deprive Germany of its colonies. But the degree to which the DKG members actually ascribed to a liberal vision of colonialism was ultimately of secondary importance. What proved more important in the circumstances of defeat and revolution was that the public endorsement of this liberal vision by these ardent colonialists underscored that the old-time imperialism of "guns, germs, and steel" was no longer tenable, and had been, at least to some extent, wrong. In this sense, the brief period of the winter of 1918-1919 not only entailed the formal decolonization of Germany, but also involved an important threshold in the intellectual process of German decolonization.

Appropriating Global Struggles

Pan-African Anti-Imperialism

45 In the aftermath of the First World War, Africans and people of African descent framed their struggle for self-determination and citizenship in global terms and built transatlantic networks for this purpose. While their networks were both the source of inspiration for, and the realization of the idea of Pan-African solidarity, they were also mobilized to serve immediate, practical purposes. In 1929, Tiémoko Garan Kouyate, who succeeded Lamine Senghor as head of the LDRN after his death two years earlier, asked W. E. B. Du Bois for "moral and *financial* solidarity".⁵⁵ The LDRN was indeed short of funds and was henceforth placed under an increasingly close supervision by the PCF and the Comintern as it had no other financial resources. Nevertheless, Kouyate tried to keep the league independent from the communists, but eventually got expelled from the PCF in the 1930s for his "anti-communist attitude".⁵⁶

46 In this regard, Pan-Africanists' stance towards communism deserves closer attention. Since communist doctrine prescribed solidarity with colonized peoples, many Pan-African militants started their political career in communist parties. While communist networks offered a platform for Pan-African cooperation, Pan-African militants acted, in turn, as agents, who diffused communism across the colonial world. However, the relation between communism and Pan-Africanism was not so clear-cut. In fact, African American activists had warned early on against giving priority to race consciousness rather than class consciousness. Although U.S. delegates appealed to the Comintern, the Central Committee did not focus its attention on the so-called "Negro Question."⁵⁷ Despite recruitment efforts by the Comintern Central Bureau, the Communist University in Moscow (KUTV) did not host many black students before it was closed in 1938. Only in 1930 did the first International Conference of Negro Workers take place – not in the Soviet Union – but in Hamburg, Germany.⁵⁸ And although the Brussels Conference of 1927 finally addressed the use of black troops by colonial powers, the Jamaican-born American poet Claude McKay had been pressing the issue to Trotsky since his visit to Moscow right after the revolution.⁵⁹

47 An episode that encapsulated the complex relationship between communism, nationalism and anti-colonialism within Pan-Africanism was the Rif War (1920-1926). In the war, the colonial powers Spain and, after 1925, France fought the Berber people of the Rif Mountains in northern Morocco in order to consolidate their respective spheres of influence in the region. Faced with dire revolutionary prospects in Europe, the Comintern emphasized the role of the colonies in bringing about international revolution. Moscow established relations to other communist parties around the world to integrate them under its direction. In France, the PCF organized a campaign against the war, in which Lamine Senghor participated. Above all, Senghor based his opposition to the war on the use of African soldiers against African peoples in French colonial wars. Senghor estimated that 75 percent of French soldiers in Syria and Morocco were "negroes".⁶⁰ Just like the Mexican anti-imperialists, he appealed to the solidarity of the oppressed all over the world – citing the examples of China, Turkey, Egypt, and India – to rectify this deplorable state: "The liberation movement being pursued by the Rif people is not a local matter. It is a social



phenomenon which manifests itself both in China and Morocco, and which echoes as much in Shanghai as in Tetuan".⁶¹ In 1925, the PCF organized an "action committee against the war" in which Senghor figured as prominent orator. He also wrote many articles in *Le Paria*, the journal of the Union Intercoloniale, "to demand the recognition of the independence of Rif".⁶² While the Comintern urged the PCF to adopt an internationalist orientation regarding the colonial questions, the reaction of the PCF was not unanimous. Although younger members, such as Jacques Doriot or Maurice Thorez, saw the campaign as an occasion to radicalize the party, others objected to the dependence of the PCF to the Comintern. The participation of the French army in the Rif War complicated the situation further, as the PCF's anti-war discourse was criticized as being anti-patriotic. After the failure of the general strike on October 12, 1925, the campaign was abandoned altogether.⁶³

48 The end of the Rif campaign marked the peak of the PCF's support for anti-colonial agitation. In 1925, the party, still under Comintern influence, decided to send Lamine Senghor as delegate to the American Negro Labor Congress held in Chicago, but allocated no funds to its envoy.⁶⁴ While the Comintern and the PCF were involved in a power struggle, Senghor pursued his own goals.⁶⁵ In 1926, he launched his own movement, the Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre (CDRN). The CDRN was more closely aligned with the race-conscious rhetoric of Marcus Garvey and the UNIA.⁶⁶ However, Senghor remained a member of the PCF well after this re-orientation. His move should be understood as an ambitious attempt to broaden the political framework of anti-imperialism. Senghor shrewdly used communist networks to promote his new movement: the creation of the CDRN was announced in *Le Paria*. The same strategy could be observed in the way Claude McKay exerted pressure on the Comintern regarding the question of the situation of black troops.

49 Whereas communism stimulated the political consciousness of Africans and people of African descent, it also exposed its own inherent limits and thereby strengthened their race consciousness. Finding themselves marginalized once again – this time within the supposedly solidary anti-imperialist struggle – Pan-Africanists invented and pursued their own strategy to overcome the inherent double standard of liberal and communist discourses. Their invention marked a crucial step in the political struggles of African and African American leaders, which henceforth played out on a global level, making them veritably *Pan-African*.

Hands off Nicaragua! Performing Marginality and Solidarity

50 The re-configured spatial imagination and identity of Mexican anti-imperialists not only developed on a theoretical level, but also became visible on the streets of Mexico City. A case in point was the "Hands off Nicaragua" (*Manos fuera de Nicaragua*, Mafuenic) campaign. Founded in Mexico City in January 1928, Mafuenic linked several anti-imperialist organizations and individuals under the leadership of the Anti-Imperialist League of the Americas.⁶⁷ Mafuenic's goal consisted in raising awareness for the ongoing war in Nicaragua and the perceived imperialist involvement of the United States in the conflict. The latter had intervened in the Nicaraguan Civil War to support the conservative government against the Liberal Party. In 1926, the self-appointed "rebel general" Augusto César Sandino took up arms against the conservative and North American forces, making him a popular hero in many parts of Latin America. The Mafuenic committee, initially founded by Nicaraguan exiles, supported Sandino and simultaneously harnessed his popularity for their own agenda.

51 The LADLA saw the Nicaragua campaign as an ideal opportunity to show the public that the anti-imperialist fight was concrete, palpable and urgent for all Latin American countries. The continental and even global appeal gained by the committee's campaign profited from its shrewd combination of anti-imperialist propaganda with humanitarian aid. Publicly, the campaign raised money to support the wounded in Nicaragua while it clandestinely used parts of the financial resources to buy weapons for Sandino's cause.⁶⁸ *El Libertador* provided a platform for donation appeals, while authors declared any donation a symbol for the anti-imperialist fight:

It is necessary to show the capitalists of Wall Street that our donations are not merciful alms, but fraternal help and a sacrifice for the cause of our freedom: 10,000 pesos for



52 The campaign quickly gathered support and could boast that “[t]here is no place in this country [Mexico] where people do not talk about Mafuenic. [...] Mafuenic is now a combat term in America”.⁷⁰ Anti-imperialists published posters throughout the Americas (“Enlist with Sandino!”) and organized charity fundraiser events, one of which drew 5,000 people to the prestigious Virginia Fabregás theater in Mexico City.⁷¹ In many other cities in Mexico, Argentina, Cuba, Colombia, El Salvador and in the United States, branches of the committee sprang up. Regarding propaganda, the U.S. section became especially active, organizing the printing of 10,000 stamps and 25,000 leaflets that protested against the war in Nicaragua and were later distributed by the American communist newspaper *Daily Worker*.

53 A highlight of the campaign’s propaganda efforts constituted the presentation of a U.S. flag in the committee’s headquarters in Mexico City. The flag had supposedly been captured by Sandino’s forces in the battle of El Zapote and was sent to Mexico in a triumphant gesture with an attached note from Sandino calling it “a trophy as expression of gratitude and trust in your activities for Nicaragua, Central America, and Latin America”.⁷² The symbolic value of the flag was clearly apparent to Sandino, who was eager to present his struggle as a Latin American war against the empire of the “Yankees”. In the summer of 1928, his aim blended with the efforts of the LADLA to construct an identity as *Latin American* anti-imperialists. By posing proudly next to the flag on *El Libertador*’s next front cover, LADLA members harnessed its symbolism as a sign for Latin American unity. This episode not only encapsulated the anti-imperialists’ efforts to overcome their marginality, but also reflected their globally re-configured spatial imagination and identities.

Saving German Colonialism

54 Saving the colonial empire and, by extension, overcoming marginality meant that the colonialists had to convince the Allies of the genuineness of Germany’s democratic transition. But framing the call for colonial restitution in Wilsonian rhetoric was not enough. The DKG members realized as much and heeded Otto Karstedt’s call to “Work and Not to Despair” not only ideologically, but also practically. Defying the constraints imposed by four years of war and military collapse, the society launched a propaganda campaign in the winter of 1918-1919 that supported Germany’s transition to democracy and sought to transform the society from an elite to a popular organization. The campaign encapsulated the degree to which the colonialists reinvented themselves as democratic colonizers in defense of their colonial ideal.

55 Shortly after the revolution, the society leadership discussed plans for a propaganda campaign that was approved by the executive committee on December 27. The plans envisioned a series of Germany-wide protest meetings, lectures, movie screenings, slide shows and a signature collection in support of colonialism that would be organized by the DKG and other colonial organizations such as the Women’s League of the German Colonial Society, the DKG’s female affiliate.⁷³ The campaign aimed to mobilize the German public in support of colonialism in order to strengthen Germany’s hand in the peace negotiations and demonstrate German unity of purpose. One of the first appeals to the revolutionary government, which was later circulated and published in the *Kolonialzeitung*, warned that the Entente could “mistake Germany’s silence” regarding colonial restitution “for her indifference” and appealed to the colonialists’ “fellow citizens” – “regardless of party affiliation” – to protest against impending decolonization.⁷⁴

56 Although smaller than prewar propaganda drives, the campaign reached an impressive scale. Between December 19, 1918 and July 20, 1919, the DKG and its partners convened approximately 120 protest meetings throughout Germany.⁷⁵ Turnout ranged from small audiences at lectures to several thousand as on December 19, 1918 in Berlin’s Philharmonic. Events included a lavish welcome reception attended by thousands of Berliners for the East African colonial corps of General Lettow-Vorbeck on March 3, 1919 and the collection of almost four million signatures in support of colonial restitution by April that year.⁷⁶ The DKG showered the government, the colonial office, the German peace delegation, and the National Assembly with innumerable appeals for more official protest and action against the threat of decolonization. In April 1919, the colonialists published an open letter to President Wilson in the society’s newspaper, which was subsequently translated into English and



57 During the campaign, the DKG formally supported Germany's democratic transition. Both the Colonial Society and the Women's League called on the revolutionary government to organize elections for the national assembly as quickly as possible to strengthen Germany's position in the peace negotiations.⁷⁸ The Women's League combined the demand for colonial restitution with civic education of the newly enfranchised female electorate. Whereas Hedwig Heyl, the league's president, conceded that the organization had not demanded female suffrage before the war, she emphasized that women now had to fulfill their democratic duty in the interest of the fatherland.⁷⁹ Else Frobenius — her later successor — concurred, observing that female suffrage was a "gift" accorded by the "Sturm und Drang of the revolution." She praised women's new ability to "have a say in determining the constitution of the future Germany. We can decide whether it will be a federation, a commonwealth, a monarchy, or a republic. We can influence whether the new people's state (*Volksstaat*) holds on to the demand for colonial activity and whether it strives to support our brothers, who have lost their belongings in the colonies".⁸⁰

58 At the same time, the colonialists sought to remake the society into a popular organization. To attract wider support, they enlisted liberal and social democratic critics of colonialism for their campaign. These included, among others, the head of the German peace delegation Matthias Erzberger, economist Moritz Bonn, and the social democratic Reichstag Representative Paul Lensch.⁸¹ Seeking to attract more workers, the important Berlin branch lowered its membership dues for extraordinary members to just one Mark and called on the society to follow its example. Going beyond its prior half-hearted courtship of workers and social democrats, the DKG's leadership advised branches to invite men and women of all social classes into their boards. Vice-President Strauch emphasized that "[i]n the interest of spreading the colonial idea it is urgently desirable that members of all parties and from all social classes are called on to participate in the society." In April, the executive committee resolved to elect at least two social democrats into its ranks.⁸²

59 Again, these efforts arose from neither unqualified enthusiasm for democracy nor placability towards the society's former opponents. The majority of the DKG leadership still resented the democratic parties for their alleged "stab in the back" (*Dolchstoß*), lack of expertise in colonial policy and tendency for a "disastrous German factionalism".⁸³ Bonn observed somewhat bitterly that the same colonialists who shunned him before the war for his liberal positions now freely invoked them and the Dernburg colonial reforms to make their case for colonial restitution.⁸⁴ Moreover, the society's efforts largely failed. Deep-seated opposition among workers against colonialism, the reluctance of pro-colonial social democratic deputies to jeopardize their constituency, and the announcement of the peace conditions rendered the colonialists' attempt to refashion themselves as democratic colonizers moot. While membership continued to fall from its pre-war peak of more than 42,000, no social democrat took up the offer to join the society's leadership.

60 The failure to fashion a democratic colonialism and the loss of the colonies were not the end, but the beginning of colonial revisionism in Germany. During the 1920s, the DKG helped foster a cross-party consensus on the return of the colonies and increased its propaganda in schools to train the next generation of German colonialists. Members still invoked Wilson's program to justify their demands, but they undertook no further efforts to reform the society. Although the society's relationship with the rising National Socialist movement remained tenuous, it became increasingly anti-republican.⁸⁵

Conclusion

61 Our juxtaposition of how West African Pan-Africanists, Mexican anti-imperialists and German colonialists fought against their perceived marginality argued that the interplay between these local actors and global connections reconfigured their group identities. By meeting each other personally and intellectually, formerly dispersed West African and African American intellectuals formed a Pan-African network that bound a multitude of local struggles together against the subjugation of Africans and people of African descent. Mexican anti-imperialists combined their fight against the foreign domination of their country with a similarly broad vision of continental, Latin American solidarity. German colonialists refashioned themselves as democratic colonizers in order to save their moribund



62 In making our case, we sought to test the concept of global moments as a methodological tool. While the three groups did experience such a moment between 1917-1919, we saw that they did so to different degrees. The period marked a clear watershed for German colonialists, who lost their *raison d'être* and became acutely aware that the future of their country, its colonial empire, and their own lives would be determined by external forces. In contrast, Mexican anti-imperialists were not as nearly affected by the convulsions emanating from Europe. Nevertheless, they attentively observed events across the globe and adapted their agitation accordingly. Pan-Africanists were caught somewhere in between. On the one hand, the war and its aftermath again relegated them to the bottom end of the world order. On the other hand, it galvanized those forces among Africans and people of African descent that strove to overcome this state.

63 Juxtaposing such views at a given point in time may reveal synchronous perceptions of the changing world and their impact on historical actors' actions.⁸⁶ Far more frequently, however, it seems that global moments such as the one of 1917-1919 elicited dissonant chronological echoes. As we have seen, globally-circulating ideas did not simply override local discourses, but were integrated into ongoing local dynamics. Thus, the shift from slave trade to colonial domination, the social changes brought about by the Mexican Revolution, and the reformist tendencies of the German Revolution continued to form the basis for how and to what degree actors perceived global events locally and integrated them into their own struggles. Consequently, global moments follow multiple time schedules: more immediate and short-term in the case of German colonialists, and more spread out and long-term in case of Pan-Africanists and Mexican anti-imperialists. These different chronologies do not constitute a hierarchy, in which one group was quicker than the other to realize and seize the potential of harnessing global audiences. Rather, they reflect both the degree to which local dynamics formed actors' primary concern and our groups' differing shades of marginality. In this way, our joint analysis of the three cases illustrates how historical actors cope with the "asymmetries" of the international order.⁸⁷ By looking across the ideological divide of imperialism, we transcend broad-brush claims of the 'influence' of ideologies such as liberalism and communism and instead look at how local actors actually dealt with these forces in the wake of a crucial historical juncture.

64 We also set out to investigate the three groups' politics of appropriation. The groups appropriated globally-circulating ideas according to their different positions in the imperial system: colonized Africa, "semi-colonial" Latin-America, and about-to-be decolonized Germany. By observing, addressing and harnessing audiences beyond their immediate vicinity, each of the three sought to shape its future place in the post-war world order. To this end they shrewdly adapted the rival languages of communism and liberal internationalism for their own ends. While German colonialists' struggle to overcome their marginality remained within the Global North, leaving the entire South still in a marginal position, Mexican and Pan-African anti-imperialists engaged in the same struggle to overcome this vertical marginality. In this way, the two spheres were interconnected. Our actors reacted to global politics, either adopting or refuting them, and invented their own strategies in response. Appropriation could also follow two directions. For instance, the Comintern tried to influence movements in different places (global to local), while local movements made use of its global network for their own purposes (local to global).

65 In light of our collaborative exploration, fears about the blurring of history under the banner of global history appear overblown.⁸⁸ Global history and microhistory do not preclude each other, just as much as the former does not inevitably proclaim a continuous worldwide integration under capitalist market regimes of commodified goods and ideas.⁸⁹ Historical actors are not controlled by ephemeral global ideas, nor do they absorb them uncritically and unconditionally. Instead, they perceive changing worlds around them, respond to external stimuli and challenges as they see fit, and adapt their actions as a result. This does not entail a primacy of the global over the local, but merely highlights the interdependence of different historical scales. Global does not mean universal.

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Notes

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6 For the relationship between identity and different historical scales cf. Jacques REVEL (dir.), *Jeux d'échelles. La micro-analyse à l'expérience*, Gallimard et Le Seuil, 1996, p. 12, p. 19; Ulrike FREITAG, Achim von OPPEN (eds), *Translocality: The Study of Globalising Processes from a Southern Perspective*, Leiden, Brill, 2010, p. 1-2, p. 9; Tony BALLANTYNE, Antoinette BURTON, *Empires and the Reach of the Global, 1870-1945*, Cambridge-MA, Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 17-20; Sebouh D. ASLANIAN, Joyce E. CHAPLIN, Ann MCGRATH, and Kristin MANN, "AHR Conversation How Size Matters: The Question of Scale in History", *American Historical Review*, 118, 5, December 2013, p. 1431-1472, p. 1443-1446, 1462ff. ; Sebastian CONRAD, *What is Global History?*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2016, p. 129-132. By using the term identity, we do not imply that the groups in question developed uniform group identities that effaced individual difference. Rather, we are interested in changing dynamics of group identification and self-understanding. See Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond Identity", *Theory and Society*, 29, 1, 2000, p. 1-47.

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8 The three were not the only groups who found themselves in this position; Chinese, Indian, Korean, and Arab nationalists suffered the same fate. See Erez MANELA, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anti-Colonial Nationalism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007. For a scathing critique of Manela's approach, see Rebecca KARL, "Review of *The Wilsonian Moment: Self Determination and the International Origins of Anti-Colonial Nationalism* by Erez Manela", *American Historical Review*, 113, 5, 2008, p. 1474-1476.

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Pour citer cet article

Référence électronique

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