

Louro, Michele L.: *Comrades against Imperialism. Nehru, India, and Interwar Internationalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018. ISBN: 9781108419307; XVI, 310 S.

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Michele L. Louro's book is an intriguing study about one of the most dynamic personalities in the global history of twentieth century anticolonialism, India's First Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. However, this is not the history of Nehru coming to power, rather, it deals with Nehru's road of becoming a politically conscious anti-imperialist between the wars. The narrative is grounded in the pivotal event of the „First International Congress against Colonialism and Imperialism“ in Brussels, 10–14 February 1927, the subsequent establishment of the international League against Imperialism and for National Independence (LAI, 1927–1937), and how this affected Nehru's political persona after the congress.

One of the main ambitions with the book is to „restore Nehru to his proper place“ in the political history of the interwar period. Focusing on delineating the larger questions at the stake for Nehru between the wars, meaning, the idea of international solidarity for India's national independence and anti-imperialism, Louro seeks to break from previous interpretations about Nehru and how these have been placed in national or international contexts. Louro's ambition is rather to emphasize „the interplay between Nehru's internationalist and nationalist projects.“ To do so, the leading argument of the book aims at reconstructing Nehru's role and engagement in advancing anti-imperialism as an international movement, built on international solidarities that crossed national borders. Further, Louro states in the introductory chapter that this is not a biographical account of Nehru's life, something already done by Benjamin Zachariah in his biography of Nehru.<sup>1</sup> Instead, it is an attempt at locating and placing Nehru's activities, contacts, and relations with other known and unknown anti-imperialists' in the context of interwar anti-imperialism. According to Louro,

this study deals with „the recovering of history,“ a statement that falls well into line with the methodology of covering the gaps and silences of „lost history“ as done in Josephine Fowler's study of Japanese and Chinese immigrants in communist networks 1919–1933.<sup>2</sup> Louro's argument is quite similar, and in the end, the same.

The theoretical approach of the book is simple, and should not be seen as something negative. Louro embarks from a statement made by the British socialist George Lansbury after attending the Brussels congress in 1927. Lansbury stated that the „a blend“ of nationalism and internationalism could serve as the very foundation of „international comradeship“, strong enough to question the structures of colonialism and imperialism. I appreciate how Louro uses the idea of „blend“ to describe Indian anticolonialism and Nehru's anti-imperialism to show the flexibility and heterogeneity of these ideas. At the end of it, by showing how different processes and encounters blended, this fits well into Akira Iriye's conception of what transnational history constitutes: the seeking of patterns, flows, and movements across, above, below and between real and imagined borders.<sup>3</sup> Relying extensively on previous research made by, for example, Nirode K. Barooah, Benjamin Zachariah and Sarvepalli Gopal to mention a few, the analysis is grounded in archival research in various archives across the world. The findings are used to corroborate Louro's view of Nehru's blend of national and international anti-imperialist frameworks. However, I would have liked to see the inclusion of, for example, Mark Mazower's discussion on interwar internationalism, and Pankaj Mishra's interpretation of anticolonial activists<sup>4</sup>, perspectives that could have strengthened Louro's overall argument about

<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Zachariah, *Nehru*, London 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Josephine Fowler, *Japanese and Chinese Immigrant Activists. Organizing in American and International Communist Movements, 1919-1933*, New Brunswick 2007, pp. 12–14.

<sup>3</sup> Akira Iriye / Pierre-Yves Saunier (eds.), *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Transnational History*, Houndmills 2009, p. xviii.

<sup>4</sup> Mark Mazower, *Governing the World*, New York 2012; Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire*, New York 2012.

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trying to capture the anti-imperialist spirit among the activists.

The book is divided in two parts. The first part outlines Nehru's political journey in Europe and how it affected him after attending the founding congress of the LAI in Brussels 1927. According to Louro, the encounters Nehru faced in Brussels functioned as „a catalyst in a number of ways.“ It is these ways that constitute the basic premise of the book, ways forged along an idea that India's independence depended on building a global solidarity movement strong enough to connect the working class with anticolonial movements. This part details on the one hand Nehru's involvement in building up the LAI as an international organization from 1927 to 1930. On the other hand, it assesses the processes that strengthened the connection of anti-imperialist movements in India with Europe via leading characters of the LAI in Berlin (the German communist Willi Münzenberg, and the Indian national revolutionary Virendranath Chattophadyaya), and with other distinguished individuals in the West (the British socialist and pacifist Reginald Bridgeman, and the US civil liberties advocate Roger Baldwin). Part two of the book discusses the „afterlives of anti-imperialism.“ Focusing on Nehru's political journey in the tumultuous 1930s, and with the outbreak of war on a global scale in and after 1939, the study ends as Louro connects Nehru's anti-imperialism with the long trajectory of the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung in 1955.

The overall results of the book weigh up for the minor inaccuracies. Some of the details connected to the LAI are not entirely accurate. For example, the reason for Chattophadyaya leaving Germany in 1931 was not because of the harassment of German authorities, but rather, it was the decision of the Communist International in Moscow to summon him there to face accusations of „political dishonesty“ in 1931. Second, her discussion on the preparations for the second LAI congress in 1929 hints that it was masterminded through the authority of the US communist Alexander Bittelman in Moscow. However, a closer reading of other research paints a different picture.<sup>5</sup> Yet much of this is balanced out by Louro's ambition to depict how an anti-

imperialist activist as Nehru perceived himself being part of a global movement.

Louro opens up a new vista of interpreting Nehru's life and his political journey. This is not a biography, but rather an intellectual history framed along the harsh realities of the political conditions that characterize the interwar period. Rather than merely being a biographical account of one of the most distinguished anti-imperialist personas of the twentieth century, the book offers an understanding of the transnational connections Nehru established at several crucial turning points in his life. The book should be read as a history that devotes great attention to mapping out the broad range of encounters and connections Nehru made as a devoted internationalist and anti-imperialist. The later shaped a life striving towards the ambition of liberating India from British rule.

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<sup>5</sup> Michele L. Louro, *Comrades against Imperialism*, pp. 146–47, 175; Fredrik Petersson, The „Colonial Conference“ and Dilemma of the Comintern's Colonial Work, 1928–29, in: Vijay Prashad (ed.), *Communist Histories*. Volume 1, New Delhi, 2016.