Subversive Networks:
Agents of Change in International Organizations, 1920-1960

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Forgotten Agents of Decolonization? Achievements, Failures and Legacies of Pan-Islamic, Pan-Asian and Pan-African International Networks

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Abstract

Since the formation of Eurocentric imperial world order in late 19th century, there emerged various Pan-nationalist ideas and networks challenging its intellectual foundations, moral claims and practices. In this process, a truly global network of Pan-Islamic, Pan-Asian and Pan-African activists articulated a set of critiques about the unequal power relations, universalist claims, racial hierarchies and legal practices of the modern international order. In fact, the era of high imperialism from the 1880s to the 1920s was also a period of intellectual cold war between non-Western internationalisms and Eurocentric ideas of legal orders, race, civilization and empire. As the collective power of Pan-Islamic, Pan-Asian and Pan-African intellectual utopias and arguments contributed to both decolonization and inter-imperial rivalries, they also influenced the re-negotiation of the world order, especially through the traumatic event of WWI and WWII.

Histories of internationalism and international organizations have only recently began to pay attention to the crucial role of Pan-nationalist thought and activism in the transition from the Eurocentric imperial world order to the contemporary international order composed of territorial nation states. Pan-nationalist networks not only empowered nationalist movements and transnational organizations, they also allied with various imperial projects and entangled in inter-imperial conflicts. It will be important to reflect on the aims, achievements and failures of the pan-nationalist subversive networks without privileging a nation-state teleology of decolonization. This reflection could help us better understand what ideals and visions has been suppressed and compromised from the perspective of Pan-Islamic, Pan-Asian and Pan-African internationalism in the crucial negotiations of decolonization process and thus help us make sense of their legacies for today. Why and how did Pan-Islamic ideas of the Muslim World persist through the cold war despite the near completion of decolonization in Muslim societies? What have been the remnants of the claims and ideals of Pan-African and Pan-Asian internationalism in the post-colonial international affairs of Asia and Africa?