In this rich and comprehensive edited volume, Michele Louro, Carolien Stolte, Heather Streets-Salter, and Sana Tannoury-Karam examine the lives and afterlives of the League Against Imperialism (LAI), a transnational anti-imperialist organisation, during the interwar period. Created in 1927 in Brussels, the LAI was under the influence of two very different sets of agendas: on the one hand, it received direct support from the Soviet Union and its Communist International (Comintern); on the other hand, peoples from the colonial and semi-colonial world were advocating for an end to the imperial rule. The fact that the League helped bring together Communists and anticolonial nationalists in “a shared platform that was not wholly defined by one side or the other” makes it “one of the largest, most inclusive international groups of its kind”.[1] The volume contains 15 essays that deal with a diverse range of linguistic, geographic, and historical specialties that are set with the aim to understand the significance of the League on its own terms and in the interwar context.

Compared to the post-World War II international organisations such as the first Afro-Asian Conference (Bandung Conference) and the subsequent Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the LAI is relatively less known and has been poorly understood in historical scholarship. Aside from a select number of short pieces and book chapters, The League Against Imperialism is the first volume to be dedicated to this particular organisation.[2] In this regard, it fills the gap in our understanding of the history and significance of the LAI. One of the volume’s notable contributions is that it brings together a diverse range of scholars who have conducted original research on certain aspects of the League but also appreciate the collective power of connecting their own work with others.

The fact that the League’s official archive was destroyed by the Nazis in 1933 makes it challenging to access a complete list of holdings in one single destination. The contributors to the volume have thus benefited from three main types of archival sources: the Comintern files made available to the public...
in the late 1990s, the records of European domestic and colonial archives, and scattered personal papers of those who had connections with the League. Collectively, the volume manages to overcome the previous limitations of geographically and archivally confined studies to embrace a real global history the League. Undeniably, many members of the League represented a privileged group of people from the so-called peripheral locations who, because of their political activism, were able to forge an alliance to challenge European domination. Though relatively short-lived, such an alliance well represented “anti-imperialist internationalism” between the world wars. As stated clearly in Chapter 1, the volume’s adoption of a transnational framework of analysis successfully transcends the categories of ‘colony, nation, and empire’ used more commonly to describe the twentieth-century world.

The volume also stands out for its balanced approach to study both the institutional nature and the lived experiences of the League Against Imperialism. An understanding of a transnational organisation is inseparable from a grasp of multiple local histories. For Latin American anti-imperialists, the structural obstacles in terms of race and religion made the LAI a less desirable organisation for mostly white, wealthy and already politically free activists. In contrast, Algerian nationalists were initially among the most radical of the League in 1933-34 but decided to break away from it for its own agenda. Sana Tannoury-Karam, by highlighting the long tradition of Arab anti-imperialist spirit, criticised the League’s failures to compromise on the question of Palestine as well as a replication of orientalism held by European left-wing activists. In the case of China, the League was attended by members from both the Chinese Nationalist Party (Guomindang, GMD) and Chinese Communist Party (CCP) who shared ‘a multiethnic and nationalist orientation’. Having read these chapters in sequence, one could not help but ask: was the League Against Imperialism led by internationalist nationalists or nationalist anti-imperialists? Or indeed, a mixture of both and even others who were neither? This leaves the reader eager to explore the diverse range of personal stories of those who participated at (some eventually departed from) the League.

Another strength of this volume is its emphasis on the individual lived experiences of the League. There has been a recent trend to place anti-imperialist struggles around the world on the ‘network’ level. One prominent example is the research cohort for the studies of Afro-Asian Networks, which according to its manifesto aims to explore transnational networks of affinity at the non-state level. In a similar vein, the League was “about the power of experience, about building personal connections, and about learning from others.” The stories of Jawaharlal Nehru, V.K. Krishna Mennon, Mohammad Hatta, Lamine Senghor, Messali Hadj, and Willi Münzenberg offer the life trajectories of the members of the League who used the language, the practices, and the contacts in Brussels to “develop their own networks of anti-imperial solidarity, sometimes within the orbit of the LAI, sometimes expressly outside it.” Indeed, what were left in the afterlife of the League Against Imperialism were the fond memories of personal friendship, which continued to influence the ideas and struggles of people like Nehru, Hatta and Hadj for many decades to come. The chapters on lesser-known individuals such as Liao Huanxing, a Chinese intellectual and the LAI’s first secretary,
and Alex da Guma, a South African writer and activist, are no less revealing. For the former, his role as the LAI’s first secretary was symbolic of the anti-imperialist project embraced by both the (add full title of organization and description) GMD and the (add full title of organization and description) CCP in the interwar period. But more importantly, he represented those Chinese ‘intellectuals’ who grew up in the late 1890s and the early twentieth century and contributed to the rise of a unique narrative of the Chinese Revolution. Compared to China, apartheid South Africa was no host for the South African Communist Party (SACP), and exile was common for South African activists in their search for wider support and global solutions. As a result, La Guma’s *A Soviet Journey* was emblematic of ‘the contours and interplay between South African politics, the Black Atlantic, the Second World, and the Third World.*

The *League Against Imperialism* provides a global narrative with a biographical approach. When I first came across the book, the title immediately reminded me of an earlier volume titled *Making a World after Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its political Afterlives*, edited by Christopher J. Lee in 2010. Both volumes attempt to understand a particular transnational organisation in the twentieth century from different regional and temporal vantage points. Therefore, it looked almost as if the Brussels meeting of the League Against Imperialism was a pure precursor to the Afro-Asian Conference had its organization not been interrupted by the disastrous Second World War. Yet, reading the present into past events will no doubt produce new distortions, which is exactly what *The League Against Imperialism* is intended to avoid. Just as historical continuities were essential to understanding the rise of the international institution-building in the postcolonial era, so were competitions, diversions and disconnections. While Jeffrey James Byrne’s last chapter teases out some crucial divergences and tensions within the so-called Third World internationalism, it would be beneficial to learn more about how these changes were shaped by the historical realities in the previous decades. In other words, are we satisfied with the dominant narrative that the two world wars (three, if we count the Cold War) and conflicts were the defining moments of the twentieth century, in which global cooperation and anti-imperialism were just footnotes? Or instead, was the expectation of a more just world order a shared vision among people across the world regardless of location, culture, and ideology? This question is even more crucial to ask at this moment when there are dangerous signs of deglobalisation and far-right ideology in Europe and the Global North. *The League Against Imperialism* is a significant addition to the literature that has since its publication excited those who hold a more positive interpretation of human history.

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Zambia’s Relations with China is currently under review by James Currey

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