How Communism went global. Building connections between Soviet, European, and African communists, 1920s to 1960s

This project proposes to study the global connections constituted in the orbit of the world communist movement, thereby overcoming a vision of globalisation limited to the formation of the capitalist West’s own economic, political and cultural system. The aim of the project is to investigate the continuities between the international networks built by the Comintern through the interwar years and the context of decolonisation in the 1950s-1960s, in the specific area of connections between Moscow, the European communists and the African communists. In such respect, this project will represent a contribution to the field of studies on global communism which have been significantly developed in recent times. While the place of Asia in global communist relations has been widely analysed, Africa is much less investigated and known in spite of its relevance to decolonization processes.

Though achieving modest results, as compared to the ambitious project of promoting a world revolution, the Comintern networks did enter into contact with socialist, anti-imperialist, nationalist, anti-racist and indigenous movements. The Soviet state provided fundamental material and symbolic resources, particularly by offering an alternative model of modernity with respect to that promoted by the Western empires. This intensive activity did not only play out in terms of the relations between centre and periphery but also displayed a thick web of transversal ties. This project intends to shift away the focus from the classic theme of the subordination/insubordination of the national communist parties with regard to Moscow’s strategies,

and turn to the multiple implications, meanings and practices that the communists’ activity promoted at the global level.

While they delve into a variety of thematic areas, the three research units will adopt some common methodological approaches. Firstly, they pay particular attention to the sites in which relations were constructed, organisations were formed and political and propaganda activities were promoted. Reconsidering communism’s global network within specific spatial relations can allow us to illuminate the multiplicity and heterogeneity of actors who operated far beyond preordained plans from the centre, and even sometimes influenced the centre’s own orientation by sparking adjustments and revision. This will allow us to shed new light on the actual means by which ideas circulated in the communist world, and lead to reassess the meanings of propaganda, as well as re-examine the ‘translations’ of categories and language. Secondly, each unit will study individual biographies, aiming to set a reconstruction of revolutionaries’ activity within a map of influences, encounters, and connections made possible by continuing travel and movement. Thirdly, the research looks at the European colonial empires both in terms of the relations between centre and periphery and in terms of the axes that linked the anti-imperialist movements to the communist international network.

The analysis of communism in the British Empire will focus on its African peripheries, and especially South Africa, while the analysis of communism in the French Empire will consider its

projection in Algeria and across West Africa. We shall also bring into the picture the influence played by the Italian communists in relation with the Mediterranean and the Horn of Africa, as well as the activities of Marxist militants in the Portuguese Empire. Such analysis will allow us to explore key questions like the relationship between nationalism and anti-imperialist struggles, as well as the question of race along the African-American axis as crucial terrains for building the universalist horizon that communism sought to incarnate. From a chronological point of view, we will privilege three moments: the 1920s, with the early formation of communist networks; the end of World War II, with the reconfiguration of the global space; and the 1960s, in order to see the long-term influence of the networks constructed earlier and their development. We will investigate how the Soviet Union and European communists, particularly the French and the Italian communists, interacted with de-colonization in Africa and with the development of African communism.

The main working hypothesis is that the communist global project maintained its original Eurocentric limitations as it constantly proposed its own model of centralised leadership and an ‘harmonisation of diversity’ though dealing with the heterogeneity of cultures, religions, societies and races. The project intends to achieve the following objectives: improving our understanding of the relations between communism and nationalism outside of Europe as a factor in the contradictory drives to political modernity; providing a cross-section of how the variegated anti-imperialist world in the Global South entered into relation with the communist strategies elaborated in Russia and Europe.

The researcher will be asked to propose and develop a specific project within the general framework outlined above as well as to support the research team providing sources from the Comintern archive in Moscow and other European archives. A very good knowledge of English and Russian is therefore required.