

ARTICLE

Transregional by design: The early communist press in the middle east and global revolutionary networks

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Abstract

This article traces the circulation of newspapers and journals as physical objects to reconstruct Middle Eastern communists' global connections. I argue that post-First World War Middle Eastern and North African revolutionary militancy was closely linked to global networks. The extensive transregional and transimperial circulation of the communist press discussed here traces these close connections. The Communist International represented a novelty as a self-proclaimed centralist worldwide party. Distinctively, it brought together the means and the will to centralize (much of) global radicalism. This argument also serves to locate the early and mid-1920s as a transitional period in the history of left-wing movements: the means provided by a World Party intersected with the network-like structure of the pre-Comintern revolutionary milieu. The article aims to contribute to global history by discussing a regional – Middle Eastern – political current, not as the aggregate sum of its national components, but as a product of a global process.

Keywords: Communist International; press; transregional; Middle East; revolutionary networks

In early 1921, Zeinel Faisal burst into a coffeehouse in Akron, Ohio. He was armed with twenty-five issues of his 'beloved *Ziya*' (Light), an Ottoman Turkish language weekly paper published by the Communist Party of Bulgaria in Sofia. Turkish and Albanian migrant workers patronised the coffeehouse, and Faisal tried to sell the newspaper to these workers. Faisal's letter to the newspaper – subsequently published in the twenty-fourth issue of *Ziya* – failed to clarify how many papers he actually sold. But in the small market of Ottoman Turkish language publications in Akron, Faisal might have found a clientele. Also, upon receiving a batch of *Ziya*, Faisal reached out to several US and Canadian newspapers to invite anyone who wanted to obtain his beloved paper. He expressed his wishes to 'reach the communist republic' at once and complained about the 'breadlines' (written in English in the original Turkish letter) in the US. 'Do you, too', he asked, 'have such breadlines over there?'¹ About a year after Zeinel extended his greetings to 'all genuine communists' via *Ziya*, the French occupants of Istanbul complained about the paper being smuggled into the city and sold illegally.² Although Istanbul, Akron, and Sofia formed an unlikely trio, the networks constituted around this particular paper are hardly an oddity. On the contrary, the written word travelling across borders to create transnational linkages constituted a quintessential feature of the post-Great War communist movement.

Taking this premise as a starting point, the article seeks to use communist publications to track the connections of Middle Eastern communists with global radical networks. I use this instrument

¹Cited: Mete Tunçay, *BKP'nin Türkçe Yayın Organı: Ziya Gazetesi (1920-1923) ve Türkiye* (Istanbul: Sosyal Tarih Yayınları, 2009), 21.

²Service Historique de la Défense, Paris (hereafter SHD), GR 20 N 1103, Renseignements 1922, Untitled note, no date.

to trace the transnational ties of the post-Great War communists, both within the Middle East and between the Middle East and other regions. The article builds and expands upon three scholarly literatures. The first concerns the vibrant Middle Eastern press in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³ Cross-border connections forged through the press, not least through diaspora publications, have received their fair share of attention.⁴ Scholars like Arthur Asseraf also affirmed the importance of non-publication means of communication such as rumours in the region.⁵ This article aims to expand this literature by emphasizing the global implication of these connections and their material/logistical side. By doing so, I argue that the all-too-convenient regional unit of the Middle East should not be reified as an analytical tool. Rather, Middle Eastern history, particularly its radical history, could only be fully appreciated through its global interactions.⁶

The second strand of literature looks at radical papers as a space where global radical connections left their paper trail. Carefully tracking the ideas exchanged via the radical press, scholars have dissected the global vistas of the militants who published these papers and the transnational cooperation that made these publications viable.⁷ My article takes a different approach to following the global aspects of the radical publishing scene. Thus, here, I will not discuss the otherwise significant debates conducted in the pages of the communist journals.⁸ Instead of focusing on the theoretical and intellectual connections, the article deals with the material side of global connections – from the ways of obtaining typeface to trajectories of papers' circulation. In this sense, it tries to bring this literature into conversation with the global history of communications, which has paid attention to the infrastructure that rendered communication global.⁹

The protagonist of this history is the Comintern. Hence, as its third axis, my article aims to contribute to the expanding historiography on this organisation. The Communist International (Comintern or the Third International) was a global communist organisation founded under the aegis of the Bolshevik Party after the October Revolution to strengthen newly-emerging communist organisations and expand them to regions where they did not exist. It came into being in 1919 as a direct result of the schism within the Second International during the First World War and

³Marwan R. Buheiry, ed., *Intellectual Life in the Arab East, 1890-1939* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1981); Ami Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 28–105; Johann Strauss, 'Who Read What in the Ottoman Empire (19th-20th Centuries)?', *Middle Eastern Literatures* 6, no. 1 (January 2003): 39–76; Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 54–8; Omar Youssef Cheta and Kathryn A Schwartz, 'A Printer's Odd Plea to Reform Legal Pluralism in Khedival Egypt', *Past & Present* 252, no. 1 (August 2021): 179–211.

⁴Reem Bailony, 'Transnationalism and the Syrian Migrant Community: The Case of the 1925 Syrian Revolt', *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East & North African Migration Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 8–29; Stacy Fahrenthold, 'Transnational Modes and Media: The Syrian Press in the Mahjar and Emigrant Activism during World War I', *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East & North African Migration Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 30–54.

⁵Arthur Asseraf, *Electric News in Colonial Algeria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 100–30.

⁶For a brilliant study connecting Ottoman and Asian regional histories with global history, see Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁷Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, *Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Pietro Di Paola, 'The Game of the Goose. Italian Anarchism: Transnational, National or Local Perspective?', in *Reassessing the Transnational Turn: Scales of Analysis in Anarchist and Syndicalist Studies*, ed. Constance Bantman and Bert Altana (Dexter: PM Press, 2017), 118–35; Margaret Stevens, *Red International and Black Caribbean: Communists in New York City, Mexico and the West Indies, 1919-1939* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 179–211; David M. Struthers, *The World in a City: Multiethnic Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 54–64.

⁸For an insightful example of this type of study, see Ali Raza, 'Provincializing the International: Communist Print Worlds in Colonial India', *History Workshop Journal* 89 (April 2020): 140–53.

⁹Simone M. Müller and Heidi J. S. Tworek, "'The Telegraph and the Bank': On the Interdependence of Global Communications and Capitalism, 1866-1914", *Journal of Global History* 10, no. 2 (July 2015): 259–83; Roland Wenzlhuemer, 'The Ship, the Media, and the World: Conceptualizing Connections in Global History', *Journal of Global History* 11, no. 2 (July 2016): 163–86.

the Bolshevik Party's victory in 1917.¹⁰ At the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920, nominal president Grigory Zinoviev declared the goal of creating a World Communist Party with national branches instead of a coalition of national communist parties.¹¹

The Comintern was the first to possess the means to potentially centralize global radicalism. Not all movements with global ambitions had the appetite for a centralized worldwide organisation; for some strands of anarchism, even the thought of global centralism would be sacrilegious. Others, though sympathetic to the idea, lacked the means to create one. The presence of a centralized apparatus capable of moving money, people, and material around provided the Cominternians with a crucial logistical advantage that none of their predecessors possessed.

The extensive transregional and transimperial circulation of the communist press discussed here traces the connections between post-First World War Middle Eastern and North African revolutionary militancy and the global networks. Newspapers, journals, and books circulated among the revolutionary groups of the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, the Soviet Union and occasionally the Americas in a wide range of languages.¹² The scale of these connections means we cannot understand the national and regional spaces of militancy as closed circuits. Rather, links across national, regional and imperial lines constituted a key characteristic of post-First World War communism in the Middle East and not a side feature – similar but on a bigger scale than its pre-war revolutionary predecessors in the region.

This argument serves to locate the early and mid-1920s as a transitional period in the history of left-wing movements. It provides an alternative to seeing a duality between loosely connected networks of the pre-First World War era and Moscow-centred communism after the October Revolution. Instead, the period between the creation of the Comintern and the rise of Stalinism in the late 1920s was a moment of transition, where the means provided by a World Party intersected with the network-like structure of the pre-Cominternian revolutionary milieu. The following article is a tentative step to rethink the unique position of this transitional period.

Historians have not reached a consensus on the periodisation of the Comintern's lifespan.¹³ Yet, for the purposes of this article, 1928 corresponds to a watershed moment. Historians and contemporaries alike pointed to 1927/1928 as a crucial juncture in the trajectory of the global communist movement. Lev Davidovitch Trotsky later suggested the defeat of the 1926–27 Chinese Revolution as a factor ushering in the final victory of Stalinism over the internal opposition.¹⁴ Historians of the Soviet Union posited the late 1920s as the point of no return for the

¹⁰Pierre Broué, *Histoire de l'Internationale Communiste* (Paris: Fayard, 1997); Serge Wolikow, 'The Comintern as a World Network', in *The Cambridge History of Communism: Volume 1: World Revolution and Socialism in One Country 1917–1941*, ed. Silvio Pons and Stephen A. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 232–55; Sabine Dullin and Brigitte Studer, 'Communism + Transnational: The Rediscovered Equation of Internationalism in the Comintern Years', *Twentieth Century Communism* 14 (2018): 66–96; Michele Louro et al., eds., *The League Against Imperialism: Lives and Afterlives* (Amsterdam: Leiden University Press, 2020); Disha Karnad Jani, 'The League Against Imperialism, National Liberation, and the Economic Question', *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 2 (July 2022): 210–32.

¹¹Aleksandr Vatlin, *Vtoroy Kongress Kominterna: Tochka Otscheta Istorii Mirovogo Kommunizma, Istorii Stalinizma* (Moscow: ROSSPĖN, 2018), 76.

¹²Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic between 1918 and 1922.

¹³For an overview; Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, ed., 'Comintern: Exploring the New Historiography', in *Marxism in Dark Times: Select Essays for the New Century* (Anthem Press, 2012), 63–90; Fredrik Petersson, 'Historiographical Trends and the Comintern', *Comintern Working Papers (CoWoPa)*, 7 October, 2007, https://www.academia.edu/3098579/Historiographical_Trends_and_the_Comintern.

¹⁴Alexander Pantsov, *The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Revolution, 1919–1927* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2000), 136–7.

Stalinization of the Bolshevik Party.¹⁵ Serge Wolikow suggested a similar periodisation for the Communist International, with the first period dating from 1919 to 1927.¹⁶

While making this statement, one shall refrain from construing the changing situation as a sudden and total control imposed by Moscow.¹⁷ The national sections had strong local roots, and the control of Stalinism, even in the 1930s, was neither sudden nor linear.¹⁸ As Brigitte Studer shows, even the cadres taking leading positions in the Comintern with Stalinization often stepped out of line. Major sections had repeatedly anticipated, if not propelled, important changes in the Comintern line, such as the French Communist Party's struggle against fascism and its role in adopting the Popular Front line by the Comintern in the mid-1930s.¹⁹

After its Sixth Congress in 1928, while Stalinism took over the Soviet Union, the Comintern officially adopted the Third Period politics. This was a milestone event in the history of communist parties, not least the Middle Eastern ones.²⁰ The most famous outcome of the new strategy was the use of the 'social-fascism' epithet for the social democrats in Germany.²¹ In the Middle East, the new line meant disavowing alliances with other anti-colonial forces. Histories of the different Comintern sections in the Middle East, as well as those on the communist movement of the Soviet Muslims, also took 1928 as a turning point, not least due to the so-called Bolshevization and the liquidation of a generation of militants.²² Syrian communists' and Emir Khaled's (a prominent Comintern ally and an Algerian nationalist) complaints in 1929 on Comintern's changing stance towards its erstwhile allies attest to the reversal.²³

Prior to the so-called Third Period, i.e., for the better part of the 1920s, the Comintern exhibited remarkable flexibility in forging alliances with the national liberation movements throughout the colonial world.²⁴ This directly flowed from the policy of anti-colonial alliances formulated in the Second Comintern Congress in 1920.²⁵ The Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East in 1920 and the Brussels Conference in 1927, where prominent non-communist anti-colonial figures gathered in Comintern-sponsored events, were the culmination of the united front policy.²⁶ The united front orientation created propitious conditions for an array of Middle Eastern nationalist groups

¹⁵Pierre Broué, *Le Parti Bolchevique: Histoire du PC de l'URSS* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972), 274–335; Michal Reiman, *The Birth of Stalinism: The USSR on the Eve of the 'Second Revolution'*, trans. George Saunders (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

¹⁶Serge Wolikow, *L'Internationale communiste: le Komintern ou le rêve déchu du parti mondial de la révolution* (Paris: Editions de l'Atelier, 2010), 216.

¹⁷Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay, 'Introduction: Left Transnationalism? The Communist International, the National, Colonial, and Racial Questions, and the Strengths and Limitations of the "Moscow Rules" Paradigm', in *Left Transnationalism*, ed. Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), 3–46.

¹⁸See Edward Hallett Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

¹⁹Brigitte Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 22–40.

²⁰Nicholas N. Kozlov and Eric D. Weitz, 'Reflections on the Origins of the "Third Period": Bukharin, the Comintern, and the Political Economy of Weimar Germany', *Journal of Contemporary History* 24, no. 3 (July 1989): 387–410.

²¹Norman Laporte, 'Presenting a Crisis as an Opportunity: The KPD and the Third Period, 1929-1933', in *In Search of Revolution: International Communist Parties in the Third Period*, ed. Matthew Worley (London: I.B.Tauris, 2004), 38–64.

²²Sepehr Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 47–8; Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union: A Revolutionary Strategy for the Colonial World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 89–92; Suliman Bashear, *Communism in the Arab East, 1918-28* (London: Ithaca Press, 1999); Erden Akbulut and Erol Ülker, *Türkiye Komünist Partisi'nin Bolşevikleşmesi, 1925-1928* (Istanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2021).

²³For Khaled: Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine (hereafter AN), BB-18-2812, 11-A-29-22-367, Emir Khaled to PCF, 26 January, 1929; for Syrian communists: Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, Moscow (hereafter RGASPI), f. 495, op. 84, d. 21, ll. 19-29, Communist Party of Syria to the Eastern Department, 16 August, 1929.

²⁴John Riddell, Vijay Prashad, and Nazef Mollah, eds., *Liberate the Colonies! Communism and Colonial Freedom, 1917-1924* (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2019); Oleksa Drachewych and Ian McKay, eds., *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial, and Racial Questions* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019).

²⁵Riddell, Prashad, and Mollah, *Liberate the Colonies*, 94–9.

²⁶John Riddell, ed., *To See the Dawn: Baku, 1920 - First Congress of the Peoples of the East* (New York: Pathfinder Books, 1993); Louro, et al., *The League Against Imperialism*.

to deploy the means of the Communist International in the 1920s. This article will show some of its publishing-related results.

Such publishing connections matter, and not only for historians of the Middle East, communism, or the press. Perhaps more importantly, focusing on these connections complicates our understanding of geographical and spatial units of analysis. The spatial turn, which underpins global history, problematized the nation-state's dominance as the privileged framework of analysis and brought about an increasing dialogue between history and area studies.²⁷ Whereas the fresh perspectives from sub- and supra-national vistas had a salutary effect, it also created the risk of reifying regional units, some of which, like the Middle East, were 'essentially colonial construct[s]'.²⁸ My point is not that regional thinking is unhelpful or irrelevant. On the contrary, as Michel Gobat affirmed for Latin America, I believe in the 'continuing significance of entities located between the national and the global'.²⁹ However, underlining the porousness of borders separating these units of analysis and challenging taken-for-granted binaries (Global South-Global North, Middle East-Europe, East-West, *inter alia*) remain equally relevant for global history.³⁰ Accordingly, the discussion of border-straddling journals in this article contributes to complicating these simple binaries. What we consider regional stories were, indeed, thoroughly global.

This article will first set the scene with a discussion of the background of the Comintern's global networks. The second section will discuss the logistical complications involved in the Comintern's publishing efforts. The following two sections will reconstruct different patterns of circulation of the communist press in the region, passing through Mashriq, Maghreb, and Europe. After that, I will deal with communist translation endeavours in the region and discuss what these translations might tell us about Middle Eastern communists' interaction with global radical networks. Finally, I will draw some overall conclusions and briefly discuss what these stories might tell us about global history.

Making of an interconnected Cominternian world

An array of extant militant traditions, technological advancements, and political conjecture provided the grammar upon which the 'transnational world of the Cominternians' was built in the Middle East.³¹ The transnational and – as Alp Yenen put it – 'trans-ideological' networks of the period following the First World War had their roots in the transimperial as well as intra-Ottoman radical connections forged by a plethora of militant traditions.³² As Ilham Khuri-Makdisi has demonstrated, radical newspapers helped establish networks between Beirut, Alexandria, Cairo, and beyond before the Great War.³³ Anarchists of Egypt animated a Popular University and published papers circulating across the Mediterranean.³⁴ Armenian revolutionaries of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) and the Social Democratic Hunchakian Party

²⁷Matthias Middell and Katja Naumann, 'Global History and the Spatial Turn: From the Impact of Area Studies to the Study of Critical Junctures of Globalization', *Journal of Global History* 5, no. 1 (March 2010): 149–70.

²⁸Abbas Amanat, 'Introduction: Is There a Middle East? Problematizing a Virtual Space', in *Is There a Middle East?: The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept*, ed. Michael E. Bonine, Abbas Amanat, and Michael Ezekiel Gasper (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 4.

²⁹Michel Gobat, 'The Invention of Latin America: A Transnational History of Anti-Imperialism, Democracy, and Race', *The American Historical Review* 118, no. 5 (December 2013): 146.

³⁰See Sebastian Haug, Jacqueline Braveboy-Wagner, and Günther Maihold, 'The "Global South" in the Study of World Politics: Examining a Meta Category', *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 9 (September 2021): 1923–44.

³¹I borrow the expression from Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*.

³²Alp Yenen, 'The "Young Turk Zeitgeist" in the Middle Eastern Uprisings in the Aftermath of World War I', in *War and Collapse: World War I and the Ottoman State*, ed. M. Hakan Yavuz and Feroz Ahmad (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 1181–216.

³³Khuri-Makdisi, *Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914*, 95–114.

³⁴Anthony Gorman, 'Socialisme en Égypte avant la Première Guerre mondiale: la contribution des anarchistes', *Cahiers d'histoire. Revue d'histoire critique*, no. 105–106 (July 2008): 47–64.

(SDHP) connected constitutional revolutions of the Russian, Ottoman, and Iranian empires by seamlessly moving publications, militants, and guns across imperial borders.³⁵ In cases like the Iranian Jangalis, the ties with Russian Bolshevism were in place well before the October Revolution.³⁶ The Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) cultivated its own revolutionary networks and *modus operandi* before seizing power.³⁷ Later, the CUP and its foremost leader Enver Paşa would bring its pan-Islamist networks into Bolshevism's orbit following the rapprochement between the two actors.³⁸

The Great War and the ensuing horrors engendered a significant decline for revolutionary groups. The massive recruitment efforts of the belligerent armies were one of the many obstacles faced by militants. During and after the war, the nation-state's emergence in the region came with its atrocities, the Armenian Genocide of 1915 being the first in line.³⁹ The genocide, besides the sheer monstrosity of the act, took its toll on Armenian revolutionary organisations, including the execution of Paramaz and nineteen other militants of the SDHP in Istanbul.⁴⁰ Several genocide-survivor Armenians would join the communist organisations in Egypt and Syria following their forced exodus.⁴¹ The compulsory population exchange in 1923 between Turkey and Greece would provide yet another tragic episode of the nation-state-building efforts in the region.⁴² Even though Istanbul's Greeks were exempt from the population exchange, this process also spelled the demise of Istanbul's predominantly-Greek revolutionary organisation, UIT (Union Internationale des Travailleurs).⁴³

The post-Ottoman connections constituted an essential part of the Middle Eastern connectivities discussed here.⁴⁴ Michael Provence persuasively showed the resilience of the ties forged in the imperial schools of the late-Ottoman era after the emergence of the nation-states.⁴⁵ Several future communists, including Hikmet Kıvılcımlı and Salih Hacıoğlu, attended the imperial colleges based in Istanbul.⁴⁶ Showing the importance of post-Ottoman connections, Hacıoğlu's first high-profile Comintern assignment was to establish ties with the Syrian revolutionaries across the new Turco-Syrian border, hinting at the role of post-Ottoman connections.⁴⁷ In cases like Hacıoğlu on the

³⁵Houri Berberian, *Roving Revolutionaries: Armenians and the Connected Revolutions in the Russian, Iranian, and Ottoman Worlds* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

³⁶Pezhmann Dailami, 'The Bolsheviks and the Jangali Revolutionary Movement, 1915-1920', *Cahiers Du Monde Russe et Soviétique* 31, no. 1 (1990): 43-59.

³⁷Benjamin C. Fortna, 'Late-Ottoman "Rogues" and Their Paths to Power: A Prosopographic Study', in *Age of Rogues: Rebels, Revolutionaries and Racketeers at the Frontiers of Empires*, ed. Ramazan Hakkı Öztan and Alp Yenen (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 302-2.

³⁸Alp Yenen, 'Internationalism, Diplomacy and the Revolutionary Origins of the Middle East's "Northern Tier"', *Contemporary European History* 30, no. 4 (November 2021): 497-512.

³⁹Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks' Crime against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁴⁰Kadir Akın, *Ermeni Devrimci Paramaz: Abdülhamid'den İttihat Terakki'ye Ermeni Sosyalistleri ve Soykırım* (Ankara: Dipnot Yayınları, 2015).

⁴¹G. G. Kosach, *Kommunisty Blizhnego Vostoka v SSSR: 1920-1930-e Gody* (Moscow: Rossiiskii gos. gumanitarnyi universitet, 2009), 41, 172-3.

⁴²Anastasia Filippidou, 'The Impact of Forced Top-Down Nation Building on Conflict Resolution: Lessons from the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange between Greece and Turkey', *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 1 (January 2020): 144-57.

⁴³Erden Akbulut and Mete Tuñaç, *Beynelmülel İşçiler İttihadı* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016).

⁴⁴For a recent and thorough compilation on the late-Ottoman revolutionaries; Ramazan Hakkı Öztan and Alp Yenen, eds., *Age of Rogues*; for post-Ottoman transitions Schayegh, *The Middle East*, 132-92; and Adam Mestyan, 'From Administrative to Political Order? Global Legal History, the Organic Law, and the Constitution of Mandate Syria, 1925-1930', *Journal of Global History* 17, no. 2 (July 2022): 292-311.

⁴⁵For the school system Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 9-55.

⁴⁶For Kıvılcımlı; Cenk Ağcabay, *Türkiye Komünist Partisi ve Dr. Hikmet* (Istanbul: Sosyal İnsan Yayınları, 2009), 36-9; for Hacıoğlu, RGASPI, f. 495, op. 266, d. 98, ll. 22-23, 'Lichnyi Listok po Uchetu Kadrov', May 6, 1941.

⁴⁷Burak Sayım, 'Beyond Borders: An Entangled History of Communism in the Post-Ottoman Middle East,' *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 8, no. 1 (Summer 2021): 449-55.

Turkish-Syrian border, communists faced the transition from intra-imperial to transnational.⁴⁸ The post-First World War Middle East was divided along imperial and national borders, with Egypt, Transjordan, Palestine and Iraq under British control, and the North African region and Syria ruled by the French. This meant that transnational communist militancy in the region, including the distribution of publications, required constant cross-border activity. Nonetheless, the transition was slow, and border-crossing for economic and political reasons remained fairly common in the post-Ottoman Middle East.⁴⁹

While the new or consolidated frontiers arose as a challenge, cross-border actors and new technologies facilitated the Comintern endeavour. Hourı Berberian convincingly illustrated how the advancement in communication and transportation technologies – from telegraph to steamships – facilitated the cross-border circulation of militants, arms and publications within the Armenian revolutionary networks during the constitutional revolutions.⁵⁰ The Comintern created its specialized organs, not least the famous OMS (International Liaison Department), to capitalize on these technological possibilities and connect to the various scattered communist organisations.⁵¹ The efforts included attempts to streamline the production of forged passports, once again taking its cue from the pre-Great War revolutionary methods indicated by Berberian.⁵²

As hinted by the mention of passports, the role of ‘mobile actors’ role was crucial in connecting the Comintern sections and disseminating the Cominternian publications. Left-wing sailors creating overseas cross-border connections figured among the most prominent spreaders of communist publications.⁵³ The Middle East and the extended Mediterranean space were no exception. In the early 1920s, sailors connected major hubs of militant politics like Istanbul with the Comintern by carrying publications.⁵⁴

Hence, the Communist International found a window of political opportunity in its early years. The setbacks experienced by different radical groups, technological advancements that shrank global spaces, and Bolshevism’s rising star as the victors of the Russian Revolution – as well as the material advantages of having a state under its control – helped the Communist International bring militants and networks into its orbit.⁵⁵ Be that as outright adherence to the Comintern or de facto alliances, diverse networks—e.g., left-Zionists, Armenian national-revolutionaries, anarchists and anti-colonial nationalists—drifted towards the fledgling Cominternian project, feeding into the nascent communist networks extant ties that predated

⁴⁸For the creation and evolution of the Turkish-Syrian border; Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, ‘The Great Depression and the Making of Turkish-Syrian Border, 1921–1939’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 2 (May 2020): 311–26. For its practical implications: Seda Altuğ and Benjamin Thomas White, ‘Frontières et Pouvoir d’État: La Frontière Turco-Syrienne dans les Années 1920 et 1930’, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d’histoire*, no. 103 (2009): 91–104.

⁴⁹Cyrus Schayegh, ‘The Many Worlds of ‘Abud Yasin; or, What Narcotics Trafficking in the Interwar Middle East Can Tell Us about Territorialization’, *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 2 (2011): 273–306; Laila Parsons, *The Commander: Fawzi al-Qawuqji and the Fight for Arab Independence 1914–1948* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2017); Philippe Pétriat, ‘The Uneven Age of Speed: Caravans, Technology, and Mobility in the Late Ottoman and Post-Ottoman Middle East’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 2 (May 2021): 273–90. Also see Jordi Tejel and Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, eds., *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918–1946*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022).

⁵⁰Berberian, *Roving Revolutionaries*, 47–72.

⁵¹Grant Mkrtychevich Adibekov et al., *Organizatsionnaia Struktura Komintern, 1919–1943* (Moscow: ROSSPĖN, 1997), 25–6.

⁵²RGASPI, f. 495, op. 266, d. 98; Berberian, *Roving Revolutionaries*, 73–5.

⁵³Ali Raza and Benjamin Zachariah, ‘To Take Arms Across a Sea of Trouble: The “Lascar System”, Politics, and Agency in the 1920s’, *Itinerario* 36, no. 3 (December 2012): 19–38.

⁵⁴Burak Sayim, ‘Occupied Istanbul as a Cominternian Hub: Sailors, Soldiers, and Post-Imperial Networks (1918–1923)’, *Itinerario* 46, no. 1 (April 2022): 128–49.

⁵⁵For an overview of the Ottoman press’ perception of the Bolshevik revolution: Uygur Kocabaşoğlu and Metin Berge, *Bolşevik İhtilâli ve Osmanlılar* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2006).

many a nation-state in the region.⁵⁶ Thus, the early Comintern could function as a network of networks in the Middle East.

A network of linguistic networks and the logistics of a multi-typeface operation

Ankara, 1922. In a letter by the ‘Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Communist International’ (ECCI) the Soviet Ambassador Semion Ivanovitch Aralov enquired about the publishing possibilities in Anatolia. It also asked about the required quantity and language of the material to be sent to Ankara. After questioning the national composition of French troops in Syria and British forces in Iraq, comrades in Moscow wanted to gauge the potential of Arabic-Urdu publications in Anatolia. The letter ended with a list of what the Comintern was dispatching. They were sending 12,500 fliers in Arabic, as well as English and French material. More publications in Hindi and English were to follow soon.⁵⁷

The reasoning behind this particular set of languages (Urdu, Hindi, Arabic, English, and French) is no mystery. The material would help defeatist propaganda toward the Entente troops located in Anatolia, Iraq, and Syria. Beyond its immediate purpose, however, another point deserves attention. Inclusion in the Comintern provided important linguistic dexterity for the militants in different localities. Ankara was not a part of English or French-speaking revolutionary networks per se. The Indian revolutionary movement was a multi-centred body extending from London to Tashkent and from Paris to Mumbai.⁵⁸ Yet, in all likelihood, no Urdu-speaking revolutionary cell was present in Ankara in the early 1920s. But indeed, this is precisely the point. Even when no apparent reason—such as migratory or commercial flows—tied one locality to another, insertion within the Comintern meant having access to the material of distinct movements all over the globe. The Comintern centre served as a proxy linking radical networks that would have no connections otherwise. In this case, communists in Ankara needed to reach out to the British army’s Hindi or Urdu-speaking South Asian troops. Still, they had no literature in Urdu, no Urdu-speaking militants, and no contact with revolutionary networks with access to this language. But the Comintern—as the World Communist Party—definitely had some Urdu-speaking comrades in Paris, Moscow, Kabul, or Mumbai.⁵⁹ The Comintern centre took charge of connecting the two parts. Through the Communist International’s centralized apparatus, the exchange of material between distinct linguistic revolutionary networks became less dependent on spatial boundaries.

The same ECCI letter helps us explore another component of the Cominternian publication activity concerning the Middle East. Operating a multi-lingual and multi-typeface printing operation required attention to logistics, and it was a point of particular concern for the Near Eastern Bureau’s activity. A Latin typeface with some modifications would suffice for some Cominternian departments, but not for the Middle Eastern sections. Although all three major languages (Arabic, Persian and Turkish) of the region used the Arabic script with modifications until 1928,

⁵⁶The continuity of the militant traditions shows itself through the biographical lens. Among the first generation of communist leaders in the Middle East; in Turkey, Salih Hacıoğlu was an ex-CUP member; in Syria, Artin Madoyan was an ex-Hnchakian. In Palestine, Joseph Berger was an ex-Zionist; in Egypt, Joseph Rosenthal was an ex-anarchist.

⁵⁷RGASPI, f. 495, op. 154 d. 137, ll. 185–93, ECCI Secretariat to Aralov, 22 October, 1922, 9.

⁵⁸Ali Raza, *Revolutionary Pasts: Communist Internationalism in Colonial India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Ole Birk Laursen, ‘Spaces of Indian Anti-Colonialism in Early Twentieth-Century London and Paris’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 44, no. 4 (July 2021): 634–50.

⁵⁹A non-exhaustive list of the Urdu-speaking Cominternian in the 1920s would include Mohammed Shafiq who published a Urdu-Persian bilingual weekly in Tashkent 1920, Sohan Singh Josh who was active in Punjab, or important Comintern ally Maulana Barkatullah who moved across, Kabul, Moscow, London, Paris, and Brussels: Communist Party of India (Marxist), ed., *History of the Communist Movement in India* (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2005), 37; Sohan Singh Josh, *My Tryst with Secularism: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1991), xix; Humayun Ansari, ‘Maulana Barkatullah Bhopali’s Transnationalism: Pan-Islamism, Colonialism, and Radical Politics’, in *Transnational Islam in Interwar Europe: Muslim Activists and Thinkers*, ed. Götz Nordbruch and Umar Ryad (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 181–209.

Comintern activity in the Middle East necessitated a multitude of languages and scripts.⁶⁰ Until 1923, Greek was a must for Comintern activity in Turkey as the Greek community constituted about a quarter of Istanbul's population.⁶¹ Armenian militants constituted the backbone of Syrian communism and were instrumental in Egyptian, Turkish, and Iranian movements.⁶² The Communist Party of Palestine did not even possess an Arabic paper until 1929, and it addressed the Yishuv residents principally in Yiddish.⁶³ In North Africa and Egypt, a substantial part of the militant body was French or Italian, and publications in these languages were indispensable.⁶⁴ All in all, even this non-exhaustive list of the languages of Middle Eastern communism necessitates five different alphabets and, therefore, five sets of typeface.

Inherent operational difficulties arose from this linguistic diversity. Middle Eastern communists' demands from the centre corroborated the variety of their needs. After their first congress in 1926, Syrian communists demanded publications in Armenian, Turkish, and one European language.⁶⁵ Similarly, Istanbuli UIT—already publishing in Greek—asked the Comintern for brochures in Armenian and Turkish.⁶⁶ Egyptian communists tried to publish a bi-weekly paper in French and had to address the Comintern centre for the typeface.⁶⁷

The diverse publishing requirements in the Middle East called for a structured action plan. Despite the efforts to streamline the course of publications, the initial years witnessed unprecedented challenges. In the first few years of the 1920s, Middle Eastern communists often resorted to stronger Comintern sections instead of the Comintern centre. Somewhat counter-intuitively, an 'Eastern Bureau' of the Austrian Communist Party played a vital role in the Arab East.⁶⁸ Accordingly, the Communist Party of Egypt (CPE) 'ha[d] a bureau in Vienna connected with the Austrian Communist Party, which look[ed] after the technical needs of the Egyptian Party, such as printing etc. and supplying literature for its European sections'.⁶⁹ Around the same time, the French Communist Party (PCF) bankrolled the first Arabic communist daily in Tunisia, as discussed below.

Not rarely, logistical decisions had political implications. Sometimes choices about printing rekindled simmering tensions beneath the surface of camaraderie. The Communist Group of Istanbul (IKG) pressed hard to ensure the printing operations for Istanbul used the facilities in Sofia instead of Baku or Batumi.⁷⁰ Sofia was closer to Istanbul—ideologically and geographically—due to competition between Istanbul- and Baku-based Turkish communists and IKG's good rapport with the Communist Party of Bulgaria, and using Batumi as a centre could give the competing Caucasia-based Turkish communist centre an edge.

⁶⁰Publishing in Arabic script was a challenge of its own, which led an array of authors and journalists to try to reform it at the turn of century. See; Ulug Kuzuoglu, 'Telegraphy, Typography, and the Alphabet: The Origins of Alphabet Revolutions in the Russo-Ottoman Space', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 3 (August 2020): 413–31.

⁶¹Alexis Alexandris, *The Greek Minority of Istanbul and Greek-Turkish Relations, 1918-1974* (Athens: Centre for Asia Minor Studies, 1992), 49–51.

⁶²Taline Ter Minassian, *Colporteurs du Komintern. L'Union soviétique et les minorités au Moyen-Orient* (Paris: Les Presses de Sciences Po, 1997), 102–18, 154–7.

⁶³Musa Budeiri, *The Palestine Communist Party, 1919-1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 51.

⁶⁴Leila El Houssi, *L'Urlo Contro Il Regime: Gli Antifascisti Italiani in Tunisia tra le Due Guerre* (Roma: Carocci Editore, 2014), 78.

⁶⁵RGASPI, f. 495, op. 84 d. 11, ll. 8–10, Communist Party of Syria to Comintern, 1926.

⁶⁶Comintern Archives at the Social History Research Foundation of Turkey, Istanbul (hereafter TÜSTAV), CD 38, Folder Findbuch 7, Document 3-5, Ginzberg to Eastern Secretariat, 25 February, 1921, 5.

⁶⁷RGASPI, f. 495, op. 85, d. 12, ll. 112–113, Untitled letter from Cairo, 14 January, 1922.

⁶⁸RGASPI, f. 495, op. 154 d. 137, ll. 126–127, 'V Vostochoe Biuro pri Avstrijskoj Kommunisticheskoj Partii', circa 1922.

⁶⁹RGASPI, f. 495, op. 85 d. 2, ll. 32–33, Ivon Jones to Troianovskiy, 20 October, 1921.

⁷⁰TÜSTAV, CD 25A, Folder 31_36 (524–628), Document 8a-12b, O. Masdar to ECCI Secretariat, 20 October, 1921, 9.

Initially, Baku emerged as a hub and served as the transmission belt of Muskom's (Central Commissariat of Muslim Affairs) Turkish and Persian publications.⁷¹ The Azeri language used the Arabic alphabet until 1929, facilitating the logistics of publishing for the Middle East. The mutual intelligibility of the Turkish and Azeri languages was a boon for the Communist Party of Turkey's (CPT) publications in Baku. The presence of a substantial Iranian labour community helped the Communist Party of Iran (CPI).⁷² An array of Persian and Turkish papers, including the CPT's *Yeni Dünya*, (New World), were initially published in Baku and Caucasia and then smuggled to the respective countries.⁷³

The dissolution of the Council for Propaganda and Action of the Peoples of the East in 1922 ensued the centralisation of the Comintern's Eastern activities. The former communist hubs in Baku and Tashkent were replaced by Moscow. As highlighted by a Comintern report in 1921, '[Eastern] centre could not be in Caucasia or Turkestan, but only in Moscow'.⁷⁴ The Comintern centre made efforts to cater to the multilingualism of the Middle East with unique strategies and inventions. For instance, in 1922, a printing press with multiple typefaces for Turkish, Armenian, Greek, Bulgarian as well as a Latin typeface to meet the needs of Comintern, was developed in Simferopol, Crimea.⁷⁵

In Moscow, 1921, the Near and Middle Eastern Bureau's budget included a one-time purchase of 100 pud⁷⁶ of 'Muslim typeface' (for the Arabic typeface used for Ottoman Turkish, Persian and Arabic language) for 4,000 rubles. Following was the acquisition of 'the Antik,' an old printing press, by the Eastern Department of the Communist International and the Commissariat of Nationalities.⁷⁷ The collaboration between the two parties originated in Lenin's support for the nationalism of the oppressed peoples.⁷⁸ This stance constituted the lynchpin of the Soviet national policy, and it begot the 'korenizatsiia' (putting down roots) strategy in Soviet Central Asia, which encouraged the flourishing of local languages and the promotion of indigenous cadres.⁷⁹ Due to linguistic and cultural connections between Soviet Central Asia and the northern Middle East, i.e., Iran and Turkey, the policy created overlapping areas between the Soviet Commissariat of Nationalities and the Comintern's Eastern Department, including militants working for both, such as Turkish communist Mustafa Suphi and Tatar communist Sherif Manatov.⁸⁰

Patterns of circulation

What publications circulated within the Middle Eastern communist networks? Reconstructing their circulation is difficult, as the publications often travelled and were distributed clandestinely. Luckily, European governments' recurrent bans left a bureaucratic-archival paper trail, providing a convenient way of tracking their circulation. Even though it is almost impossible to establish exhaustively which communist publications reached whom, where, and how, one can discern some overlapping but distinct patterns.

⁷¹Minassian, *Colporteurs du Komintern*, 118–22; on Muskom, see Bennigsen and Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism*, 37–71.

⁷²Cosroe Chaqueri, *The Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran, 1920-1921: Birth of the Trauma* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 24–5.

⁷³Chaqueri, 174; Mete Tunçay, *Mustafa Suphi'nin Yeni Dünya'sı* (Istanbul: BDS, 1995).

⁷⁴RGASPI, f. 495, op. 2, d. 7, ll. 1–3, 'Ob Organizatsii (...)', 12 August, 1921, 1.

⁷⁵RGASPI, f. 495, op. 154 d. 136, ll. 35, Note on printing presses in Crimea, 13 April, 1922.

⁷⁶Approximately 163 kilograms.

⁷⁷RGASPI, f. 495, op. 154 d. 75, ll. 14–16, 'Smeta Otdela Blizhnego i Srednogo Vostoka', 1921, 3.

⁷⁸Yuri Slezkine, 'The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism', *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414–52; Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁷⁹Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 125–82.

⁸⁰Bennigsen and Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism*, 78, 207.

A starting point would be a list of banned foreign publications in Egypt from 1925. The list combines publications with ‘communist tendency or pornographic character’ and registers interdiction orders between 1924 and 1925.⁸¹ Before unpacking it, we could identify three levels of connections through the list: other centres of Middle Eastern communism, European communists, and the Soviets.

The first level of connection was with the rest of the Middle East. For instance, *al-Insaniyya* (Humanity), the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon’s newspaper, in Beirut; the Turkish *İleri* (Forward) in Egypt, even though the latter was not communist, Istanbul communists used it as their venue; and *Le Combat Social* (The Social Combat), a French-language paper published by the Communist Party of Tunisia.⁸² The second level of connection is with the European parties. The Beirut paper’s French namesake, *l’Humanité*, appears on the list, just as *Workers’ Weekly* from Great Britain, respectively belonging to the PCF and the CPGB (Communist Party of Great Britain). As for the third level, *Khorhrdayin Hayastan* (Soviet Armenia) from Yerevan and *Krasnaia Niva* (Red Field) from Moscow also appeared on the list, probably propagated amongst the sizeable Armenian and Russian communities in Egypt, showing the resilience of the pre-First World War radical connections between the South Caucasus and the Middle East. The genocide in 1915 increased the number of Armenian migrants in Egypt.⁸³ The Russian presence was mainly a product of the increasing cultural and economic relations between Egypt and the Russian Empire, including a direct steamer line between Alexandria and Odessa – which, incidentally, became the smuggling track for the Bolsheviks’ *Iskra* before the revolution.⁸⁴

Could this list of publications tell us something about the global connections of the interwar communism in the Middle East, or would we be reading too much into the Egypto-British administration’s overzeal in censorship? I will attempt to track and reconstruct some circulation patterns that banned papers in Egypt hinted at to argue that the list rather accurately represented the transnational and transregional circulations of the early communist press in the Middle East.

Greater Syria and Egypt constituted one of the layers.⁸⁵ Among the above-listed journals, in its short lifespan, *al-Insaniyya* typically exemplified the constant pressure the communist press faced in the region and how the regional Arabic press —leftist or not— moved. Since the late nineteenth century, Beirut had been a vital hub of the Arabic press.⁸⁶ Between 1918 and 1928, 148 new papers appeared in Lebanon, although two-thirds did not live to see the 1930s.⁸⁷

Organised communism was absent in Syria until the formation of the Communist Party in Syria in 1924. After that, *al-Insaniyya* appeared as a weekly publication in 1925.⁸⁸ While their efforts to seek the most from the vibrant Beirut publishing scene had limited success, *al-Insaniyya* counted among Palestinian communist Najati Sidqi’s, and presumably others’, first communist reading materials in Jerusalem, distributed in a communist club in the city.⁸⁹

Lebanon provided a relatively liberal ground for press activity, but communists knew this scantily applied to them.⁹⁰ They were cautious as one misstep would lead the French High

⁸¹Centre des Archives Diplomatiques, La Courneuve (hereafter AD), Afrique 1917-1940, Affaires Musulmans, Bobine 534, Folder 21, Document n. 217, ‘Journaux et revues dont l’entrée a été interdite sur le territoire égyptien’, circa October 1925.

⁸²TÜSTAV, CD 25A, Folder 31_36 (524-628), Document 8a-12b, O. Masdar to ECCI Secretariat, 20 October, 1921, 4.

⁸³Ayman Zohry, ‘Armenians in Egypt’, (Tours, Paris, 2005), 2–3.

⁸⁴Paul Du Quenoy, ‘The Russian Empire and Egypt, 1900-1915: A Case of Public Diplomacy’, *Journal of World History* 19, no. 2 (2008): 217.

⁸⁵Greater Syria, or Bilad al-Sham, roughly corresponds to an regional ensemble consisting of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Transjordan in the interwar period; Schayegh, *The Middle East*, 3–4.

⁸⁶Schayegh, 55–8.

⁸⁷Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East*, 88.

⁸⁸RGASPI, f. 495, op. 84, d. 8, ll. 16, Report on Syrian Activity, 1925.

⁸⁹Salim Tamari, ‘Najati Sadqi (1905-79): The Enigmatic Jerusalem Bolshevik’, *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 2 (2003): 86–7.

⁹⁰Ayalon, *The Press in the Arab Middle East*, 85.

Commissioner Maurice Sarrail to stifle *al-Insaniyya*.⁹¹ Aware of the paper's circulation in Egypt and Palestine, communists tried to benefit from inter-imperial fault lines. They probably inferred that they could adopt a more aggressive stance towards British imperialism while tiptoeing around subjects sensitive to the French. Had this approach worked, it would give them the best of both worlds; they would elude the French censure to keep the presses rolling while donning the mantle of unwavering anticolonialism on the other side of the imperial line. When Egyptian anticolonialists gunned down the Egyptian 'Sirdar' Lee Stack, the Syrian communist weekly vehemently opposed the death sentence for the perpetrators. They probably hoped that the French could have let an affront against a rival imperial power slip, but Sarrail was possibly worried about a possible spill-over effect more than he enjoyed embarrassing his colonial rival. On the morning of 19 June, 1925, Sarrail informed Paris of his decision to shut down *al-Insaniyya* and unleashed a series of police raids against the communists organising in Beirut,⁹² stoking up the former interdictions on the paper from entering Palestine and Egypt.⁹³ The heavy toll of incarceration ended this first, but not last, spell of Arabic communist press in Beirut — but not before proving its ease in crossing national and imperial borders.

Back to the list, Tunis-based *Le Combat Social* takes us to another circulation unit. The paper was one of the numerous French and Arabic publications by the French Communist Party and the semi-autonomous body of the Communist Party of Tunisia (PCT), targeting the Maghrebi audience. Their papers got banned one after another — only to resurface under other names. Throughout the 1920s, their names changed, but the papers kept crossing the borders among the French North African colonies and beyond.

A prominent example was *Habib al-Oumma* (People's Friend), published in Tunis in Arabic. The first intelligence about such a project reached the French administration on 2 November 1921. Authorities deemed it particularly troublesome as 'one of the first manifestations of an indigenous communist movement in North Africa'.⁹⁴ The intelligence warned about Comintern money behind the paper — in addition to some wealthy locals who hoped it would give the pan-Islamist cause a jolt — but in reality, it required no detective work. Five days after the original intelligence report, the French communist daily *l'Humanité* publicly and boastfully announced the creation of *Habib al-Oumma*, 'the first communist daily in the Arabic language'. 'Our party has granted its financial aid to this launch', it read, 'and this act will attract the interest of the Muslim people of North Africa even further towards international communism'.⁹⁵ That is to say, from its inception, it made its audience clear: not just the Tunisian reading public but the whole 'Muslim people of North Africa'.

Habib al-Oumma rapidly incurred the wrath of the colonial administration; no sooner had it published its sixteenth issue than it got banned. French Resident-General Lucien Saint used a decree from 1884 with the accusation of 'inciting to hate and contempt towards the French government' by nothing less sacrilegious(!) than calling for the equal treatment of French and indigenous civil servants.⁹⁶

Suppression begot a cat-and-mouse game between the Regence and Tunisian communists. Communists started to use a stratagem to contravene colonial censure. Robert Louzon, editor-in-chief of the paper, later noted that 'each day, *Habib al-Oumma* was appearing under a different name'.⁹⁷ *Habib as-Shab* followed *Habib al-Oumma*, and then *An-Nasir*, *Al-Mahdoun*, *Al-Bashir*,

⁹¹RGASPI, f. 495, op. 84, d. 8, ll. 16, Report on Syrian Activity, 1925.

⁹²AD, Afrique 1917-1940, Affaires Musulmans, Bobine 534, Folder 21, Document n. 97, Maurice Serail to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 19 June, 1925.

⁹³Idem; also RGASPI, f. 495, op. 84, d. 8, ll. 16, Report on Syrian Activity, 1925.

⁹⁴AD, Afrique 1917-1940, Affaires Musulmans, 533, 18, 36, 'A.S. de la propagande [...]', 2 November 1921.

⁹⁵*L'Humanité*, 'Le Communisme aux Colonies-Habib el-Oumma', 7 November 1921, 2.

⁹⁶AD, Afrique 1917-1940, Affaires Musulmans, 533, 18, 38, 'A.S. interdiction par la régence du journal Habib-el-Oumma', 9 November, 1921.

⁹⁷*L'Humanité*, 'L'Humanité aux Colonies', 18 May, 1922, 4.

and *Al-Kabir*.⁹⁸ Communists were resourceful, but the Regence had no intention to lose face. Saint urged the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Aristide Briand to let him implement harsher measures. On 3 January, 1922, he got the approval and banned the ‘publication of all newspapers that carr[ied] the monogram of sickle and hammer’ in Tunisia.⁹⁹ More than this measure, the arrests against the leading proponents of Tunisian communism like French Robert Louzon, Italian Enrico Costa, and Tunisian Mohtar el-Ayari proved difficult to counter. Thus, the first attempt to create an Arabic communist daily came to an abrupt end within a couple of months.

Nonetheless, in this short period, the paper showed that even though there were circulation patterns of the communist press in the Middle East, these were not closed circuits. From North Africa, *Habib al-Oumma* reached distant shores. Istanbuli communists used it to target the French North African soldiers stationed in the city.¹⁰⁰ The line of nationality and language mattered in the uphill struggle to publish a communist paper in North Africa. In order to suppress the communist publications in Arabic and Hebrew, the colonial administration introduced preliminary checks for controlling the flow of communist content in the region. The severe scrutiny imposed on the Arabic and Hebrew publications made it impossible for them to survive legally in Tunisia.

Communists — along with pan-Islamists — were well-situated to challenge and circumvent these obstacles with their transnational networks. They did so by importing Arabic publications and printing journals in French, both in Tunisia and Algeria.

Transregional and transimperial circulations

Particularly with the new anti-colonial orientation of the French Communist Party after 1924, communist papers with a regional outlook reappeared in North Africa. For these papers, crossing borders and constructing a transnational audience was a feature and not an exception. Tellingly, as opposed to an earlier North African communist publication *Lutte Sociale* (Social Struggle), whose subheader read ‘organ of Algerian communist federations’, the new papers reclaimed a regional stature.¹⁰¹ *Al-Chab al-Ifriki* (the African People) referenced itself to ‘North African workers’ in its subheader, *al-Istiklal* (Independence), to the ‘Committee for the Liberation of North Africa’ while *al-Alam al-Ahmar* (Red Flag) used the subheader ‘organ of the colonial workers’.¹⁰²

The new papers were published outside of North Africa — for the most part in France — then smuggled into the region. The dual audience in North Africa and the North African workers in metropolitan France and the experience with *Habib al-Oumma* made outsourcing publishing services the ideal deal for the new publishing endeavours in North Africa. Although changing names could dodge the blow of a ban, the vulnerability of publishing infrastructure was still an obstacle to be overcome.

The clandestine strategy of communist publications left scant trace of their actions and irked the French colonial administration. The issue of *al-Istiklal* by PCF’s underhand Committee for the Liberation of North Africa in 1926 and the subsequent spread of the paper in rural southern Tunisia and at a tram station in Tinja, Ferryville (currently Menzel Bourguiba) increased the confusion of the French.¹⁰³ The initial investigation concluded that the paper had been entering Tunisia since its inception, and a translator pointed out that the style and the font indicated

⁹⁸*L’Humanité*, ‘Le Communisme en Tunisie’, by Amédée Dunois, 24 March, 1922, 1.

⁹⁹AD, Afrique 1917-1940, Affaires Musulmans, 533, 18, 67, Aristide Briand to Lucien Saint, 3 January, 1922.

¹⁰⁰RGASPI, f. 495, op. 154, d. 769, ll. 34-38, ‘Doklad T. Sharki’, 23 February, 1923, 2.

¹⁰¹AD, Afrique 1917-1940, Affaires Musulmans, 533, 19, 232, ‘La Lutte Sociale’, 5 October, 1923.

¹⁰²*Al-Alam al-Ahmar*, no lisible date, circa May 1926; *Al-Chab al-Ifriki*, no lisible date, circa 1927; AD, Afrique 1917-1940, Affaires Musulmans, 534, 22, 135, ‘AS du journal El-Esteklal’, 23 October, 1926; *Al-Alam al-Ahmar*, no lisible date, circa 1926.

¹⁰³AD, Afrique 1917-1940, Affaires Musulmans, 534, 22, 127-128, ‘AS d’un tract communiste’, 14 September, 1926.

an Egyptian connection.¹⁰⁴ However, the French diplomatic corps in Cairo objected that even the famous Egyptian daily *al-Ahram*'s type was cast in Paris.¹⁰⁵ The investigation did not yield fruitful conclusions as a sizeable batch of *al-Istiklal* seized from a communist militant in Marseille added further confusion.¹⁰⁶

The most persistent and successful effort to supply the North African communist press through Paris was *al-Alam al-Ahmar*. The PCF bragged about this publication to prove to the Communist International that the French party had accomplished its anti-colonial duties. A letter by Pierre Célor claimed in 1926 that the PCF printed it in 14,000 copies, distributing it 'among others, in Algeria and Tunisia'.¹⁰⁷ The police corroborated the claim about publication numbers.¹⁰⁸ Like many other communist papers in North Africa, it received one interdiction order after another. True to form, it kept appearing under different names. Arabic language's rich lexicon of flag-related words facilitated the endeavour. The French police gave a taste of this never-ending cycle in the wonderfully stoical prose of bureaucracy: "Al Alam al Ahmar", edited in French and Arabic, prohibited by decree of August 23, 1926, replaced by "Al Beirak al Ahmar" and "Al Lioua Al Ahmar", prohibited by decree of 18 January, 1927, and replaced by "Al Raiat al Hamra" prohibited by decree of June 29, 1927, has never ceased to appear'.¹⁰⁹

Despite the hurdles, *al-Alam al-Ahmar* and its successors managed to reach almost all major Algerian and Tunisian cities, as well as the significant enclaves of the North African diaspora in France. In just 1927 and 1928, batches of *al-Alam* reached big cities such as Tunis, Oran, Constantine, Orleansville (currently Chlef), Bougie (currently Béjaïa) and Sidi bel-Abbes besides smaller localities such as Uzès-le-Duc (currently Oued el Abtal).¹¹⁰

Circumventing the interdiction required various methods. Communists posted the paper as individual copies instead of big batches and folded them to hide the title. This simple-sounding idea proved efficient enough. The Governor-General of Algeria complained in a letter to Sûreté Générale that 'obviously, under these conditions, many issues [of *al-Alam*] might go unnoticed'.¹¹¹

Besides the administrative efforts of widening the reach of Communist publications, transregional familial and social ties succoured the cause, as in the case of *al-Alam*. Some Kabyle workers in Châlons-sur-Seine (currently Châlons-en-Champagne) adhered to the communist party after the formation of the communist-led trade union CGTU in 1923 in their town. Abdoulwahab and Abderrahman Djebrani were two brothers working at the sugar refinery. Abderrahman got drafted and moved to the barracks in mountainous Bibans, Algeria. The two brothers maintained an epistolary exchange that often included copies of *al-Alam al-Ahmar*.¹¹² Even though the exchange between the brothers was stifled soon, in other cases the spread of the publication went past the hold of authorities and bolstered the Arabic communist word's circulation in North Africa through similar connections. Papers discussed in this part attest to the impossibility of understanding the history of communist publications in the Middle East and North Africa without their transregional and transimperial entanglements. Stories of European communist publications in the Middle East further corroborate this argument.

¹⁰⁴ AN, 19940494/43, 3672, Berzon to Aristide Briand, 23 October, 1926.

¹⁰⁵ AN, 19940494/43, 3672, 'A.S. du journal el-Istiklal', 7 December, 1926.

¹⁰⁶ AN, 19940494/43, 3672, Ministry of Interior to Bouches-du-Rhône prefect, 20 January, 1927.

¹⁰⁷ Archives Départementales de la Seine-Saint-Denis PCF Fonds, Bobigny (hereafter ADSSD), 517/1/375, Document 47, Célor to ECCL, 19 August, 1926.

¹⁰⁸ AN, F7/13171, Folder 1, Subfolder Propagande Communiste dans les Colonies 1927, 'AS du journal Al Loua Al Ahmar', 12 January, 1927.

¹⁰⁹ AN, 19940494/41, 3585, 19, Ministry of Interior to Prefect, June 19, 1930.

¹¹⁰ AN, 19940494/41, 3585, 31, Minister of Interior to Minister of Justice, February 9, 1928 ; same place, 26, 'Propagande Communiste Indigène', 30 May, 1928 and 46, 'A.S. de l'envoi en Algérie du journal interdit Al Raiat el hamra', 23 November, 1927.

¹¹¹ AN, 19940494/41, 3585, 21, 'A.S. du journal interdit Al-Raiat al-hamra', 7 June, 1930.

¹¹² AN, 19940494/41, 3585, 83, Special commissary of Chalons to Prefect of La Marne, 27 August, 1926.

Two papers we have seen banned in Egypt — *l'Humanité* of the French Communist Party and *Workers' Weekly* of the Communist Party of Great Britain — provide further proof of transimperial connections. Publications like *al-Alam* traversed borders smoothly in different colonies. Nonetheless, they carried a bespoke message crafted for one set of colonies: the French Maghreb, in this case. It meant that their circulation remained neatly within the imperial borders of France. On the other hand, the catch-all nature of central dailies such as *l'Humanité* enabled them to travel not just transnationally but also transimperially.

In the field of trans-imperial circulations, *l'Humanité* had it easier. Whereas the British papers *The Communist* and *Workers' Weekly* were newcomers in the global radical publishing scene, *l'Humanité* was already a household name. Founded in 1904 by Jean Jaurès, before turning communist, it already possessed an extensive network of correspondence with radical papers worldwide, including epistolary exchanges with Hüseyin Hilmi, at the head of Ottoman socialist paper *İştirak* (Contribution).¹¹³ Thanks to their majoritarian split with socialists at the Tours Congress in 1920, French communists conveniently inherited a well-oiled machine and a label carrying the halo of Jean Jaurès, one of the founding leaders of European socialism. Novice left-wing presses in the Middle East, often led by French-educated militants, looked up to the socialist-turned-communist press in France. Not seldom, their names carried thinly-veiled homages to it — before and after the onset of the Comintern. When Hüseyin Himi's — Jaurès' penpal — paper *İştirak* was banned in the early 1910s, it was replaced by *İnsaniyet*, the Turkish word for *l'Humanité*. In its first issue, just under the title written in Ottoman Turkish with Arabic letters, it read in French 'journal socialiste *l'Humanité*' — making clear where it took its cues from.¹¹⁴ The Communist Party of Syria's first regular Arabic paper (which we have met above) carried the Arabic version of the same moniker, *al-İnsaniyya*. In Istanbul, the leading communist paper *Aydınlık*, published by two Sorbonne-educated intellectuals, Şefik Hüsnü and Sadri Antel, carried the name of another French communist journal, *Clarté*, published by Henri Barbusse. The name choices came with clear preferences; not *Pravda* or *Iskra*, but *l'Humanité* and *Clarté*. The Bolshevik project was awe-inspiring for the newly-minted communists of the Middle East. Still, in this period of transition, it was yet to replace the French socialist tradition within the cultural codes of French-educated left-wing militants.

At least two factors favoured the French communist press' circulation in the Middle East. The first was its widespread availability. Its publications did not just dwarf — far and beyond — Middle Eastern communist papers. Effectively, it was the most published communist paper worldwide, save Soviet papers.¹¹⁵ Second, French was more widely spoken in the Middle Eastern intellectual milieu than English. An array of institutions propagating the French language, such as the Alliance Israélite Universelle, further bolstered the trend.¹¹⁶ In the Ottoman socialist movement, the militants urging translations from French socialism included teachers and alumni of these institutions.¹¹⁷

Like *al-Alam al-Ahmar*, *l'Humanité* travelled through social and familial ties between the North African population and the Maghrebi diaspora in France. A North African police agent reported that places of sociability and work in mainland France served *l'Humanité* as gateways to Morocco. The communist paper, the agent argued, had a reader base among the Moroccan workers in Epinay, among those patronising one particular café in Levallois near Paris or Café Populaire in Marseille. Through this readership and their ties, *l'Humanité* managed to reach Morocco.¹¹⁸

¹¹³Hamit Erdem, *Osmanlı Sosyalist Fırkası ve İştirakçi Hilmi* (Istanbul: Sel, 2012), 74–5.

¹¹⁴Erdem, 98.

¹¹⁵RGASPI, f. 495, op. 154, d. 3536, ll. 34–48, 'Kommunistische Presse', no date.

¹¹⁶Michael M. Laskier, 'Aspects of the Activities of the Alliance Israélite Universelle in the Jewish Communities of the Middle East and North Africa: 1860–1918', *Modern Judaism* 3, no. 2 (1983): 147–71.

¹¹⁷Erdem, *Osmanlı Sosyalist Fırkası*, 58.

¹¹⁸AD, Afrique 1917–1940, Affaires Musulmans, 534, 20, 12–14, Djouini to French consul in Tetouan, 12 November, 1923.

However, unlike *al-Ahram al-Ahmar*, *Humanité's* circulation was not limited to the French imperial space. A group of militants from Cairo, who would eventually constitute the 'Cairo communist group', reported that they started their political work by reading *la Vie Ouvrière* (Worker's Life) and *le Bulletin Communiste* (the Communist Bulletin)—both PCF publications.¹¹⁹ *L'Humanité* seemingly counted among essential reading material for Alexandrian communists too. Being fairly represented by this mammoth of the communist press mattered for them, evident enough in their opposition to their exclusion from the list of countries sending aid for the famine victims in Russia in 1922.¹²⁰ In Istanbul, *L'Humanité* enjoyed a relatively broad distribution, both among the Europeans and the French-speaking intellectuals.¹²¹ It reached not just major Middle Eastern metropolises like Cairo and Istanbul but less likely places, too, such as Mersin, a nineteenth-century Ottoman port-town that developed in the periphery of Aleppo.¹²²

The French communist press held an important place in the Middle East for local communists and their allies alike. The paper held a considerable influence, owing to its position in the European political scene. The support provided to the Syrian and Moroccan independence wars in *L'Humanité* buttressed the anti-colonial credentials of the Communist Party of Syria. According to local militants, this editorial line of *L'Humanité* attracted 'sympathies towards communism' in the country.¹²³

Moreover, the clout of *L'Humanité* did not just help the Middle Eastern revolutionaries at home. It served them as an outlet within the belly of the beast. Access to the pages of a major national newspaper in France was a significant boon. A multitude of Middle Eastern revolutionaries utilised this resource. Even before the communist-socialist split in December 1920, the Jeune Tunisien delegation in Paris used this opportunity. They asked *L'Humanité* and another socialist paper, *Le Populaire*, to publish the resolution adopted by a recent anti-colonial congress attended by Turkish, Caucasian, Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian, and Tunisian delegates.¹²⁴ Although the papers apparently did not run the full resolution, Léon Blum penned a highly sympathetic article on *L'Humanité* to support the resolution.¹²⁵

Another Middle Eastern anti-colonialist to express himself on the pages of *L'Humanité* was Emir Khaled, one of the most prominent anti-colonial allies of the Comintern.¹²⁶ In 1924, he penned a piece for *L'Humanité* where he retorted against a right-wing press crusade targeting him.¹²⁷ Egyptian communists, upon the interdiction of their short-lived paper *al-Shabiba* (Youth), called the revolutionary press to protest it, to which *L'Humanité* responded by rapidly running a note of protestation.¹²⁸ The same year, Turkish communists brandished their access to the European communist press as a threat. Mustafa Kemal's government had decided to dissolve the People's Communist Party of Turkey (THIF), and Salih Hacıoğlu, as its chairman, warned the government in a letter. 'This bad treatment will be transmitted to the workers' parties worldwide through the Communist International', it read, 'this declaration (of protest) will be published by all European communist newspapers'.¹²⁹ Hence, stories of European communist papers in the Middle East reinforce my argument about the entanglement of European and

¹¹⁹RGASPI, f. 495, op. 85, d. 10, ll. 1-22, 'Rapport du Mouvement ouvrier et communiste en Egypte', 12 October, 1922, 17.

¹²⁰RGASPI, f. 495, op. 85, d. 12, ll. 6-7, Rosenthal and Arabi to Safarof, 26 May, 1922.

¹²¹TÜSTAV, CD 25/A, Folder 31_36 (524-628), Document 56-73, UIT to ECCI, circa 1921, 15.

¹²²Erden Akbulut and Mete Tunçay, *Türkiye Halk İştirakiyun Fırkası, 1920-1923* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2016), 617.

¹²³RGASPI, f. 495, op. 84, d. 8, ll. 9, Report on Syria, circa 1927.

¹²⁴AD, Afrique 1917-1940, Affaires Musulmans, 533, 17, 112. 'Délégation Jeune Tunisienne', 5 July, 1920.

¹²⁵*L'Humanité*, 'Le droit des peuples', 14 July, 1920, 1.

¹²⁶On Khaled, see; Ahmed Koukassis and Gilbert Meynier, *L'Emir Khaled: premier za'im?: identité algérienne et colonialisme français* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987).

¹²⁷*L'Humanité*, 'L'Emir Khaled répond', 30 September, 1924, 1.

¹²⁸RGASPI, f. 495, op. 85, d. 11, ll. 18-19, Arabi and Rosenthal to Comintern, 15 July, 1922.

¹²⁹Cited in Akbulut and Tunçay, *Türkiye Halk İştirakiyun Fırkası, 1920-1923*, 397-9.

Middle Eastern communism. Not only the papers published for Middle Eastern consumption used the helping hand of European comrades, but also the European publications constituted a pivotal part of the militant experience in the Middle East.

A world in translation

The emergence of the communist movement in the Middle East raised the question of available political literature. Unlike in Europe and North America, where a sizeable amount of ‘recyclable’ pre-Comintern socialist literature existed, Middle Eastern Cominternians had to face the daunting task of producing literature from scratch. One Palestinian communist put it rather dramatically: ‘We are forced to create new words for it, because the terminology of the class struggle does not exist in Arabic, although this language is extremely rich’.¹³⁰ Some were prolific authors themselves, but translation remained invaluable in filling the material gap.¹³¹

Long before the Comintern project changed the face of communist publishing across the globe, the left-wing milieu and the general reading public in the Middle East and the Ottoman Empire, in particular, took an interest in the politics of translation.¹³² According to Friedrich Engels himself, The Communist Manifesto got translated in Istanbul to be published in Armenian as early as 1887.¹³³ Although the translation of Marxist literature into Ottoman Turkish was later than in other dominant languages, Marxist theory was not an alien idea for Ottoman Turkish readers. The available literature included translations, commentaries, and plagiarisms – sometimes all of them combined.¹³⁴ Just before the Great War, the Ottoman Socialist Party’s paper *İştirak* highlighted that having a group of French-speaking socialists translate Marxist literature into Turkish remained their ‘most burning need’.¹³⁵

After the Great War and throughout the 1920s, communists throughout the Middle East kept stating the need for regular translations into Turkish, Persian, and Arabic. The Communist Party of Egypt created a special translation commission almost immediately after its foundation.¹³⁶ Istanbuli communists’ correspondence indicated similar needs and similar efforts. In 1923, they proposed to the Eastern Department of Comintern that the Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) students who could not make it into Turkey shall constitute a ‘translation bureau for the classical works of Marxism’ such as ‘*Capital* by Marx, *Historical Materialism* by Bukharin, *State and Revolution* by Lenin’.¹³⁷ Almost simultaneously, Anatolian communists expressed a similar need. The Comintern envoy Mikhail Golman asked the Comintern to ‘translate the main works of Marx to Turkish’. Golman reported that their nascent efforts in that direction with a Turkish comrade, Fuat, had come to an abrupt end with Fuat’s exile to Eastern Anatolia, so an exiled French-speaking Turkish communist, Nizamettin, was assigned the task.¹³⁸

The Eastern Department, for its part, tried to provide a steady flux of publications. In 1925, the organisation started to lay the groundwork for an Arabic communist publishing house in the Near

¹³⁰RGASPI, f. 495, op. 84, d. 8, ll. 17–32, İhtiyar to Eastern Secretariat, circa 1927.

¹³¹On the issue of communists and translation, see Anna Belogurova, ‘The Chinese International of Nationalities: The Chinese Communist Party, the Comintern, and the Foundation of the Malayan National Communist Party, 1923–1939’, *Journal of Global History* 9, no. 3 (November 2014): 447–70; Leah Feldman, ‘Red Jihad: Translating Communism in the Muslim Caucasus’, *Boundary 2* 43, no. 3 (August, 2016): 221–49.

¹³²Strauss, ‘Who Read What in the Ottoman Empire (19th–20th Centuries)?’; Andrew Arsan, ‘Under the Influence? Translations and Transgressions in Late Ottoman Imperial Thought’, *Modern Intellectual History* 10, no. 2 (August 2013): 375–97.

¹³³Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 207–8.

¹³⁴Y. Doğan Çetinkaya, ‘Osmanlıca Marksizm’, *Toplumsal Tarih*, 319 (July 2020), 20–6.

¹³⁵Erdem, *Osmanlı Sosyalist Fırkası*, 58.

¹³⁶RGASPI, f. 495, op. 85, d. 11, ll. 14–16, ‘Postanavlennie Sotsialisticheskii Partii Egipta ot Avgusta 1922 goda’, 8 September, 1922.

¹³⁷TÜSTAV, CD 24–25B, Folder 32_36 (383–460), Document 24–32, O. Masdar to ECCI, 15 November, 1923, 8.

¹³⁸RGASPI, f. 495, op. 154, d. 764, ll. 132–142, Golman to Brike, 7 September, 1922, 8.

East.¹³⁹ However, these efforts either failed at the start or were, at best, partially satisfactory. Deep into the 1920s, Arab communist parties still needed to resort to their own translation activities to fill the void. In 1929, Syrian communists reported an increase in the Arab base of the party but felt they could not sufficiently satisfy the need for Arabic revolutionary publications. Hence, in June 1929, they created a committee of ‘special translations’.¹⁴⁰

The actual content of their translations showed a selective interaction with left-wing political literature. The political evolution of disparate communist groups and the amount of orthodox supervision exerted over their activities determined the choices for translation. Translations by militants on Soviet soil and presumably under direct Cominternian oversight tended to be more conventional choices from the classics of Marxist and Leninist literature. Mustafa Suphi, in his Simferopol days, started translating *The Communist Manifesto* into Turkish. Unexpectedly, he had to cut it short, as the changing fortunes of the Russian Civil War forced him to evacuate Simferopol urgently.¹⁴¹ After Suphi’s murder at the hands of nationalist thugs in 1921, the task fell upon the leader of the Communist Group of Istanbul, Şefik Hüsnü. He completed the translation in 1923 and published it with a foreword stating that the Manifesto, which had already been translated to ‘Armenian, Jewish¹⁴² [sic] and Chinese,’ was finally appearing in Turkish.¹⁴³

Similarly, the Cominternian translators in Crimea or Moscow created a straightforward list of translated publications. These included Turkish translations of *Capitalism and Socialism from Thomas More to Lenin* by David Petrovsky, *A Short Course of Economic Science* by A. Bogdanov from Russian, Karl Kautsky’s *Karl Marx’s Economic Doctrine* from German, and *The ABC of Communism* by Nikolai Bukharin and Yevgeni Preobrazhensky.¹⁴⁴ These were pretty conventional choices, even if a translation is often as much about interpreting a text as choosing it.¹⁴⁵ Although Kautsky had already been ostracized by Lenin in 1918 as a ‘renegade’ and targeted by Trotsky in an acerbic brochure,¹⁴⁶ this former ‘red pope’s earlier writings were still highly esteemed.¹⁴⁷ In the early 1920s, *The ABC of Communism* was a go-to option to translate for communists worldwide, as attested by Chinese communists.¹⁴⁸ Bogdanov’s book had the unbeatable credential of being highly commended by Lenin himself.¹⁴⁹

However, the story was not just about toeing the line and translating ready-made curricula. Middle Eastern communists had their own literary and political tastes, which seeped into their translation choices. More distance and less oversight from the centre created more elbow room for particular preferences to show. During the first years of the Communist International, this was particularly true, with the militants of newly-forming communist parties being less eager to show themselves to be model Cominternians according to the Soviet taste. For instance, the Communist Party of Egypt’s first big-scale translation was anarchist Piotr Kropotkin’s *An Appeal to the Youth*.

¹³⁹RGASPI, f. 495, op. 154, d. 239, ll. 1-19; ‘Doklad Vostochnogo Otdela’, 14 May, 1925, 18.

¹⁴⁰RGASPI, f. 495, op. 84, d. 21, ll. 19-29, Central Committee of Communist Party of Syria to Eastern Department of Comintern, August 16, 1929.

¹⁴¹Hamit Erdem, *Mustafa Suphi* (Istanbul: Sel Yayıncılık, 2010), 110.

¹⁴²Given Ladino’s prominent position in Istanbuli publication scene, Şefik Hüsnü might have been referring to this language.

¹⁴³Şefik Hüsnü’s foreword, ‘Komünist Beyannamesi [1923]’, in *Komünist Manifesto ve Hakkında Yazılar*, (Istanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2018), 82-3.

¹⁴⁴RGASPI, f. 495, op. 154, d. 137, ll. 147-151, Eastern Department to Provisional Bureau of CPT, 1922, 3-4.

¹⁴⁵See Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

¹⁴⁶Vladimir Il’ich Lenin, *The Proletarian Revolution and Renegade Kautsky*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976); Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* (London: Verso, 2007).

¹⁴⁷Marek Waldenberg, *Il Papa Rosso: Karl Kautsky*, trans. Mario Di Salvo, 2 vols. (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1980); Massimo L. Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution, 1880-1938* (London: Verso, 1990).

¹⁴⁸Wang Fan-hsi, *Chinese Revolutionary*, trans. Gregor Benton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 30-1.

¹⁴⁹Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, ‘A. Bogdanov. A Short Course of Economic Science’, Marxists Internet Archive, 1898, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1898/feb/bogdanov.htm>.

The CPE translated this brief but globally influential text into Arabic and printed it in 20,000 copies.¹⁵⁰ Former anarchists were one of the two major constituents of the CPE at its foundation. The text, which inspired a generation of revolutionaries from the US to India since its publication in 1880, must have been an obvious choice for some Egyptian communists. Indeed, before the Great War, different left-wing groups of the Middle East had taken initiatives to translate Kropotkin, including the ARF leader Simon Zavarian and Egyptian secular intellectual Salama Musa, who, incidentally, would become one of the first members of the CPE.¹⁵¹ Although they proved flexible enough at this period of transition, comrades in Moscow scantily shared the Egyptian communists' penchant for Kropotkin, who had been at loggerheads with the Bolsheviks for some time then. Quite tellingly, the unnamed militant who read the CPE's report in Moscow underlined the phrase about Kropotkin's brochure quite emphatically – an untypically passive-aggressive behaviour for the Comintern apparatus.¹⁵² The Eastern Department might not have appreciated the decision, but the heyday of Stalinism still being years away, it initiated no purge, nor even issued open invective, for that matter. Moreover, once within the Cominternian networks, the less-than-orthodox text circulated within the Greater Syria-Egypt circuit. It reached communist clubs in Jerusalem to be distributed amongst the young communists there.¹⁵³

Other choices were less blasphemous but still showed the variety of ways Middle Eastern revolutionaries came to the Comintern. In Istanbul, the UIT militants translated an abridged version of Charles Rappoport's *Précis du Communisme* into Greek and Ottoman Turkish.¹⁵⁴ Rappoport, a fierce opponent of the Great War, a Zimmerwaldian¹⁵⁵ and a founding member of the PCF, was anything but politically unorthodox.¹⁵⁶ Even so, the predisposition to turning to a veteran of French socialism when needing a trustworthy communist manual is quite telling. The choice cannot be reduced to an issue of availability. Cultural and political affinities seemed to be more determinant. By 1922, literature produced by Russian Bolsheviks was fairly well accessible in Istanbul in its original Russian and in French translations. Non-political French learners would recall translating Lenin brochures from French as a language-learning practice.¹⁵⁷ On the other hand, Rappoport's brochure had only been published in 1920; therefore, the book, unlike Kropotkin's text in Egypt, could not have been a household name for local militants. Hence, it shows that this was a period of transition; Russian Bolsheviks, who made a stellar entrance to global politics, were rapidly becoming the domineering force of the global left, yet the control was not yet solidly consolidated. At decisive moments, many still turned to the old masters: French and other non-Russians.

Conclusion

Connections across national, regional, and imperial lines marked early Cominternian militancy, which starkly contrasted with the increasingly stiffening and nationally-oriented Stalinist period

¹⁵⁰RGASPI, f. 495, op. 85, d. 2, ll. 9-10, Relations Hebdomadaires; Aperçu General sur la situation en Egypte', August 25, 1921.

¹⁵¹Berberian, *Roving Revolutionaries*, 94; Gorman, 'Socialisme en Égypte avant la Première Guerre mondiale'.

¹⁵²RGASPI, f. 495, op. 85, d. 2, ll. 9-10, 'Relations Hebdomadaires; Aperçu General sur la situation en Egypte', 25 August, 1921.

¹⁵³Tamari, 'Najati Sadqi (1905-79)', 87.

¹⁵⁴Both police and Comintern sources mention the circulation of this translation in Istanbul; SHD, GR 20 N 1103, Renseignements 1922, 'Compte-Rendu', 7 September, 1922; RGASPI, f. 495, op. 154, d. 769, ll. 7-23, Sharki to Eastern Department, no lisible date, circa 1923, 5.

¹⁵⁵Left-wing opposition to the social-democracy's support to the World War, and symbolized by a conference at the tiny Swiss town of Zimmerwald in 1915, was the precursor to the Communist International. See R. Craig Nation, *War on War: Lenin, the Zimmerwald Left, and the Origins of Communist Internationalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989).

¹⁵⁶Branko M. Lazić and Milorad M. Drachkovitch, *Biographical Dictionary of the Comintern* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1973), 330-1.

¹⁵⁷İ. Hakkı Sunata, *İstanbul'da İşgal Yılları* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2006), 66-7.

of the Comintern and post-Second World War. Yet, this peculiar period was often relegated to a simple projection of what would be the Stalinist and monolithic future or became the subject of the search for an original sin in a teleological reading of history.¹⁵⁸ Taking a more nuanced approach, I have tried to relocate the 1920s as a transitional period for the Comintern and global revolutionary movement, where network-like structures of the pre-Great War radical militancy intersected with the logistical advantages of a self-proclaimed world party. The trajectories of various communist newspapers in the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and the Soviet Union enabled me to show the deep connections between these revolutionary spaces.

Throughout the 1920s, Communist newspapers in Arabic, Turkish, Yiddish, Armenian, Greek, French, and Italian circulated extensively across borders, in and out of the Middle East. Their diffusion both facilitated the creation of new bonds and attested to the extant regional or global networks. In addition to its ease in crossing national borders, the communist press of the 1920s in the Middle East also proved flexible in interacting with other strands of anticolonialism and other left-wing movements, such as Kropotkin's anarchism. This historical moment ended with the consolidation of Stalinism both in the Soviet Union and the Comintern. Although it proved somewhat fleeting and subsequently got buried with the rise of both national frameworks and Stalinist monolithic communist parties, this transitional historical moment was noteworthy in the exceptional radical connections it fostered across national, regional, and imperial lines.¹⁵⁹ This is why this article tried to take a tentative step toward reconsidering this moment and its connections.

This article has drawn attention to the interwoven story of political actors from two regions. I started from a Middle Eastern perspective to underline the global dimensions of what has often been exclusively construed as a regional story. Affirming these connections from a Middle Eastern standpoint is all the more useful, I believe, given that— as Cyrus Schayegh and Giancarlo Casale recently affirmed – ‘MENA [the Middle East and North Africa] history as currently practiced remains more resistant to the methodologies and perspectives of global and international history than other area studies fields’.¹⁶⁰ The article examined broader communist networks from the Middle Eastern vantage point as an attempt to take a modest step in the other direction and reframe Middle Eastern history as global history. Thus, this article tried to highlight the agency of radical actors in what we now call the Global South and reconstruct their stories not as a mere extension of the real show happening in the Global North but as a global story in its own right, from which stemmed transnational and trans-regional connectivities.

¹⁵⁸Cf Tareq Yousif Ismael, *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2005).

¹⁵⁹Pierre Broué distinguishes the Stalinist party with the absence of public discussion and the settling of political scores within the party apparatus Broué, *Le parti bolchevique*, 295–9. As Brigitte Studer showed, the Stalinist practices would spread to other communist parties through the Comintern: Studer, *The Transnational World of the Cominternians*, 75–6.

¹⁶⁰Cyrus Schayegh and Giancarlo Casale, ‘Mobility, Spatial Thinking, and MENA’s Global Interconnectivity: A Primary Source Roundtable’, *Mashriq & Mahjar: Journal of Middle East & North African Migration Studies* 9, no. 2 (August 2022): 1.