The Other Side of Internationalism
Switzerland as a Hub of Militant Anti-Colonialism, c. 1910–1920

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Introduction: Linking Two ‘Turns’

This chapter represents an attempt to fruitfully combine two recent historiographical currents that have so far mostly existed in isolation from one another. For one, there have been increasing attempts over the last decade by historians of Asia and Africa as well as of colonial and imperial history to break free from the spatial fixation on the postcolonial nation-states that emerged as the result of the wave of decolonization from the 1940s to the 1970s. Building on an agenda that was first articulated in Benedict Anderson’s Under Three Flags, historians like Maia Ramnath, Manu Goswami and Kris Manjapra have recently posited a ‘transnational turn’ in the study of colonialism and imperialism, and advocated an intense engagement with the diasporic and cosmopolitan dimension of anti-colonial nationalisms. In like vein, literary scholars such as Leela Gandhi have reminded us of the existence of ‘affective communities’, that is, alliances between anti-colonial activists on the one hand and European and American critics of imperialism (and, occasionally, ‘Western civilization’ in its entirety) on the other.

Almost simultaneously, historians and social scientists in Switzerland have discovered postcolonial theory. More than two decades after postcolonialism made an impact in the Anglophone academe, scholars working on Switzerland have started to interrogate the past and present of the non-colonizing European country par excellence, using these new theoretical approaches and methodological tools. As has been discussed in the introduction to this volume at greater length, the first results of the nascent ‘postcolonial turn’ in Switzerland have already brought to surface astonishing entanglements between Swiss actors and Swiss capital with the colonial enterprises of other European nations.

Drawing inspiration from both these trends, this chapter analyses the role of Switzerland less as profiteer of imperialism than as a rallying ground, operational base and contact zone for various anti-colonial groups and individuals in the first three decades of the 20th century. It traces the lives and
politics of anti-colonial nationalists on Swiss soil while attempting to reconstruct their interactions with Swiss authorities and civil society. Whereas scholars have so far focused their attention almost exclusively on the imperial metropoles of London, Paris and Berlin in order to reconstruct diasporic anti-imperial networks, it is my contention that an ostentatiously neutral country like Switzerland played an equally important role as a safe haven as well as a site of intense political interaction for ‘third world’ nationalists belonging to what has recently been termed a transnational ‘anti-imperialist ecumene’.

In what follows, a first probing into this field will be undertaken through a micro-historical case study of a small and loose network of predominantly South Asian anti-colonialists residing in Switzerland during the 1910s and early 1920s. The anti-imperial web was originally created by the leading anti-colonial activist Shyamji Krishnavarma (1857–1930) from India, who lived in exile in Geneva from 1914 until his death. The contacts he established or cultivated during his sojourn in Switzerland included not only other prominent Indian ‘revolutionaries-in-exile’ but also anti-imperialists from other regions (such as Egypt, Java and Ireland) who resided in the Swiss Confederation at the time. Focusing on this limited set of actors, and concentrating on two key events that took place in Zurich – the establishment and consolidation of the International Pro India Committee (IPIC) in 1912–14 and the ‘Zurich bomb trial’ of 1918–19 – the following sets of questions will be addressed. First, what was the extent of anti-imperial activities and exchanges on Swiss territory and the circulation of ideologies, knowledge and money? Did they include Swiss individuals, organizations or political parties? How far did the specificities of the Swiss constellation (neutrality, internationalism, federalism, multilingualism) matter for the émigré nationalists from Asia? Second, how was this anti-imperial diaspora perceived by various segments of Swiss society? What, if any, were the repercussions of their presence and activities in the Swiss Confederation on the country itself? Were the entrenched ideals of neutralism and internationalism fostered by this phenomenon? Or, conversely, were xenophobic tendencies reinforced by the presence of ‘oriental revolutionaries’? Third, what are the wider historiographical implications of the findings generated in this case study?

Let us first glance at the lofty upper side of Swiss political self-representations. Since there is a vast body of literature on the topics of Swiss neutrality and ‘governmental internationalism’, it will suffice to provide a very brief sketch.

A ‘Samaritan’s Land of Love’? Swiss Philanthropy, Neutrality and Internationalism in the Era of the Great War

When the high tide of nationalism swept over Europe in the last third of the 19th century, Switzerland had to face several structural problems that