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Peace and the Barrel of the Gun in the Internationalist Women's Movement, 1945–49

***Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism*. 18:2(2019): 261-277.**

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Abstract: In 1949, at a conference instigated by the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) held in Beijing, China, the Asian Women's Conference solidified an anticolonial, antifascist, and antiracist theory for organizing women transnationally. This transnational feminist praxis drew its movement demands and strategies from the masses of women in anticolonial movements, both rural and urban poor women. It also framed a two-fold theory of women's organizing: it delineated one platform for women fighting imperialism within colonized countries, and another platform for women fighting imperialism within aggressor nations. This transnational feminism supported an explicitly pro-socialist vision for the future.

Keywords: anticolonialism, decolonization, transnational feminism, Afro-Asian solidarity, peasant women

Colonialism is dead, and it only remains for the corpse to be buried.

—Asian Women's Conference

Asian Women's Conference, Beijing, 1949

The air was cold in December of 1949, and delegates of the Asian Women's Conference (AWC) stayed bundled up at their seats in the Winter Palace in Beijing, People's

Republic of China. Banners hung on the walls that celebrated their historic gathering of anti-imperialist women activists, a conference hosted by the Women's International

Democratic Federation (WIDF) and the All China Women's Federation (ACWF).

Delegates from fourteen Asian countries and thirty-three fraternal delegates from around the world listened to speeches and country reports, danced the Korean lindy hop and

listened to experimental, pan-Asian musical performances; many also toured Shanghai and Huairou factories and art institutes after the conference ended (Millard Papers;

Ramelson Notes).

The celebrations did not mask the seriousness of their political moment, however. Delegate after delegate described the horrendous conditions faced by women, children, and men under Dutch, French, and British rule in Asian and African colonies. They spoke of planned starvation, forced labor, and conscription into colonial armies. They condemned the military occupations that gave lie to the Western rhetoric of democracy, let alone freedom. They built the sinews of a mass-based transnational women's movement: one that fought systems of colonialism, fascism, racism, and patriarchy simultaneously.

Delegates attending the AWC lauded the bravery of peasant women as the militant backbone to their anticolonial struggles for independence and women's emancipation from oppressive customs. These rural women primarily fought battles against feudal landowners and old forms of subjugation based on land ownership, customary rule, and local hierarchies. As activists from the Tebhaga peasant struggles of Bengal between 1946 and 1948 described, colonial rule at its inception yoked these systems of violence against peasant women to its own reproduction at the global level (Chakravartty 1980; Lahiri 2001; Sen 2001). Peasant women in Bengal in the Tebhaga movement fought for the rights to the crops they grew as well as for their own sexual autonomy over the demands of landed men (Armstrong 2017; Panjabi 2017). Intrinsic to these struggles, they fought and briefly won the right to live without violence in their own familial relationships, serving justice for women in violent relationships in their own courts.

As interviews of peasant activists from this period show, women particularly, but also men narrated all of these demands as integral to anticolonial struggles (Cooper

1988). Similarly, AWC delegates across Asia spoke about how anticolonialism and women's full autonomy were entwined struggles. Neither national nor social self-determination could precede the other, since both were deeply embedded economic forms of enslavement to another's gain. Colonial regimes relied on localized patriarchal relationships to secure their regional control. The demand for women's self-determination was an inseparable and mutually reinforcing struggle for regional independence. For anticolonialism to have any purchase on the future, women's full emancipation was today's work, not tomorrow's aspiration.

As ceremony, the Asian Women's Conference symbolized the truth of postwar imperialism: colonialism was over and revolutionary women had dug that grave. As politics, the conference evoked another future: of equality, of independence, of emancipation for all—patriarchy, fascism, racism, and imperialism would not be tolerated any longer. Colonialism, configured as the past, and socialism hailed as the future reverberated throughout the delegates' speeches. The most concrete gain from the gathering was one of strategy for a feminist anticolonialism that truly encompassed the aspirations of women from around the globe. The AWC successfully ratified a profound shift in strategy for women's internationalism, one that has disappeared, almost without a trace. The best place to view this anticolonial, socialist, and feminist strategy lies not in delegates' speeches at the 1949 conference, though they provide valuable clues to the interweaving of techniques developed across Asia. The clearest articulation of anticolonial feminist socialism was collectively framed in their conference appeals, and put into action the moment delegates returned home.

Women's Internationalism, 1945–49

At the 1945 inception of the leftist international women's organization called the Women's International Democratic Federation, participants from Asian and North African colonies successfully added anticolonialism to antifascism and antiracism in WIDF's platform for action. By 1949, WIDF's internationalist praxis went far beyond symbolic solidarity and called for all women's active confrontation with imperialism at home and in the world. For women in colonies, the call to action was two-fold: build a regional unity and join women's armed resistance against colonialism. For women in imperialist countries, this praxis demanded politics against the domestic economy of imperialist militarism and colonial occupation. As a praxis grounded in a Marxist analysis led by the Soviet Union and China, it emerged from the Communist International's understanding of postwar imperialism, anticolonial nationalism, and the necessity of armed struggle. Just as importantly, however, are the movements of rural, agricultural waged and peasant women workers who were willing to combat oppression by any means necessary. Rural and urban working women's organizing forged this internationalist strategy, largely overriding for *this* moment in the late 1940s, other distinctions of practice and theory among leftists around the world.

From the blunt edge of their analysis, leftist and nationalist women's movements in Asia and Africa built an anti-imperialist strategy for women of the world that linked feminism with a systemic analysis of antiracism and antifascism (Pieper Mooney 2013). They used regional ties and international gatherings in Asia to build consensus and air their differences, including the nationalist Asian Relations Conference held in New Delhi, India in 1947, the pro-Palestinian, anticolonial women's gatherings like the Arab

Women's Conference held in Cairo in 1944, and the almost entirely communist gathering of the pan-Asian Women's Conference held in Beijing in 1949 (Stolte 2014; Weber 2003). By the late 1940s, however, WIDF became the central organizational means for leftist and nationalist women to debate the postwar anticolonial order, to amplify their strategies, and to build toward a pro-socialist future. Between 1945 and 1949, WIDF members debated how to understand the dynamic of imperialism in the second half of the twentieth century as territorial colonial occupation faced its violent end.

Baya Bouhoune Allaouchiche, general secretary of the Algerian Women's Union, presented a clear picture of postwar imperialism and the solidarity Algerian women practiced:

Algeria is in fact a colony of France with political, economic and social inequalities and the crushing of national culture. War (is) being prepared before (the) eyes of people. Algerian troops have been sent to Vietnam and Algerian women have protested against this. (Ramelson Notes)

Allaouchiche details the politics of imperialism, the place of Algerian women and men, and an Algerian women's solidarity of complicity.¹ Algerian peasant women and men drove away the recruiting agents who offered cash for their sons' enlistment into the colonial military. This solidarity laid bare the colonial relations of war. Algerian soldiers were trained by the French to crush the Vietnamese independence struggle. Algerian women's solidarity assumed accountability for the mercenary actions of Algerian soldiers and thus protested the use of Algerians by the French against the Vietnamese. As anti-imperialist women, they refused to accept the colonizers' blood on their hands. In this women's movement, colonialism was shorn of its veneer of local self-governance, its

promises of women's education, or its erasure of state-planned starvation and the dispossession of peasants' land. Colonialism was war. These refusals to edicts of colonialism led by rural and urban women were not simply solidarity actions of nationalism. The actions themselves demanded confrontations with gender norms of public behavior, and more broadly, the public stage for political action itself. The very possibility of refusing to allow their sons to enlist forced a confrontation with women's access to public space, public voice, and autonomy as anticolonialism. Feminism, in the leftist diction of the time, referred to women's legal and political rights shorn of any attention to (if not outright refusal to demand) the economic transformation of capitalism. The revolutionary refusals of colonialism described by delegates like Allaouchiche, however, reframed feminism and demands for women's legal and political rights as demands made meaningful *through* anticolonialism as a movement for people's self-determination and radically different world orders.

In 1948, Cai Chang, an important women's leader in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and vice president of WIDF, defined the terms for WIDF's internationalist activism at its second international congress held in Budapest, Hungary. Cai paraphrased Lenin for her slogan that echoed throughout many of the speeches: "A people which oppresses another cannot itself be free."² This slogan, heard so many times over the six days of the congress, threaded together emergent political strategies. Women across Africa and Asia demanded freedom with peace. European and American women needed to act with equal urgency, though from a distinctly different location. Cai obliquely referenced Andrei Zhdanov's two-camp theory of the postwar order: the capitalist nations' camp was imperialist, the socialist and anticolonial nations' camp was

democratic.³ This doctrine “declared that communist parties were natural leaders of the anticolonial struggle” (Efimova and McVey 2011). As such, she bridged the character of anti-imperialist internationalism for the women on the frontlines of colonialism and the women still figuring out their role in this battle. Speaking directly to women from imperialist nations, she explained:

This must be the slogan under which the Union of French Women fights to strengthen the struggle against the war in Vietnam. . . . The women of Holland must ceaselessly demand the cessation of the colonial war, and the recall of the troops from Indonesia. This slogan must also be adopted by women of the other imperialist countries, above all those of the United States. They must help their sisters *not only because they are moved by a sentiment of justice, but because the struggle of the women in the dependent countries against the oppressors is part of the fight for peace and democracy*. Our American sisters must demand the retreat of the American troops from South Korea. (WIDF 1948: 488; my emphasis)

Cai named women from France, Holland, and the United States to lead an anti-imperialist campaign for peace. Within the framework of a globally coordinated fight against colonialism, she described a praxis that extended the reach of Allouchiche’s solidarity of complicity to women in imperialist nations. She urged women in imperialist nations to become *accomplices* in struggle, not simply allies to colonized women. This solidarity had consequences, and women paid them in full.

Imperialism and Anticolonial Nationalism in the Postwar Order

In her speech at WIDF’s 1948 Budapest Congress, Cai described the growing complexity of imperialism, between the older colonial nations and the rise of an American-led

financial imperialism marked by the dominance of the dollar and Wall Street. Both forms of imperialism agreed on military solutions to “wiping out every movement for national liberation” (WIDF 1948: 476). Cai reminded her audience that the United States was the true victor of World War II, gaining a hegemony won through its capital reconstruction loans to Europe and England. She linked movements in Africa, including labor struggles in the Gold Coast, to those in Asia, citing the oil workers’ strikes in Iran. She spoke about the food shortages in China that led to peasant uprisings against the Guomintang, and the starvation in India that fueled peasant resistance to large landowners in Bengal. All of these struggles included women workers on the land and in factories, exploited even more intensively than men by even lower wages and even longer hours. While Cai spoke about the exploitation of both women and men, her focus on women’s lives in colonialism was clear: working women’s demands should ground anticolonial demands, as the floor to change the oppressive living conditions for all.

The intensity of working-class, rural, and urban organizing, alongside alliances with the progressive middle classes, finally gave the anticolonial movement around the world the strength it needed to win. Colonial powers’ use of violent force to retain colonial territories continued unabated after the war, if not fiercer than before. Economies of the Netherlands, England, and France still relied upon colonies’ wealth in resources, labor, and captive consumer markets—perhaps even more desperately in the war’s aftermath. But brute force and bad-faith agreements to share power no longer sufficed to hold onto power. The united front from below, one that linked landless agricultural workers to small farmers and the urban proletariat to intellectuals and progressive middle-class people, created the unity that anticolonial resistance needed to win. Cai’s

analysis ended with three goals of women's ongoing praxis: peace, self-determination, and a democracy that eradicated poverty and starvation to provide "the freedom to live under human conditions."⁴

Women's Revolutionary Violence and Anticolonial Activism

On the international stage of the United Nations, WIDF activists reiterated that a world peace that left imperial power unchecked was an empty slogan. Armed resistance in the colonies was not synonymous with war, but necessary to gain peace. In April 1949, WIDF joined with other leftist organizations to hold the first World Peace Conference in Paris that was both antifascist and anticolonial in its demands. The harsh nature of colonial violence, including the character of counterinsurgency wars, allowed few options for nonviolent resistance in the colonies. "After the war," Cai said in 1948, "the national independence movement in the countries of Asia and Africa has won unprecedented victories. Armed struggle is at present the characteristic feature of this movement" (WIDF 1948: 479). Delegates gave their full support for Cai's unapologetic embrace of armed freedom movements as the necessary response to colonial intransigence and exploitation. Thus, in 1949, the debate among the delegates at the Asian Women's Conference was not about the violence itself, but about the supportive actions and strategies for a meaningful internationalism. At this gathering, Asian and African delegates solidified a praxis that amplified internationalist women's *material* solidarity for these armed struggles.

The necessity of armed struggle echoed other recent internationalist gatherings in Asia, most notably the World Federation of Democratic Youth and Students (WFDY) held in Kolkata in February, 1948. Within months of the WFDY conference, military

resistance to colonialism broke out in Myanmar (March 1948), Malaysia (June 1948), and Indonesia (September 1948). By 1949, vast sections of Vietnam gained a formal independence that proved fragile in the face of French determination to hold onto the territory as its colony. The broken promises for a slow transition to full independence proffered after the end of World War II by England in Myanmar and Malaysia, by France in Vietnam, and by Holland in Indonesia resulted in armed resistance. In 1948 and 1949, the Indonesian independence movement had taken up the few arms available to them, through channels that led from India through Myanmar and from China through Vietnam. Many rural people fought with handmade wooden weapons and explosives left over from the end of Japanese occupation. Meanwhile, the French, British, and Dutch with the active assistance of the United States colluded to support each other's military counterinsurgency assaults by lending troop regiments, arms, military ships, planes, and other equipment from the region used against the Japanese during World War II.

Anticolonial Women's Emancipation and Debates about Revolutionary Motherhood

At the Asian Women's Conference in 1949, Cai celebrated the long odds of the gathering: "Many delegates from the Asiatic countries have risked their lives to come to the Conference, crossing firing lines and outwitting the watchfulness of secret agents and detectives to arrive at their destination."⁵ In a regional context of insurgency and danger, the conference crafted two appeals—one to Asian women, and the other to women from imperialist countries. The first sought Asian women's unity for the entrenched battles ahead. The second mapped what women's internationalist solidarity outside of anticolonial warfare should be. Both appeals demanded a just peace. Both supported women's increased commitment to the militant struggle to secure this peace. Asian

delegates, but also the leaders who traveled from Cuba, Ivory Coast, Algeria, and Madagascar all came from movements that had put rural women at their center.⁶ Their speeches and conference documents explicitly named the linkages between antiracism and antifascism to anti-imperialism. They rejected the “humanitarian” colonial consensus that dogged anti-imperialism in the United States and Western Europe (Gaiduk 2009). No colonial power’s occupation could ever be kind enough to support full self-determination, women’s emancipation, and a meaningful peace. Whether Algeria, Morocco, Indonesia, or Burma, it was time for the colonizers to leave.

The Asian Women’s Conference culminated in two appeals. Both appeals were crafted by a movement that was peopled by rural farmers fighting guerrilla wars against wealthy, powerful forces armed to the teeth. They sought to mobilize the differential relations of solidarity to show what an internationalist resistance to colonial aggression meant. Their appeal to Asian women connected their participation in anticolonial resistance as the *means* to support their demands for full rights:

Women of the countries of Asia! Workers, peasants, white-collar workers, intellectuals—remember that in unity lies our strength and the guarantee of victory over imperialism and feudal reaction! . . . Sisters, suffering under the burden of imperialism and the yoke of reaction! Unite, and in uniting, take into consideration the concrete conditions prevailing in our respective countries and adapt to them all available forms of struggle.

Women militants! Take part in all the organizations comprising masses of women, help to educate them and to defend their basic rights! (“To Our Sisters” 1950: 9)

Their appeal provided focused feminist demands: for economic, political, and social rights for women. These were demands for women's education, their right to own land, and political equality—all demands embedded in their revolutionary mass organizational work in the countryside, towns, and cities. They were not discrete legal demands lodged with the colonial state, since dismantling regional customs (or “concrete conditions”) demanded more focused attention from organized, leftist women and men. Their central call was a regional unity to fight imperialism; but without feminist demands for women's political, legal, and economic rights, imperialism could easily return or, to use the term in the resolution, *adapt* to the new conditions of local or national self-rule.

The second conference appeal targeted women of the imperialist countries, and named the United States, Britain, France, and Holland in particular. They described the shared violence and losses of colonial wars that affected all women. But they added a special ethical imperative: “Do not allow yourselves to be accomplices of our murderers! . . . Do not permit our sons to kill each other! Stop colonial wars! Insist that your governments recall the troops from Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaya, Korea” (“To Our Sisters” 1950: 9). Motherhood in this appeal could not be conceived outside of war: women must refuse to raise sons who become murderers. The appeal linked home to the theater of war. Both appeals relied on a shared analysis of imperialism—and which countries were imperialist—for two powerful aims. First, they celebrated the leadership of Asian women fighting British, American, French, and Dutch colonial militarism. Second, they promoted an internationalism led by these revolutionary anticolonial women.

But there was another internationalist feminist strategy that emerged from the conference, one that was not represented in either of the 1949 AWC appeals. It sought to build a multi-class, international women's movement for peace using the language of radical motherhood. This third strategy was an alternate path that was integral to WIDF's active debates before, during, and after the 1949 conference in Beijing, which had proponents from around the world, including the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United States, and Sweden. A large delegation of women from the US Congress of American Women (CAW) attended WIDF's Budapest Congress and listened to Cai's speech in 1948. Three of them—two African American, one white—also joined the Asian Women's Conference a year later: Ada Jackson, Eslanda Robeson, and Elizabeth Millard. In 1948, CAW participants expressed the difficulty of organizing around WIDF resolutions that named the United States as the central imperialist aggressor. The political context in Cold War United States, they said, would make their organization's survival impossible. However, WIDF's final resolution in 1948 *did* name the United States as the primary agent of postwar imperialism: "American monopolists seek to dominate the world. With the aid of the Marshall Plan, they deprive nations of their sovereignty, turning people into servants of the American warmakers" (WIDF 1948: 12). The clarity of this resolution, and the resolve of CAW to bring it to American women had the consequences they foresaw. By 1949, CAW members were charged with subversion by the House on Un-American Activities Commission (HUAC). By 1950, CAW was banned and dismantled. Yet in 1951, these same women put their bodies on the line to stop the US-led war and occupation of Korea.⁷

Anti-imperialist Appeals in Practice

The conference configured examples of how to coordinate internationalist women's activism across geopolitical borders in its speakers' reports. For example, in the case of Indonesian anti-imperialist internationalism, Lillah Suripno was the Indonesian delegate to the Asian Women's Conference and a member of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Suripno spoke immediately before Maria Lips, who was the chairwoman of the Dutch Women's Movement and a communist. Together, their reports illustrated what concerted anti-imperialist solidarity should be. Suripno emphasized Indonesian women's full participation in the fight against the Dutch military attack (Suripno 1950). Indonesian women were part of all anti-imperialist resistance movements in the region, as fighters, as well as logistical support, surveillance, communication, and infrastructure (Wieringa 2002). She emphasized the role of women in these battles: "Indonesian women fight with arms in hand for national independence!" (Suripno 1950). For her part, Lips described Dutch women's opposition at the shipyards sending off arms to colonial soldiers in Indonesia.

In October 1949, at WIDF's board meeting held in Moscow six weeks before the Asian Women's Conference, the seeds of this two-fold praxis was given a pragmatic flexibility: "To work to draw all active women into active struggle, and to achieve this, it is recommended to take into account the national peculiarities of the movement in each country" (Ramelson Notes). The women's movements across the world could develop solidarity actions to coordinate their anticolonial activism in many possible forms. However, women in imperialist countries had to oppose imperialism from within its ideologies, economies, and governmental policies. Solidified between 1945 and 1949,

this two-fold internationalist praxis challenged and ultimately presaged the full support for national independence movements by the previously pro-colonial wings of European communist parties, including the Dutch and French ones. Within a month of the Asian Women's Conference, Jeannette Vermeersch, a leader in WIDF and the Union of French Women as well as a French legislator, gave a scathing speech. On January 27, 1950, Vermeersch shredded the language of humanitarianism surrounding the French colonial war in Vietnam. In a speech republished and distributed around the world, she addressed the French National Assembly, a body that included Communist Party members. "The Vietnamese people are fighting a just war," she said, "a war in the defense against your aggression, a war of national liberation. You are fighting an unjust war, a colonial war, a war of aggression" (Vermeersch 1950).

The conference resolutions were carefully negotiated ones that navigated the rapidly changing context of Asian anti-imperialism. Chinese Communist Party leaders, such as Liu Shaoqi, argued against a resolution in the Asian Women's Conference that emphasized open fights for women's legal rights in Asia. Asian women who openly sought the legal rights to marriage reform, equal pay, or land rights, Shaoqi argued, would immediately be targeted by colonial regimes (Heinzig 2004). Campaigns for legal reforms in these repressive colonial contexts would lead to women activists' imprisonment or death rather than build women's multi-class unity in the region. Women's participation in Asian liberation movements was necessarily underground. Instead of legal reforms, Liu Shaoqi favored a resolution for regional unity and support for armed combat. Even these general demands, demands that are very close to the

appeals of the Asian Women's Conference, had to be kept secret in order to ensure the safety of women in Asian and African anti-imperialist movements.

Shaoqi's hesitance about Asian women's open advocacy for equal rights in the colonial context was a strategic one, not one of principle. But it was still a difficult one to navigate as delegates from the Asian Women's Conference sought to nimbly guide women's struggles through their appeals and resolutions. In the 1940s, many of WIDF's international demands for women's rights assumed that women already enjoyed some forms (even if limited) of representative governance—such as demands for the right to own property and divorce at will—all aspirations shared by Asian, Latin American, and African women. However, for those under colonial occupation, women's rights were woven into the aspiration for a socialist government that affirmed their rights to exist, to take leadership, to have a voice, and to exercise self-determination. Anticolonial women's movements across the world fought for both rights and deeply representative self-determination simultaneously. As the shared platform for the internationalist women's movement, WIDF, they argued, had to accurately mirror their commitments.

The AWC conference resolutions reflected the communists' two-camp analysis of postwar alignments, as mentioned before, but these strategies for an internationalist anti-imperialist women's movement were fueled by more complex forces of power than simply negotiations among national communist parties. They also exceed the frame of the international women's organization of WIDF. World unity among women opposing imperialism developed from Asian and African women's struggle over a longer period of time than the four years after the war in Europe ended in 1945. The moment to demand the reins of self-governance emerged with the end of the European war for countries like

India, Pakistan, Vietnam, and Malaysia; but the organizational strength behind this demand lay in rural organizing that began much earlier.

Starvation after Harvest: Peasant Women's Anticolonialism

Two communist women from Africa reminded Asian women of their commonalities in struggle. Gisèle Rabesahala cofounded the communist Congress Party for the Independence of Madagascar and led the Malagasy Solidarity Committee to fight for political prisoners after the French crushed the 1947 uprising against their colonial rule. She described the conditions in Madagascar, giving details of enormous profit for French, British, and American firms, and of devastation for the people of Madagascar. "In 1944," she illustrated with stark simplicity, "there were 25,000 more deaths than births."

Célestine Ouezzin Coulibaly was one of the founders and the secretary of the African Democratic Assembly, a communist political organization that spanned French colonies across West and Equatorial Africa. Like Rabesahala, she stressed the importance of organizing dispossessed rural and urban women to the anticolonial movement she led. Coulibaly expressed her solidarity with Asian revolutionary women in racialized terms of commonalty: "I have six children. They live in a country where to have a dark skin is thought to make a person less than a human being. So we all have a lot in common to discuss in Beijing." **{Au: Add citation/source here for the quotation?}** The colonial economy during the war years exacerbated the demands of tribute: to feed the armies on the western front, food from grain-growing colonies in Morocco, Algeria, India, and Vietnam was expropriated at a devastating rate. Whole rural populations from these countries starved, with estimates of death in the many millions.

Rural regions of Asia during the 1940s, to different degrees of success, united small landholding peasant women and landless farming women with middle-class communist and leftist organizers. In Asia, these movements developed a united front led from below rather than from above. In China, the communists described their agrarian reform policy in four parts: “Rely on the poor peasants. Unite with the middle peasants. Isolate the rich peasants. Fight the landlords” (Robeson Papers). This strategy drew from different contexts, since some nations, like India, had powerful nationalist movements dominated by the landed and industrial elite. Other polities, like Vietnam, had virtually no nationalist organizations to align with leftist worker and peasant movements. Instead, the rural organization of poor farmers and landless agricultural workers aligned on their own terms with middle-class nationalist forces from urban areas. In rural localities, they built a powerful leftist movement. In some parts of the North, it had enough power to create autonomous zones, or soviets, led by revolutionary ideals.

In Bengal, crossing the border between India and West Pakistan, these rural organizers built autonomous regions led by the women at the forefront of the Tebhaga struggle that sought a fairer share of the crops they reaped. A number of these regions developed their own court systems to punish domestic violence, end unequal marriage traditions, and promote women’s sexual and bodily autonomy (Cooper 1988). In Vietnam, these liberated zones also protected resistance units, with most women fighters in two levels of combat (regional forces and village guerrillas): “Women partisans go from village to village to oppose the French attacks. They are also given charge of launching constant and small nocturnal assault [*sic*] against French isolated posts, in order to harass them and reduce their number as well as lower their morale” (UVWF

1948; Post 1989). The Union of Vietnam Women in France described dozens of accounts of mass rape by French soldiers in 1947 alone. French military sadism, they wrote, was an ineffective counterinsurgency tactic, and inspired the commitment of Vietnamese women's armed resistance.

Ling Long, one of two delegates from Malaysia, spoke bluntly about their independence war led by the Malaysian workers of Chinese descent who were miners and agricultural workers. "The Chinese in Malaya are inspired by the struggle of the Chinese against Japan and Guomindang, and also by the struggle of Indonesians for their independence. . . . The people's forces work underground in towns and cities and work amongst the peasantry in the countryside, taking up arms where necessary" (Ramelson Notes). Ling reiterated that for most of the Asian delegates, particularly those from Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Korea, and notably the Japanese delegation barred from attending the conference by Douglas MacArthur's government, women's work in their revolutions was clandestine and life-threatening.

In the years after the Asian Women's Conference, women increasingly became the public face of revolutionary, anticolonial peace through a rhetoric of radical motherhood. Even when couched in the language of family, this praxis maintained that anticolonial struggles were won and lost by the barrel of the gun. However, this bridge between two different visions for feminist internationalism was fraught. One, represented by the 1949 AWC conference resolutions centered the knowledge of peasant women's struggle against colonialism and landed systems of rule that preceded it. The other was a rhetorical strategy that sought to build global linkages through radical motherhood. It was

a means to circumvent rising anticommunism across the West and build sympathy for women in colonial struggles in Asia, Latin America, and Africa.

In 1949, the delegates to the AWC strengthened the two-part vision for feminist, socialist internationalism. A third, largely unspoken part of this strategy was the role of women in socialist countries, most notably China and the Soviet Union, who provided material support, guidance, and inspiration. The geopolitics of capitalism bifurcated its strategy into two main parts: feminist activism outside imperial centers, and feminist activism inside those centers—as accomplices in struggle, activists in these political locations were coordinated, but not identical. Struggles and demands shaped by colonized women led both locations of activism. In rural and urban colonial territories, women’s rights were a necessary kindling for colonialism. The suppression of women’s rights fueled, and then congealed colonial control over occupied territories. For anticolonialism to succeed in systemically loosening the grip of imperialism on the world, in their analysis, women’s rights must be at the heart of that project. At its best, internationalist feminism as women’s regional anticolonial solidarity across the Third World could dig the grave for colonialism. Western women’s staunch rejection of their own nations’ imperialism could help bury it for good.

Elisabeth Armstrong is a professor in the Program for the Study of Women and Gender at Smith College. She has written two books on the praxis of organizing, one about India called *Gender and Neoliberalism: The All India Democratic Women’s Association and Globalization Politics* (2013), and one about the United States called *The Retreat from Organization: US Feminism Reconceptualized* (2002). She is an executive board member of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research based in Latin America, Africa, and South Asia. She serves on the editorial boards of *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* and *Kohl: A Journal for Body and Gender Research*, a queer feminist journal on gender and sexuality in the Middle East and North Africa region.

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Notes

¹ I have defined this term elsewhere as a form of revolutionary internationalism led by women such that “even under the conditions of colonialism women should take responsibility for atrocities carried out in their nation’s name or by their nation’s people” (Armstrong 2016: 311).

² From Lenin's "Speech on the National Question," The Seventh All-Russia Conference, April 29, 1917. "No nation can be free that oppresses other nations."

³ At the founding conference of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' Cominform in August, 1947, Andrei Zhdanov outlined a two-camp theory of the world order driven by the United States for the imperialist camp, and congealing around the USSR for the democratic camp. Fascism, colonialism, imperialist expansion, and war marked the imperialist camp, and the fight for labor, peace, democracy, and national liberation defined the other. Andrei Zhdanov, "Report on the International Situation to the Cominform," September 22, 1947.

⁴ Deng Yingchao reiterated Cai's argument a year later at the Asian Women's Conference. "China's experiences tell us that it is only through the resolute struggle of the armed people against armed counter-revolution that the oppressed people in the colonies and semi-colonies may attain their freedom" (WIDF 1948: 476). China's eviction of Japan from Northern China, and their hard-fought civil war with the US-backed Guomindang proved it. Revolutionary violence and wide nationalist coalitions were deeply linked strategies. **{Au: is quotation in the main text on the same page?}**

⁵ WIDF conference notes, December 21, 1949, Left Federation of Swedish Women. Huddinge, Sweden.

⁶ See WIDF 1945 for a Latin American example.

⁷ Many of the members of CAW reconfigured as part of American Women for Peace to maintain their activism during the McCarthy period. Their newsletter, *The Peacemaker*, dedicated one issue to the WIDF contingent that toured Korea and reported on the

carnage. In “Negro G.I.s Question Korea,” the authors demanded an end to racist wars in Asia and Africa. “We think that we Negroes, who are asked to fight wars in Asia and Europe but who are not free at home should have our say before it is too late. If enough of us can get together, we believe we will get our peace and freedom too.” The editorial stated: “We who are aware of the effects of these things, and who love our country look with horror on the death and misery which has resulted from our war policy. We cry out.” (“Editorial” 1951).