Geopolitics, transnational solidarity or diaspora nationalism? The global career of M.N. Roy, 1915–1930

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This article examines the global travels and anti-colonial thought of the Indian revolutionary Manabendra Nath Roy. It focuses particularly on his little explored stay in revolutionary Mexico, where he became a founder of the Mexican Communist Party in 1919. Drawing on archival sources from various countries and Roy’s own writings, the article situates Roy’s exploits somewhere between a global anti-colonialism, transnational solidarity and diasporic nationalism. It explores particularly the possibilities and the limits of an image of Asia and Latin America as regions united in their oppression by imperialism, and warranting shared anti-colonial strategies in the framework of international Communism.

Keywords: global history; colonialism; India; Mexico; Communism; Russian Revolution; World War One; Germany

Introduction

Internationalism and anti-colonialism were central elements of the Communist movement in the 1920s. The Comintern couched its anti-colonial campaigns in the language of ‘international solidarity’, a term that at the time did not yet denote the relationship between nation-states that is usually meant today. Even as these anti-colonial campaigns simultaneously pursued Moscow’s rather selfish geopolitical goals, they were thus sold in an idiom resembling what today may be called ‘transnational solidarity’. As such Communist anti-colonialism also propelled countless people to articulate political demands in other people’s names; that is, claims from which the articulators did not necessarily benefit themselves. From the viewpoint of the referents of such demands, namely colonial peoples, the matter looked differently: on the surface, even when they combined their demands with calls for the betterment of the working poor in the countries of the colonial powers, the cause of anti-imperialism appears to have been their own. However, virtually all Asian and African anti-colonialists of the inter-war period, theoretically at least, demanded freedom for all the peoples that in their eyes were oppressed by imperialism, not only ‘their’ people. In a different way, Third World anti-imperialists thus engaged in a form of transnational solidarity by calling for an end to colonial practices wherever they found them. Both European critics of colonialism and their peers in the Global South practised kinds of transnational solidarity, while they also pursued geopolitical goals.

Historians have rarely tested how far anti-imperial solidarities went in the inter-war period. Some alliances were evidently easier to construe than others when rallying against...
the same enemy. Irish nationalists sympathised with Indian anti-colonialists, as this article will mention; Argentines identified with Nicaraguans suffering a U.S. intervention; and Martinicans and Senegalese forged a pan-African ‘solidarity’ in inter-war Paris.1 As these examples intimate, ethno-cultural affinities, the binding power of a common imperial sphere, tactical alliances and bare geopolitics were not easy to disentangle from solidarity in the muddy field that was colonialism. As Manu Goswami has recently highlighted, anti-colonialism in the inter-war period was a decidedly internationalist project with an open-ended outcome, undeserving of a teleological reading that prioritises nationalist end products.2 Even so, the most internationalist of movements and the most encompassing avowals of solidarity were not unbounded. This article aims at testing their limits.

The article’s particular example is the interaction between Asian anti-colonialism and Latin American anti-imperialism, which I explore by looking at the itinerary of Manabendra Nath Roy, an Indian anti-colonialist born as Narendra Nath Bhattarchaya in West Bengal in 1887, who, together with other foreigners, founded the Mexican Communist Party (PCM) in 1919. Unlike the numerous biographies written about his political activities in relation to his home country India3, this article concentrates on Roy’s sojourn in Mexico between 1917 and 1919. From reconstructing this stay, the conclusion derives some broader reflections about the practice of transnational and global history. The scholarship about Roy thus stands exemplarily for a problem at the heart of recent historiographical trends seeking to overcome the narrow focus on the nation-state as the natural unit of analysis. For even the historiography about the internationalist revolutionary M.N. Roy is for the most part divided along national lines. Most existing biographies about Roy have evaluated his life and thought with an exclusive view to their relevance for the political history of India. The Mexican dimension in Roy’s career plays, even in Manjapra’s recent biography, a very secondary role at best. On the other hand, the historiography about the Mexican Left or about Communism in Latin America has reconstructed in some detail Roy’s role in the foundation of the PCM and his ties to the Comintern.4 But this historiography has had little interest in Roy’s global trajectory. Nor has it examined Roy’s perceptions of Mexico’s cultural and political life in any depth. Once he had fulfilled his role as the founder of the party, Roy fell under this literature’s radar. Symptomatically, Jorge Castañeda has cited the example of the PCM and of Roy to argue that ‘the founding of these [Communist] parties [in Latin America] was sometimes anecdotally interesting, though mostly uneventful.’5 By contrast, this article scrutinises Roy’s career with a view neither to Mexican nor Indian history, but in order to learn something about the relationship between anti-colonialism, transnational solidarity, diaspora nationalism and geopolitics in the inter-war period.

For this purpose this article draws not only on the ample existing historiography on Roy, Mexican Communism and Indian anti-colonialism, but more specifically on German and British diplomatic sources, Roy’s and his contemporaries’ own writings, as well as on documentation of the PCM. The main purpose is not so much to fill in historiographical lacunae, but to analyse the role that Mexico played in Roy’s anti-colonial and anti-imperialist vision. Through this, the article addresses more general questions concerning recent debates in global and transnational history, as well as the issues that a figure such as Roy presents for the writing of such a history.

From Bengal to China via Japan, the US, Mexico and Europe

When Roy arrived in revolutionary Mexico in June 1917 he followed neither a long-cultivated plan nor a pre-existing interest in Mexico. Nor did it look likely as yet that from
his Mexican exile he would emerge as one of the leading Comintern agents of the colonial world. Rather he came as a peripatetic Indian anti-colonialist and nationalist, who hitherto had co-operated with whoever looked like a promising partner to foment anti-British unrest in India. He had thus first left his homeland during the First World War because of the so-called Indo-German conspiracy, in the course of which organisational centres of Indian diasporic networks had been set up in Berlin, Tokyo, San Francisco, New York City and, from 1916, Kabul. As Harald Fischer-Tine has underlined, even if the war and the Indo-German conspiracy deepened and geographically dispersed Indian diasporic nationalism, this nationalism preceded the war, as did its diasporic spread. The year 1905 in particular, when the partition of Bengal coincided with the Japanese victory in the war against Russia, saw considerable anti-colonial unrest in India and contributed to the emergence of global networks of Indian anti-colonialists.

It was these pre-existing networks of the Indian diaspora from China via Southeast Asia and the Middle East to East and South Africa that German agents sought to mobilise against British interests during the war. This Indian-German co-operation followed mainly geopolitical goals from a German viewpoint, in that it furnished German arms and money to Indian revolutionaries in the context of the war. Ideology underwrote the alliance, however, especially from the angle of Indian nationalists, who drew on an anti-Western and in some respects anti-modern romantic nationalism. In doing so, Indian nationalists borrowed alternately and complimentarily from pan-Islamic, pan-Asian (often centred in Japan) and ‘Indo-Aryan’ ethnic identity constructions. In the United States, meanwhile, elements of Irish nationalism sympathising with Indians and Germans also mingled with these networks, most often for geopolitical considerations but in some cases also founded on a more ideological basis. As the documentation at the Auswärtiges Amt (Germany’s Foreign Office) confirms, German diplomacy played a central role in the mobilisation and the financing of these networks, whose constitutive parts nevertheless pursued their own goals, which were more closely tied to the grievances or claims of particular locales.

As an arena of marginal importance for the warfare of 1914–18, Latin America played a subordinate role in the activities and networks as well as in the imaginaries of Asian anti-colonialists of all backgrounds. Indians were even less interested in Latin America than, say, the Chinese or Syrians and Lebanese, since they lacked a significant diaspora in the region. For the Germans, in turn, Latin America and Mexico in particular played a certain role as a geopolitical military theatre. Although Friedrich Katz has shown that German diplomats behaved amateurishly in Mexico, partially out of a contemptuous cultural attitude, the country still deserved a degree of attention from the German perspective. As the infamous Zimmermann Telegram of 1917 testified, the German Empire sought to persuade the Mexican administration of Venustiano Carranza to rally behind the Central Powers so as to attack the US in an attempt to recover what used to be Mexican territories in Arizona, New Mexico and Texas. Yet again, the German Foreign Office and German intellectuals generally flank ed such diplomatic efforts with ideological constructions advertising the example of Germany as an alternative to the liberal universalist imperialism that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came to be associated with France, Britain and the United States. In this way German ‘culture’, in declared opposition to the ‘civilisational’ model of the Western colonial powers, offered itself to an anti-imperialist or anti-Western intellectual elite in both Latin America and Asia. Even though Asia and Latin America were usually considered separately, Mexican–Asian relations, especially with Japan, awakened a lively interest among German diplomats on the eve of the First World War, since they regarded them as a potential base for an
anti-American Pacific alliance. From 1915 onward, Mexican ports served for the shipping of German-financed arms to India. A blend of geopolitical considerations during the war and the diasporic networks of Indian nationalism thus provided the backdrop to the beginnings of Roy’s travels.

Roy left his homeland for the first time in 1915, leaving for Java to meet German agents there. This trip turned out to be no more than the prelude to many others, which took him to China and Japan, and from there to San Francisco and New York City, where he arrived in late 1916. As the biographies about his life, his own memoirs and diplomatic sources reveal, these journeys were all a part of the Indo-German conspiracy, even as they also brought him into contact with radical students at the universities of Stanford, where he met his later wife, Evelyn Trent, and Columbia. When the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, those Indians implicated in the Indo-German conspiracy within the United States were put on trial, together with their German backers. Like a few other Indian revolutionaries, Roy escaped to neighbouring Mexico, where he settled in the capital to continue organising revolutionary activities for India with the help of German diplomats. He also published a book, targeting a Mexican readership, in which he denounced British colonialism in India. As the success of the conspiratorial alliance with Germany appeared ever less likely, Roy began socialising with a group of North American leftists who had come to Mexico to dodge obligatory military service in the United States (pejoratively called ‘slackers’). Under the influence of the recent Bolshevik revolution in Russia, members of this group, together with Mexican unionists and anarchists, founded the PCM in November 1919. Supported by a Comintern envoy, Mikhail Borodin, Roy was elected as its first Secretary-General. Roy’s conversion from an Indian nationalist financed by the Germans to an internationalist revolutionary thus occurred in Mexico.

Global and local factors interacted in the foundation of the PCM. If the Great War had worked as a mobiliser – organisationally, ideologically and spatially – of Indian anti-colonial nationalism until 1917, from that year onwards (with the US entry into the war as a starting signal) the war had the opposite effect. Instead of animating movement, it now stifled it, leading to a temporary territorialisation of the ferment, of which the foundation of the PCM was an offshoot. After crossing national borders because of the war, both the ‘slackers’ and Roy now found themselves pinned down in Mexico City. Gradually losing the protection and the financial backing of the German Reich, Roy was obliged to weave new networks among local politicians with socialist sympathies, the North American expatriates and, increasingly, with Russian Communists who came to replace the Germans as his mentors. The repercussions of the October Revolution and the foundation of the Comintern, in combination with the unfolding of the war, thus triggered a lasting ideological reorientation in Roy’s personal career, as well as among many Indian nationalists more broadly. Inasmuch as Russia replaced Germany, it was now Moscow’s instead of Berlin’s geopolitical considerations that played a role in the Marxist quarters of Indian anti-colonialism.

With the stabilisation of international relations on the basis of the Versailles Treaty, these networks began to move again. In his role as PCM Secretary-General Roy attended the second Comintern congress held in Moscow in 1920. There he presented his famous ‘supplementary theses on the national and colonial question’, with which he established his worldwide reputation as one of the most brilliant colonial theorists, who sought to increase the Comintern’s scarce interest in colonial matters. On this basis the Comintern leadership put Roy in charge of founding an Indian Communist Party, which he duly did in Tashkent with the support of a group of Indian pan-Islamists who in 1915 had founded the so-called ‘provisional government of India’ with German support in Kabul. Roy thus
continued to draw upon the networks forged in the course of the Indo-German conspiracy, even as he adhered to international Communism and, in his book *India in Transition*, harshly criticised the ‘romantic imperialism sanctified by religious authority’ of the pan-Islamist converts to Communism and the ‘orthodox nationalism’ of Gandhi’s Indian National Congress.  

Even though throughout the 1920s Roy typically adopted orthodox Marxist viewpoints and refused to collaborate with ‘bourgeois nationalists’, he eventually fell out with international Communism and returned to India. After sojourns in various European capital cities, in particular in Berlin, Stalin sent Roy to China in 1927 shortly before the Guomindang assault on the Communists in order to assuage the rising nationalist–Communist conflict. A combination of this mission’s failure and Roy’s disagreements with the Soviet hierarchy over the effects of the Comintern’s one-size-fits-all approach in India entailed Roy’s expulsion from the Comintern in 1929. Having lost first the official backing of Germany once it had been defeated in the war and, then, of the Soviet Union, he returned to India in 1930 after 15 years of exile. There, a political trial awaited him, which ended with his imprisonment for six years, during which he completed his turn away from Communism. After his release in 1936, his relationship with Gandhi’s National Congress continued to be tense due to Roy’s repeated attacks against a type of anti-British nationalism that he suspected of ideological affinities with the totalitarian regimes in Europe. Marginalised because of the hegemony of Congress, he led an anti-Fascist party called the Radical Democratic Party and produced several philosophical-political writings propagating what he labelled ‘radical humanism’. The poor political results of his efforts made him retire from Indian politics shortly after independence in 1947. Seven years later Roy died, alienated from the mainstream of Congress and judged a ‘renegade’ by Communists.  

**Mexico in Roy’s eyes**  
Whereas historians of India have devoted much effort to analysing Roy’s life and thought and historians of Mexico have reconstructed his role in the foundation of the PCM, the absence of studies about Roy’s social surroundings and about how he experienced his stay in Mexico is rather striking. From the viewpoint of transnational history, however, those two last points promise to be especially revealing. The scarcity of reliable sources on these issues necessitates recurring to the memoirs Roy wrote in the early 1950s. Their reading and interpretation show all the problems that are typical of the autobiographical genre. Written almost 25 years after the events, Roy filled memory lapses with anecdotes that are dubious and impossible to verify. His autobiography, probably written with an Indian reader in mind whom the author imagined to be uninformed about Mexican history, culture and politics, suffers moreover from an irritating boastfulness. In a fanciful inflation of his own role in Mexican revolutionary politics between 1917 and 1919 Roy arrived at almost implying that many of the decisions taken by Mexican political leaders, such as Venustiano Carranza, Álvaro Obregón or Plutarco Elías Calles, were basically owed to his own manoeuvres, which he unfailingly presented as exceptionally perspicacious. More problematically still, the issue that Pierre Bourdieu has famously diagnosed for the autobiographical genre as a whole applies here too: the hero endows his own trajectory with an artificial retrospective coherence, according to which he presents events and changes in his life as if they followed a unidirectional teleology, when in truth they often stemmed from historical contingencies upon which the author had little influence. Bearing in mind these caveats, however, Roy’s memoirs can be read as a useful source for studying global anti-imperial and anti-colonial networks in the years following the First World War.
Mexico fulfilled various roles in Roy’s autobiography. He couched his descriptions of Mexican culture in a sort of double exoticism, which on the one hand highlighted the country’s supposedly archaic and pre-modern character, implicitly contrasting Mexico with the US and Europe, but on the other hand stressed the ‘Western’ or European imprints on Mexico, in comparison with India. The first chapter on Mexico, which according to Roy was ‘in a state of permanent revolution’, bears the heading ‘Conquistadores, Rebels, Bandits and Civil Wars’. It offers a summary of Mexican history since independence, which Roy read through a remarkably racial lens. Surprised that Mexico’s ‘war of independence [had] begun as early as 1811’, Roy held that this war essentially ‘continued as the struggle for power between the Mexicans of mixed as well as pure Indian blood and the colonial aristocracy which claimed descent from the conquistadores’. Referring to the nineteenth-century liberal reformer Benito Juárez – ‘a full-blooded son of the soil’ – he concluded that ‘[a]fter nearly half a century the Mexicans won.’\(^{29}\) This racial interpretation, however, was co-articulated with political issues that basically reflected the ideological predilections of the Carranza years, which Roy seemed to accept wholesale. Hence, even though both were in reality mestizos, Roy presented the late nineteenth-century dictator Porfirio Díaz as ‘a scion of the Spanish conquistadores’, while claiming that the revolutionary rebel Emiliano Zapata had been ‘of pure Indian blood’.\(^{30}\) The long-lasting continuity of a stark binary between colonisers and colonised that Roy diagnosed for Mexican history arguably betrayed the author’s South Asian framework of understanding.

Roy offered this racialised understanding of Mexican history and politics against the backdrop of a society that he claimed was markedly archaic, even akin to ‘mediaeval Europe’. In Roy’s eyes Mexico’s pre-modern features owed much to popular religiosity and the power of the Catholic Church, which Roy strongly despised as a source of various kinds of backwardness. He professed irritation over being asked about spiritualism in India\(^{31}\), in contrast to which he stressed his belief in ‘science’. He set himself apart from his Mexican surroundings by stressing that, contrary to Mexicans, he ‘did not believe in […] magic power’.\(^{32}\) He also ridiculed the ‘religious prejudices’ of the wives of his Mexican Communist friends, some of whom he deemed to belong to ‘the common type of the urban mixed race, illiterate and generally ignorant’.\(^{33}\) According to Roy, Mexicans had a penchant for ‘melodrama’\(^{34}\) and a childish affection for military uniforms that resembled ‘the fondness [….] of children for toys’, even as Mexicans also constituted ‘a warlike race’.\(^{35}\) Practising a sort of Orientalism, by infantilising supposedly typical features of Mexicanness, Roy set himself apart from the alleged shortcomings of his host country by claiming a position of Western rationality for himself. This distancing arguably limited any potential anti-imperialist solidarity with Mexico.

However, the stay in Mexico played at least two more roles in Roy’s tale. Still in an implicit comparison with his native India, on other occasions Roy emphasised the Western and European features of Mexico. He thus highlighted the ‘modernism’ of his female host – naming her simply ‘la mujer moderna’ (the modern woman) – at a bohemian dinner invitation, where he also noted that French was ‘almost the mother tongue of all Mexican intellectuals’. His hosts’ table manners, Roy claimed, helped him to become familiar with a universalist and cosmopolitan civilisation he had known little before his arrival in Mexico.\(^{36}\) Elsewhere he wrote that it was through his friendship with the ‘Francophil Maestro Casas’, the rector of Mexico’s National University, that he began to read Voltaire, Cervantes and Kant and to attend concerts of classical music.\(^{37}\) These passages clearly reflected a global hierarchy of emancipation in Roy’s mind. Here, Mexico appeared to be less ‘backward’ than India inasmuch as it had achieved independence much earlier and possessed a Europeamised elite guaranteeing easier access to the international concert of
‘civilised’ countries. Again, Roy construed this European Mexico in opposition to his native India.

On other occasions, though, Roy underscored supposed affinities between Mexico and India, based either on alleged ethnic similarities or, more often, on the observation that from a geopolitical angle both countries were victims of imperialism. Buttressing this second point through ethnic constructions, Roy repeatedly referred to the homonymy between the ‘Indians’ of South Asia and the ‘Indians’ of Mexico. To be sure, stressing his ‘scientific’ credentials, he professed: ‘My fascination for Mexico [...] was not to be explained by the dictum that blood is thicker than water.’ The ‘legend’ that Mexico had originally been populated by (Asian) Indians was ‘too absurd to be taken seriously’ and had rightly been ‘destroyed by the advance of scientific knowledge’, Roy added. But the subtext revealed that this connection did exert a certain attraction both for Roy and for his Mexican interlocutors. For example, when summarising an encounter with the editor of a left-wing Mexican newspaper, who had asked Roy to contribute a piece on British colonialism in India, Roy cited himself saying: ‘We are in the same boat; my country is similarly stigmatised by the arrogant imperialism of the White race.’ The editor allegedly replied: ‘You know ours was also a colonial country [...]. Mexicans sympathise with you, and would be benefited by a knowledge of your country and the struggle of its people for freedom. We are also Indians, you know. I am of the pure blood.’ Roy’s comment to this purported statement was that the editor effectively had ‘a dark handsome, intelligent face, which could belong to any Indian of the best type’. Blurring the boundary between Mexican and Asian ‘Indians’, even religiosity could serve as a bridge between Mexico and India. For example, Roy wrote that he enjoyed cordial ties to President Carranza, even if he was ‘a Spanish colonial aristocrat’. This was, he explained, ‘a typical case of noblesse oblige. Carranza personified the Christian culture of the Middle Ages, which seems to have appealed to the Brahmanical tradition of intellectual aristocracy.’ In short, Roy stressed both differences and commonalities between Mexico and India. The shared features usually rested on a blend of geopolitical and ethno-cultural considerations.

These ambivalent portrayals of Mexican culture ultimately served the purpose of attributing a particular function to Roy’s Mexican sojourn within the overarching account of his life. Simply put, in Roy’s memoirs the Mexican experience explained the hero’s political ‘conversion’ from Indian nationalism to internationalist Communism, assuming a vantage point that henceforth allowed him to belittle Gandhi’s ‘orthodox nationalism’. Notwithstanding his repeated statements against ‘religious prejudices’ Roy presented this conversion in the tone of a spiritual, almost religious, experience. While claiming to be ‘a born sceptic’, he also wrote that the whole Mexican episode of his life ‘might have resurrected my belief in Providence’. The centrepiece was his encounter with Borodin, which meant that ‘my lingering faith in the special genius of India faded as I learned from him the history of European culture.’ Yet it was also Mexico as a country that opened new insights: ‘In Mexico I realised what I could not do in China, that national independence was not the cure for all the evils of any country.’ This revelation had steered him to ‘the discovery of India’. As a result of his growing scepticism towards national independence as an all-purpose solution to India’s ailments, Roy adopted an increasingly Marxist viewpoint, according to which ‘native feudalism’ constituted as powerful an obstacle to his country’s development as did British colonialism. Whereas at the moment of his arrival in Mexico ‘culturally [he] was still a nationalist’, in Mexico ‘the anti-imperialist connotation of left-wing socialism’ began to attract him. The ‘road from revolutionary anti-imperialist nationalism to Communism was short’, Roy wrote, and ‘it began in Mexico.’
Nationalism, Communism and the return to India

Roy’s writings of the period from 1918 to 1927 demonstrate that this transition of his political thought indeed occurred and that Mexico played a crucial role in it. The first evidence of how Mexico impressed Roy’s political opinions came in 1917. While many Asian and Arab anti-colonial activists, though soon disappointed, saw Wilson’s rhetoric about self-determination as a promising vehicle to bolster their demands, Roy showed himself sceptical from the beginning, most likely owing to the closer inspection of US imperialism he could experience in Mexico. The Wilson administration, after all, had repeatedly violated Mexico’s national sovereignty through military incursions amidst the revolutionary unrest south of the Rio Grande. In an open letter written in 1917 Roy attacked what he saw as Wilson’s lacking commitment to the plight of colonial peoples.46 The Spanish translation of this letter, published in Mexico in 1918 under the title ‘The path to a lasting peace’ (El camino a la paz duradera) consequently included a section about the Monroe Doctrine, which detailed the outgrowths of US imperialism in Latin America.47 This suggests that Mexico strengthened Roy’s anti-imperialism, which then served as a bridge from Indian nationalism to internationalist Communism. Roy’s memoirs, with their frequent references to the economic anti-imperialism of the Mexican constitution of 1917 and to the widespread feeling of a threat emanating from the US, as well as the documentation of the first years of the PCM, further underline this point.48 The same centrality of the theme of anti-imperialism was tangible in Roy’s ‘supplementary theses’, presented in Moscow in 1920, and in his book India in Transition, published in 1922.49 Furthermore, Roy’s memoirs suggest that his sojourn in Mexico may well have accentuated his anti-religious ideas, which tallied neatly with the Marxist interpretation of Hinduism as an obstacle to the spread of Communism in India.50

Even so, the relationship between nationalism and Communism in Roy’s career and Mexico’s role in it were more complicated than the memoirs’ teleological tale intimated. Three points deserve attention. Firstly, Roy’s ‘conversion’ to Communism obeyed dynamics far more global in nature than his local experience in Mexico. Roy was by no means the only Indian – or Asian or African – anti-colonialist who exchanged an alliance with the German Reich during the war for another one with the Comintern after 1918.51 The wider background of German and Russian support for anti-colonialists in the British Empire even showed some continuities in the sense that both Germans and Russians had an interest in weakening Britain by stirring unrest in its colonies. In both cases, the strategy to an extent subordinated anti-colonialists to the geopolitical goals of a rival European power, Communists’ genuine ideological dislike of colonial exploitation notwithstanding. In short, geopolitical conjunctures interacted with the transnational networks of Indian diaspora nationalism. In this sense, Roy and Mexico were only a small part in a much broader dynamic, less driven by Mexico’s particularities than Roy implied.

Secondly, in hindsight Roy’s interest in Mexico turned out to be far more ephemeral than he wrote in his memoirs – or than he effectively might have believed in 1919. To be sure, in his memoirs Roy maintained that by 1920 his first commitment was to Mexico. He wrote, for instance, that he was reluctant to go to Moscow in 1920 to attend the Comintern congress, since he first wanted to fight against North American imperialism in Mexico, where he ‘could do more for the revolution’.52 But the memoirs also revealed that for the longest part of his stay in Mexico he trailed German backing for revolution in India, a pursuit he only gave up once the Germans had clarified that their support dried up. As late as 1918, Roy attempted to leave Mexico for China, in search of arms and money for anti-colonial uprisings in India. The undertaking failed due to the scarce
shipping possibilities between Mexico and Asia during the war and because of a pending arrest warrant in the US, which forbade a stopover in San Francisco. Roy himself admitted that his biggest problem was that ‘all my German friends had gone from Mexico’, obliging him to secure new sources of financing, which he obtained first from carrancistas and then from the Soviets. German agents therefore later complained that Roy had embezzled money designed to stir anti-British unrest in India for purposes of a very different kind, namely a leisurely life in a sumptuous villa in Mexico City’s Colonia Roma. In other words, Roy’s alleged commitment to Mexico made a virtue out of a necessity. After leaving for Moscow in 1920, he never returned to Mexico.

During the two years of his stay, India continued to be Roy’s main concern, as his political associates of that time would later remember. Both the only book that he wrote in Mexico (Algunas opiniones sobre la administración británica en la India [Some opinions about the British administration in India]) and the one that he published two years after his departure from Mexico (India in Transition) focused on India and had virtually nothing to say about either Mexico or Latin America. Although, according to his memoirs, Roy had been named head of a planned Latin American anti-imperialist league, presumably a project hatched by president Carranza, the ‘supplementary theses’ barely mentioned Latin America. Even though these theses purportedly included those countries that Lenin deemed ‘semi-colonial’, which comprised most of Latin America, their focus was clearly on Asia. This is all the more surprising if one bears in mind that Roy attended the conference where he presented the theses as a delegate of the Mexican Communist Party. As his American compagnon de route Charles Phillips – who went with Roy from Mexico to Moscow – later remembered, it was him, not Roy, who explained Mexico to Lenin, whose ‘information on the country was – frankly – fragmentary’. When Roy opened a Comintern colonial bureau in Paris in 1925, there was no corroboration that he mingled with any parts of the city’s large scene of Latin American intellectuals, some of whom were very active in internationalist anti-imperialist politics.

This relative indifference towards Latin America, to be sure, was not specific to Roy, but representative of the Comintern’s geopolitics as a whole, as the above comment on Lenin’s knowledge of Mexico suggests. That Roy was no exception whatsoever to this tendency, however, is surprising in the light of the central relevance he attributed to Mexico in his autobiography. Except for his memoirs, Mexico barely figured in all subsequent writings by Roy. But even the memoirs themselves suggested that Roy did not follow Mexican politics closely once he had left the country. Although the text was written only in the 1950s, he never mentioned once the government of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40), which is normally considered a crucial touchstone in interpretations of the Mexican Revolution – and one with which Roy might have sympathised politically at the time. In other words, if the development of Roy’s political ideas was deeply influenced by his stay in Mexico, its traces vanished soon thereafter. The one occasion when Roy wrote about Mexico in some detail – that is, in his memoirs – it was in a personal manner, primarily in order to render plausible his politics, the target of which however continued to be India (and temporarily India in the 1920s).

Thirdly, Roy’s conversion to Communism had a strategic element to it, which had nothing to do with an ideological transition occurring because of his stay in Mexico. Even though official Comintern policy advocated co-operation with ‘bourgeois nationalists’ until 1928, Roy evidently felt compelled to prove his Marxist credentials to his new political allies in 1919–20. He was therefore especially keen to demonstrate that he was distancing himself from his earlier ‘cultural nationalism’. In order to get Roy admitted to the Comintern congress of 1920, Borodin similarly had to dissipate lingering doubts that Roy’s foremost compromise was merely with Indian independence and that he might try to use the
Comintern only as a useful vehicle to attain that goal. In his own letters, for example one to the Dutch Communist Sebald Justinus Rutgers, who was in charge of organising the trips to Russia, Roy accentuated his criticism of ‘reactionary socio-patriots’ in shrill tones.\textsuperscript{61} To be sure, Roy soon became much more averse to co-operation with ‘bourgeois nationalists’ than the Comintern, which explains his growing divergence from Muscovite guidelines. But even if Roy’s turn away from what he now saw as ‘cultural nationalism’ eventually became one of real conviction, it also contained a strategic element in the first place.

The palpable external sponsoring of the PCM and the disproportionate involvement of foreigners such as Roy in its early history invited nationalist reactions against Communism’s internationalism. In a sense, then, the transnational character of Communist networks outside of Russia hampered their rooting in national politics. After Roy and Phillips had left Mexico, the second guard of PCM leaders, sent by the Comintern, also comprised an inordinately large share of foreigners. This constituted a serious handicap in revolutionary Mexico, in particular where US citizens were involved – such as the Italian-American Louis Fraina, besides the Japanese Sen Katayama one of the major organisers of Mexican Communism after Roy’s departure. As many historians of the Mexican Left have argued, this ‘foreign’ imprint of Mexican Communism might not only have hindered an accurate reading of the particularities of Mexican politics, but more importantly opened the door to anti-Communist propaganda drawing on the idea that Communism was an international conspiracy against the interests and the ‘real character’ of the Mexican nation.\textsuperscript{62} As early as 1921 the Obregón government deported several Communist activists with the argument that they had meddled in Mexico’s internal affairs and hence violated the country’s sovereignty.\textsuperscript{63} This charge perhaps resonated especially widely in revolutionary Mexico, but, as Castañeda has argued, Communists faced problems of a similar kind in most Latin American countries.\textsuperscript{64}

To many contemporaries, these problems appeared to recommend a turn away from the Comintern’s internationalism and the transnational networks on which it was based, striving instead to ground politics once more within a national framework. With his return to India in 1930, Roy followed this wider trend, which marked the beginning of an obliteration of his transnational experience. Although Roy’s travels, in good measure initiated with specifically national goals in mind, had never lost their original referent (Indian politics), this now became the dominant feature again. In hindsight, when he mentioned his sojourn in Mexico, as he did in his autobiography, he converted it into a piece designed to explain and justify teleologically the development of his ideas and, with this, his current political stance – facing a reader he certainly imagined to be Indian. In sum, Roy’s trajectory was not an example of the dissolution of national boundaries due to their crossing. Nor was it an instance of a ‘solidarity that knew no boundary’. If anything it was a parable about de- and re-territorialisation of politics, from which a few theoretical and methodological conclusions can be derived.

**Conclusion**

From the viewpoint of the historiography of Mexico, Roy’s stay in that country appears to be no more than an anecdote, which is perhaps entertaining but of little consequence for the country’s history – just as Castañeda has claimed. From a Mexican viewpoint, Roy was no more than a marginal figure. This is obviously less true if looked at from India, but from this perspective the Mexican episode loses importance. If historians of India have mentioned Roy’s stay in Mexico at all, they have usually evaluated its relevance for the rise of Indian nationalism. This is also the case with Manjapra’s recent biography of Roy,
which reconstructs the travels and writings of its protagonist as an instance of India’s ‘de-territorial nationalism’, by which the author means the diasporic networks through which Indian nationalism was constructed during the first half of the twentieth century. Harald Fischer-Tine has made a similar point, even though he has not focused on Roy but rather on the origins of these same networks before the First World War. This literature has contributed significantly to unearthing the subsequently obliterated traces of transnationalism that underpinned Indian nationalism. However, and perhaps unavoidably, its point of departure continues to be a national historiography (here Indian), even if this is subjected to a serious critique.

The problem is that historians are both accustomed and trained to relate their findings to a framework of existing literature. The common obligation to write a review of the existing literature implies as much. For good reasons, few would be prepared to give up this custom. The practice, however, easily enters into conflict with demands to reform the discipline that in recent years have insisted on the necessity to overcome a historiography too focused on the nation-state. This raises the question of how to write and where to insert a history such as Roy’s, if the existing literature in large measure continues to be divided along national or regional (Latin America versus Asian) lines and debates. The problem is all the more acute in the case Mexico/India, where little transnational research exists.

Ever since transnationalism has in and of itself become a legitimate field of inquiry for historians, it is much easier to place a figure such as Roy’s within a wider body of research questions. Whether his travels and changing political philosophy was part of German and then Russian geopolitics, transnational solidarity or of diasporic nationalism thus seems to be a question more fruitful to ask than those relating to his relevance for respective national political histories, even if it is one that cannot be answered in a definite fashion. Roy was certainly an important and singularly brilliant part of global anti-colonial networks, as well as of the early Communist movement in the Global South. The itinerary he pursued was geographically more expansive than that of most of his fellow campaigners. Still, people and ideas did not flow across the globe in an unrestricted, even or arbitrary fashion. Frederick Cooper’s cautionary words against the homogenising term ‘globalisation’ should thus be taken seriously. ‘Transnational’ in some ways appears to be the more modest and controllable term. An element of ‘solidarity’ was also undeniable in Roy’s internationalist exploits. From 1918 at least Roy habitually denied being a ‘nationalist’, since he associated this term with a blind and irrational exaltation of cultural particularities, from which he sought to distance himself. If anything, Roy was, like most of his later biographers, guilty of ‘methodological nationalism’: a primary interest in the fate of his own country on the basis of a naturalisation of the idea of the nation-state. As his internationalist Communist commitments indicate, this might not have been incompatible with a degree of transnational solidarity after all.

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Notes

1. Dewitte, Les mouvements nègres and Goebel, Anti-Imperial Metropolis.
2. Goswami, “Imaginary Futures.”
3. North and Eudin, M.N. Roy’s Mission; Haithcox, Communism and Nationalism; Karnik, M.N. Roy; Bhattacharyya, Social and Political Ideas; Chandra, Political Philosophy; Roy, M.N. Roy;
Bharathi, The Political Thought; Pant, Indian Radicalism; Naumann, M.N. Roy; Talwar, Radical Humanism; Manjapra, M.N. Roy.

4. Schmitt, Communism in Mexico, 3–7; Herman, The Comintern in Mexico, 54–61; Carr, El movimiento obrero, 95–108; Caballero, Latin America and the Comintern, 21–2, 34, 79 and 162; Taibo II, Los bolchevikis, 27–51; Carr, Marxism and Communism, 19–27; Spenser, The Impossible Triangle, 41–4.

5. Castañeda, Utopia Unarmed, 24.

6. Bose, Indian Revolutionaries Abroad; Fraser, “Germany and Indian Revolution.”

7. Fischer-Tine, “Indian Nationalism.”

8. Nationalism and Indians in German East Africa: Auswärtiges Amt (henceforth AA) to Legation Stockholm, 4 February 1915, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts (henceforth PAAA), R21078; AA to Chief of Staff, 10 February 1915, PAAA, R21079; about the activities of the Indian Muslim nationalism Maulavi Barakatullah in Japan and the Middle East: internal memo, AA, 4 March 1915, PAAA, R21079; about Shanghai as a center of the conspiracy: AA to Legation Stockholm, 8 February 1915, PAAA, R21078; about Bangkok: Bernstorff, Stockholm, to AA, 1 March 1915, PAAA, R21079. British intelligence about these activities was later summarised in: India Office Records (IOR), L/PJ/12/102, File 6303/22, January–October 1923.

9. Roy, Memoirs, 5–6, 30, 81–2; Fraser, “Germany and Indian Revolution;” generally see Aydin, The Politics of Anti-Westernism.

10. Bernstorff, Stockholm, to AA, 1 marzo 1915, en: Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (PAAA), R 21079; Hoover, “The Hindu Conspiracy,” 251; Plowman, “Irish Republicans;” Viswanathan, “Ireland, India;” Fischer-Tine, “Indian Nationalism,” 333–5.

11. Katz, The Secret War.

12. PAAA, Mexiko 28, caja 8322.

13. Goebel, “Decentering the German Spirit.”

14. Unger, Mazatlán, to Magnus, Mexico City, 25 February 1920, PAAA Mexiko 28, box 8322; “139 Men Indicted as German Plotters,” New York Times, 8 July 1917; “Berkman in Ring of German Spies,” New York Times, 25 February 1918; Roy, Memoirs, 3–44; Dignan, “The Hindu Conspiracy.”

15. Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), fonds 495, reg. 108, no. 4, 1–4, cited in La Internacional Comunista, eds. Spenser and Ortiz Peralta, 71–6; Taibo II, Los bolchevikis, 27–51; Carr, Marxism and Communism, 19–27.

16. As Manela, The Wilsonian Moment, 55–213 has shown, the Paris Peace Conference was itself a mobilising factor in this sense.

17. Roy, Selected Works, 1 (1987): 174–80; Roy, Memoirs, 313–426; Shipman, It Had to be a Revolution, 98–134.

18. “Monthly Reviews of Revolutionary Movements in British Dominions and Overseas Countries,” Cabinet Office Records (CAB), National Archives, Kew, 24/122 [1921], 56–57; CAB 24/129 [1921], 54–59; IOR/L/PJ/12/54, File 4968(C)/21, January 1923 to January 1929; National Archives (College Park, Maryland), Record Group 165, box 2268, cited in La Internacional Comunista, eds. Spenser and Ortiz Peralta, 121–2; Pochhammer, Calcutta, to AA, 3 November 1925, PAAA R77427; generally Ansari, “Pan-Islam.”

19. Roy, India in Transition.

20. IOR/L/PJ/12/420, File 1468/30, August 1930 to December 1931; North and Eudin, M.N. Roy’s Mission; Jukes, The Soviet Union in Asia, 100–1.

21. Manjapra, M.N. Roy, 98–169.

22. Bourdieu, “L’illusion biographique.”

23. Roy, Memoirs, 45–6.

24. Ibid., 46 and 49.

25. Ibid., 75 and 185.

26. Ibid., 179.
33. Ibid., 171.
34. Ibid., 145.
35. Ibid., 52.
36. Ibid., 70. The claim seems exaggerated, since after all he was married to a North American by then – but Roy did not mention his first wife in his memoirs.
37. Ibid., 86 (similar comments on 122–3). Roy presumably referred to Antonio Caso, although Caso only became rector of the National University once Roy had left the country. There are numerous similarly implausible stories in Roy’s memoirs.
38. Ibid., 55.
39. Ibid., 62.
40. Ibid., 71.
41. Ibid., 163.
42. Ibid., 62.
43. Ibid., 195.
44. Ibid., 76.
45. Ibid., 59–60.
46. Roy, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, 67–83; Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*, 91; Manjapra, *M.N. Roy*, 33–5; Naumann, *M.N. Roy*, 40–1.
47. Roy, *Memoirs*, 29; Roy, *M.N. Roy*, 29; Naumann, *M.N. Roy*, 43.
48. Roy, *Memoirs*, for example 48–9, 107, 114 (1917 constitution) and 94, 143, 159 and 207 (anti-Americanism among Roy’s Mexican associates).
49. Roy, *Selected Works*, vol. 1, 174–80; Roy, *India in Transition*.
50. See for example von Rüdt, Calcutta, to AA, 10 June 1924, PAAA, R30615; IOR/L/PJ/12/179, File 8390/23, January to October 1924.
51. See for example the internal memo about Barkatullah, 13 April 1924, PAAA, R77459 and the documents in IOR/L/PJ/12/213, File 1103/24, July 1924 to September 1927.
52. Roy, *Memoirs*, 207.
53. Ibid., 98–105.
54. Ibid., 107.
55. Von Schubert, secret internal note, 29 September 1929, PAAA, R30615.
56. Valadés, “Confesiones políticas,” 1; Shipman, *It Had to Be a Revolution*, 76.
57. Carr, *Marxism and Communism*, 332.
58. Shipman, *It Had to Be a Revolution*, 118.
59. Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris, BA 2184, 10037; Archives Nationales, F7 14978; Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer, 3SLOTFOM47. See also Haikal, “Das internationale Kolonialbüro.”
60. Roy, *Selected Works*.
61. Roy to Rutgers, Berlin, 18 April 1920, RGASPI, fonds 497, reg. 2, no. 2, 3–5, in: Spenser and Ortiz Peralta, *La Internacional Comunista*, 93–7.
62. A good example of this tendency is Treviño, *El espionaje comunista*. From a scholarly viewpoint, the argument that Mexican communism lacked success because of its “foreign” roots can be found in Schmitt, *Communism in Mexico*, and Herman, *The Comintern in Mexico*. Historic Mexican Communists themselves saw that problem, of course: e.g. Valadés, “Confesiones políticas,” 12–13.
63. Carr, “Marxism and Anarchism,” 294.
64. Castañeda, *Utopia Unarmed*, chapter 2.
65. Manjapra, *M.N. Roy*.
66. Fischer-Tiné, “Indian Nationalism”.
67. Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 91–112.

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