

Two Leagues, One Front? The India League and the League Against Imperialism in the British Left, 1927-1937

V.K. Krishna Menon always made people angry. When he left southern India in 1924, coming to England under the auspices of his mentor Annie Besant's Theosophist and Indian Home Rule movement, Menon disappointed his father by not becoming a lawyer and returning to Kerala to take over the family practice.¹ Moreover, he disappointed Besant by not remaining true to the Theosophist or Home Rule faiths, and instead charted his own path with various intellectuals on the British Left, especially Harold Laski. He would eventually frustrate even those new leftist friends: first by his conservatism and gradualism, and then by his radicalism, adopted in the mid-1930s.² His personal prickliness did not help: as even his allies noted, he created "round himself an atmosphere of suspicion and intrigue."³ Alan Lawson, who photographed Krishna Menon along with Jawaharlal Nehru on a visit to the front in Spain in 1938, had a more generous explanation. Owing to his vegetarianism, he could rarely find anything to eat.⁴ Whatever the reason, the same year, Indira Nehru (later Gandhi) identified the problem: "There are so many groups and parties here, and Krishna is not popular with any of them."⁵

¹ Janaki Ram, *V.K. Krishna Menon: A Personal Memoir* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 8–16.

² Mino Masani, *Bliss Was It In That Dawn... A Political Memoir Up to Independence* (Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1977), 24–25.

³ H.N. Brailsford quoted in Nicholas Owen, *The British Left and India: Metropolitan Anti-Imperialism, 1885-1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 233.

⁴ Alan Lawson, Oral History recorded November 1978, Interview 3901, Imperial War Museum, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/80003885>.

⁵ Indira Nehru, quoted in Owen, *The British Left and India*, 233.

Perhaps his unique and ironic gift was an ability to equally alienate everyone, placing him on an equal footing with everybody. If he irritated the left, he positively frightened the right, and his mid-1930s embrace of the far left, including the British Section of the League against Imperialism and the Communist Party of Great Britain, made him a *bête noire* for MI5, and eventually the U.S. intelligence services.⁶ Even at the height of his powers after Indian independence, when he had the ear of Jawaharlal Nehru, everyone around India's leader detested or at best tolerated Krishna Menon, both for his imperious manner and his political intransigence. The White House and the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi were not alone in rejoicing when Krishna Menon took the fall for the Indian army's disastrous performance against China in 1962.

This essay will argue that Krishna Menon's troublesomeness, both for his allies on the left and his enemies on the right, originated in the mid-1930s, when he followed Nehru's lead to embrace a "united front" approach to anticolonialism. By "united front," this essay refers to the broad coalition of nationalists and leftists, both pro- and anti-communist, by which Nehru described the League against Imperialism on its formation in 1927: an organization with "a broad enough basis to include national organisations on the one hand and labour organisations belonging both to the 2nd and the 3rd Internationals."⁷ This united front approach led Krishna Menon to embrace rather than reject organizations with ties to communists, and to participate in European anti-fascist activity such as support for the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and

⁶ Paul M. McGarr, "'A Serious Menace to Security': British Intelligence, V. K. Krishna Menon and the Indian High Commission in London, 1947–52," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 38, no. 3 (September 2010): 441–69; Paul M. McGarr, "'India's Rasputin?': V. K. Krishna Menon and Anglo-American Misperceptions of Indian Foreign Policymaking, 1947–1964," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 22, no. 2 (June 2011): 239–60; Ian Hall, "'Mephistopheles in a Saville Row Suit': V. K. Krishna Menon and the West," in *Radicals and Reactionaries in Twentieth-Century International Thought*, ed. Ian Hall (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 191–216.

⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru, "Note for the Working Committee," March 7, 1927, *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, First Series vol. 2 (Delhi: Orient Longman, 1972), 301. Henceforth selections from volumes of this series will be abbreviated as *SWJN FS*, with the volume specified.

China against Japan after 1937. After the League against Imperialism folded in 1937, Krishna Menon particularly embraced the Communist Party itself, unlike many of the other participants in the united front.

Krishna Menon and the India League became a hub in a wide network of leftist organizations and causes which took root in London in the mid- and late-1930s, many of which were tied to British Communists' attempts to build a united front among leftists in parallel with the "popular front" uniting French and Spanish communists with anti-fascist bourgeois parties.⁸ Through his frequent collaborations with Reginald Bridgeman, the former British diplomat and prime mover behind the League against Imperialism in Britain, Krishna Menon gained allies for Indian independence in Britain and internationally through participation in a wide variety of institutions.⁹ Both fellow travelers rather than members of the CPGB, Krishna Menon and Bridgeman sought to build wide coalitions based in personal connections. This strategy which could backfire, but it also allowed for a flexibility surviving the many crises which afflicted the left throughout the mid- to late-1930s, such that Krishna Menon and Bridgeman's networks outlasted the League against Imperialism itself.

By the time that Nehru visited Britain in late 1935 and first met him, Krishna Menon had embraced the same faith in socialism and internationalism that Nehru had adopted in the late

⁸ This essay distinguishes between "united front" and "popular front" because "united front" is the term British leftists used, since the British Labour Party never seriously entertained unity with the CPGB, much less non-socialist parties. On the joint Comintern and French origins of the "front populaire," see Jonathan Haslam, "The Comintern and the Origins of the Popular Front 1934-1935," *The Historical Journal* 22, no. 3 (1979): 673-91; John F. Santore, "The Comintern's United Front Initiative of May 1934: French or Soviet Inspiration?," *Canadian Journal of History* 16, no. 3 (December 1981): 405-21. For the 'Popular Front' as concentric circles of a united front (socialists), a 'people's front' (anti-fascists), and internationalism, see Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 265-66.

⁹ The best single account of Bridgeman remains John Saville, "Bridgeman, Reginald Francis Orlando (1884-1968), Anti-Imperialist," *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, ed. Joyce M. Bellamy and John Saville, volume 7 (London: Macmillan, 1984), 26-40.

1920s. This, in turn, had led him to Bridgeman and the League against Imperialism. From 1935 onward, Krishna Menon tied himself to Nehru's particular brand of socialism and anticolonial internationalism, which sought not only Indian independence but a shift in world order toward national freedom, economic liberation, and international equality. That is, after 1935 Krishna Menon caught the vision of what Nehru had hoped the League against Imperialism could be back in 1927.

The united front which Krishna Menon, Bridgeman, and others tried to build in the mid- and late-1930s arose out of a similar vision from the late 1920s, when Willi Münzenberg spearheaded the effort to unite world anti-imperialist efforts under the auspices of a League against Imperialism.¹⁰ Nehru was only one of many anticolonial activists who found inspiration in this approach, but his particular engagement with Krishna Menon, and through him the British left, allowed his interpretation of the united front to flourish in the 1930s and beyond. In 1927, while Krishna Menon was still offering Theosophist seminars and agitating for dominion status for India, Nehru was engaging with Münzenberg and others in Brussels, blazing the political path which Krishna Menon would follow for the rest of his life.

Nehru's United Front

When the League against Imperialism formed in Brussels in 1927, Nehru had high hopes for the organization because of its international *and* ideological breadth (for more on Nehru's interest, see Michele Louro's chapter in this volume; and for the context of Brussels and the LAI, see Fredrik Petersson's chapter in this volume). At Brussels Nehru first met Fenner Brockway of

¹⁰ For the best evocation of Nehru's entry into this milieu in 1925-7, see Michele L. Louro, *Comrades against Imperialism: Nehru, India, and Interwar Internationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), chs. 1-2.

the Independent Labour Party (ILP), Labour's George Lansbury and Ellen Wilkinson, members of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), and the former British diplomat Reginald Bridgeman.¹¹ The unity among British leftists at Brussels did not last long, however. As early as September 1927, the Labour Party had disavowed the international League against Imperialism (based in Berlin) over its ties to Moscow, and Labour's George Lansbury resigned from the League.¹² Thus, by the time the British attendees at Brussels had organized a British Section of the League against Imperialism (BS-LAI) in 1928, its members spent much of their first meeting excoriating Labour.¹³ Even as the British leftists fought among themselves, Nehru maintained consistent contact with Bridgeman and ensured that a Congress representative attended the meeting.¹⁴

Only ten days after the BS-LAI's inaugural meeting, the Comintern convened for its Sixth Congress in Moscow, where the organization abandoned the united front approach entirely. The Comintern implemented this shift at the League against Imperialism's second international congress in Frankfurt, held in 1929, where the Comintern orchestrated speeches and actions

¹¹ "List of Organizations and Delegates Attending the Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism" (League against Colonial Oppression, February 10, 1927), League against Imperialism Archives, International Institute of Social History [hereafter LAI, IISH], <https://search.socialhistory.org/Record/ARCH00804>; Jawaharlal Nehru, "Report on the Brussels Congress," February 19, 1927, *SWJN FS* 2: 279; "Report of the International Secretariat for 1934" (League against Imperialism, 1934), U DBN/25/1, Hull History Centre [hereafter HHC].

¹² Nehru to Rangaswami Iyengar, September 7, 1927, *SWJN FS* 2: 329; Fredrik Petersson, "From Versailles to Bandung: The Interwar Origins of Anticolonialism," in *Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Pasts and Pending Futures*, ed. Luis Eslava, Michael Fakhri, and Vasuki Nesiah (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 74.

¹³ For example, comments by A.J. Cook, Harry Pollitt, Shapurji Saklatvala, George Allison, and Fenner Brockway in "Report on the First Conference of the British Section of the League Against Imperialism Held in London on July 7th., 1928," July 7, 1928, 4, 6, 8–9, 10, LAI IISH, <https://search.socialhistory.org/Record/ARCH00804>. For the organization of the British Section, see R. Bridgeman to C.P. Dutt, March 28, 1928, KV 2/2504, The National Archives [hereafter TNA].

¹⁴ Jawaharlal Nehru to R. Bridgeman, June 11, 1928, *SWJN FS* 3: 132; Nehru to Bridgeman, June 26, 1928, *SWJN FS* 3: 133; Nehru to V. Chattopadhyaya, July 1928, *SWFN FS* 3: 135. Nehru also kept up with the BS-LAI after its July meeting: Nehru to Bridgeman, October 25, 1928, *SWFN FS* 3: 149.

strongly criticizing organizations such as Nehru's Indian National Congress and the BS-LAI's main non-communist member, the ILP. By September 1929, the League's international secretariat had expelled its own head, the ILP's James Maxton.¹⁵

The criticism of Congress at Frankfurt deeply hurt Nehru, who had consistently defended Congress's affiliation with the League against criticism from non-communist Indian nationalists since 1927. In replying to such critiques, Nehru articulated a cohesive rationale for cooperating with communists or organizations with communist members. Just as the Comintern turned away from the united front, Nehru made the case for anticolonialism as a broad church in which anticolonialists must remain willing to cooperate with international allies of any stripe in order to achieve their immediate goals. Admitting in a letter to the veteran Indian nationalist Taraknath Das that the League included communists, Nehru nonetheless advocated as wide an anticolonial alliance as possible, insisting that he would "cooperate with any organization or state whether it is monarchical, republican or fascist," "so far as its activities are anti-imperialist."¹⁶ Writing to the ILP's Fenner Brockway, who grappled with the same difficulty about cooperating with communists, Nehru articulated a middle path, where non-communists could cooperate with communists "if [they] happen to do something which helps us," not regarding them "as untouchables and keep[ing] away from them lest more respectable people might be offended" while also rejecting out of hand any "reliance on communists in England or elsewhere."¹⁷

Nehru's letter to Brockway came in the aftermath of Brockway's attendance at the Frankfurt Congress, and as Nehru heard reports of the Comintern-backed attack on the broader

¹⁵ Fredrik Petersson, "Hub of the Anti-Imperialist Movement," *Interventions* 16, no. 1 (January 2014): 58; footnote to Nehru to Roger Baldwin, November 25, 1929, *SWJN FS* 3: 314.

¹⁶ Nehru to Taraknath Das, August 25, 1929, *SWJN FS* 3: 311.

¹⁷ Nehru to Fenner Brockway, August 1, 1929, *SWJN FS* 4: 107.

left parties present there, he came to feel great frustration at the sudden shift, lamenting to the U.S. civil liberties campaigner Roger Baldwin “that some of our friends have a peculiar knack of doing things the wrong way.”¹⁸ In his letters to the Indian communist Chattopadhyaya, who served as one of the League’s international secretaries in Berlin, Nehru fell back on his defense of an united front, referring back to the original 1927 vision of the League “[bringing] together all anti-imperialist elements whether communists or not.”¹⁹ Nehru acknowledged differences within such united fronts, but placed the preference on the side of cooperation, noting that despite “a difference in outlook... If there is a fair measure of agreement then it is desirable to work together.”²⁰ In his formal letter finally breaking Congress’s relationship with the League in early 1930, Nehru still maintained future hope of cooperation, looking back to his original hope for the League as “a meeting place for anti-imperialist elements, communist and non-communist,” where “both viewpoints have sufficient weight attached to them.”²¹

Nehru did not give up on cooperating with the League, and many within the British League, such as Bridgeman and the Indian Communist MP Shapurji Saklatvala, happily worked with Nehru on such causes as defending the accused in the Meerut Conspiracy Case.²² However,

¹⁸ Nehru to Edo Fimmen, November 25, 1929, *SWJN FS* 3: 312; Nehru to Roger Baldwin, November 25, 1929, *SWJN FS* 3: 313-314.

¹⁹ Nehru to Chattopadhyaya, November 25, 1929, *SWJN FS* 3: 312-313.

²⁰ Nehru to Chattopadhyaya, January 30, 1930, *SWJN FS* 4: 233.

²¹ Nehru to Secretaries, League against Imperialism, January 30, 1930, *SWJN FS* 4: 238.

²² Meerut now has a substantial literature; see Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), chap. 4; Michele L. Louro, “‘Where National Revolutionary Ends and Communist Begins’: The League against Imperialism and the Meerut Conspiracy Case,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 3 (2013): 331–44; Franziska Roy and Benjamin Zachariah, “Meerut and a Hanging: ‘Young India,’ Popular Socialism, and the Dynamics of Imperialism,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 3 (2013): 360–77; Carolien Stolte, “Trade Unions on Trial: The Meerut Conspiracy Case and Trade Union Internationalism, 1929–32,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 3 (2013): 345–59.

Nehru spent most of the six years from 1930 through 1935 in prison, and so his vision of a less ad hoc anticolonial united front also languished. In the meantime, Krishna Menon moved to the left and toward a Nehruvian vision of socialism, anticolonialism, and internationalism, such that by the time they met in 1935, together they sought to build the united front which Nehru had hoped the League against Imperialism could become back in 1927.

Krishna Menon's India League, 1929-1934

Krishna Menon had arrived in Britain in July 1924, where he joined the ILP and worked hard as an activist for his Theosophist sponsor, Annie Besant. Krishna Menon's work for Besant centered her pet route to Indian freedom, the Commonwealth of India Bill, which had the support of Labour's delegate to the League against Imperialism, George Lansbury.²³ In fact, while Krishna Menon worked for its passage, Nehru had condemned Besant's bill, since it left foreign relations and the army in British hands, and he had even briefly corresponded with his League against Imperialism comrade Fenner Brockway of the ILP about drafting a rival bill.²⁴

Throughout the late 1920s, Krishna Menon remained a loyal follower of Besant, dutifully organizing Theosophist meetings and activities promoting her gradualist approach to Indian freedom.²⁵ Despite his moderation, Indian Political Intelligence flagged Krishna Menon as a potential liability in December 1927, noting he "holds extreme political views and is anti-British

²³ Ram, *Personal Memoir*, 16–17; Suhash Chakravarty, *V.K. Krishna Menon and the India League, 1925-47* (Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1997), volume 1: 60, 67, 73.

²⁴ Jawaharlal Nehru, "Note on a Proposal for a Parliamentary Bill for India," March 10, 1927, *SWJN FS 2*: 305-306.

²⁵ For example, "Lectures and Meetings: The Theosophical Society," *The Times*, May 5, 1928. For an exhaustively detailed account of Krishna Menon's time in Britain based on unique access to Krishna Menon's papers, see Chakravarty, *V.K. Krishna Menon and the India League, 1925-47*; volume 1 covers 1924-1930, volume 2 covers 1930-1932.

in his conversation.”²⁶ However, through 1929 and 1930, Krishna Menon continued to voice a moderate call for Britain to grant dominion status to India, in his writing and in addressing ILP, Labour, and pro-Besant meetings from London to Manchester and the Midlands.²⁷ Indeed, Krishna Menon’s moderation made him a target for the Communist Party, which interrupted a conference he organized in Birmingham in April 1930.²⁸

The first hints of radicalism from Krishna Menon came in June 1930, when he implicitly rejected Besant’s pacifism and explicitly endorsed full Indian independence - not dominion status - as the Indian National Congress had done in 1929 under Nehru’s influence. Moreover, Krishna Menon made his case in socialist terms, justifying his pessimism about a post-independence Indo-British relationship “as there was not a nation in the whole of the world that had not at one time or another ‘come under the exploitation schemes for British capital.’”²⁹ Through the summer of 1930, Krishna Menon publicly returned to the Besant party line, but by September he had seized control Besant’s organization and led it to endorse the Congress line.³⁰

²⁶ “Extract from New Scotland Yard Report, Dated 28th December, 1927,” December 28, 1927, L/P&J/12/323, British Library India Office Records [hereafter BL IOR].

²⁷ “Britain’s Future in India: Peace by Conciliation and Agreement,” *Manchester Guardian*, January 7, 1929; “Commonwealth of India League, Extract from New Scotland Yard Report Dated 10th July, 1929,” July 10, 1929, L/P&J/12/356, BL IOR; “The Commonwealth of India League: Manchester Branch,” *The Indian News* 1, no. 5 (July 25, 1929): 11; C.R.G., “The Commonwealth of India League,” *The Indian News* 1, no. 9 (September 19, 1929): 7; “The Commonwealth of India League,” *The Indian News* 1, no. 10 (October 3, 1929): 5; “Conditions of Life in India: Case for Self-Government,” *Manchester Guardian*, October 7, 1929; “Commonwealth of India League,” *The Indian News* 1, no. 11 (October 17, 1929): 7; V.K. Krishna Menon, “India: A New Chapter,” *The Indian News* 1, no. 13 (November 14, 1929): 4; V.K. Krishna Menon, “India: A New Chapter. Hope for the Future,” *Bradford Pioneer*, December 6, 1929, 1–2, L/P&J/12/323, BL IOR; “A Petition,” *The Indian News* 1, no. 22 (April 3, 1930): 7; “India and Dominion Status: Moderate Opinion Ready to Be Friendly,” *Manchester Guardian*, April 7, 1930; V.K. Krishna Menon, “Save the Conference!,” *The Indian News* 1, no. 25 (May 17, 1930): 3.

²⁸ “Conference at Birmingham,” *The Indian News* 1, no. 23 (April 17, 1930): 4

²⁹ “Commonwealth of India League, Extract from New Scotland Yard Report Dated 25th June 1930,” 3, L/P&J/12/356, BL IOR.

³⁰ V.K. Krishna Menon, “Great Britain and India: Letter to the Editor,” *The Spectator*, July 12, 1930, 51; “Critics of Simon Report: Manchester Meeting,” *Manchester Guardian*, July 14, 1930. For the organizational maneuvers to take over the Commonwealth of India League: “Formation of London Federation,” *The Indian News* 2, no. 2

After September 1930, the “Commonwealth of India League” which Krishna Menon had led since 1929 on Besant’s behalf, ceased to support its founder’s goals, and instead agreed to support the demands of the Indian National Congress, “including the right to secede from the Empire.”³¹

As Krishna Menon’s organization shifted toward supporting Indian independence, it began to attract supporters from Labour’s left wing, who had left the League against Imperialism in the late 1920s over its ties to the Comintern. Thus, the Labour MP John Beckett (later to join Mosley’s fascists), who had been on the Executive Committee of the BS-LAI in 1928, attended a Commonwealth of India League event in July 1930, where he called Saklatvala and the CPGB leader Harry Pollitt his “friends” for defending the Meerut prisoners, and identified himself as a “Left-Winger” alongside two other exiles from the League against Imperialism, Maxton and Brockway of the ILP.³² After mid-1930, Brockway and other “left-wingers” began to appear frequently at Krishna Menon’s events.

Still hostile to “bourgeois nationalists” such as the Indian National Congress, the CPGB did not celebrate Krishna Menon leading the Labour left to align with Congress. Instead, at an event intended to unify the entire anticolonial Indian community of London on November 27, 1930, Indian CPGB members shouted down speakers ranging from the Quaker activist Horace Alexander to the fiery leftist MP Ellen Wilkinson. While interrupting one Indian woman, the troublemakers justified their disruption on the basis that “We are not gentlemen, we are

(October 7, 1930): 7; “Commonwealth of India League, Extract from New Scotland Yard Report Dated 26th November, 1930,” L/P&J/12/356, BL IOR.

³¹ “Commonwealth of India League,” *The Indian News* 2, no. 1 (September 18, 1930): 8.

³² “Commonwealth of India League, Extract from New Scotland Yard Report Dated 11th December, 1929,” 1–2, L/P&J/12/356, BL IOR; “Commonwealth of India League, Extract from New Scotland Yard Report Dated 23rd July, 1930,” 2, L/P&J/12/356, BL IOR.

Communists.”³³ Tension between Krishna Menon and the CPGB continued into 1931, even as Krishna Menon’s organization began to overlap with BS-LAI members. For example, in May 1931, the BS-LAI’s A.E. Fruitnight participated in the Commonwealth of India League’s annual conference. Fruitnight attempted to draw Krishna Menon into the Meerut prisoner campaign, proposing a resolution “demanding the release of the Meerut prisoners at once.” However, Krishna Menon demonstrated his refusal to cooperate with communists on any grounds by insisting that “he did not care about a mere 31 men, but for the thousands of political prisoners now in jail.”³⁴

Amid his continued antipathy for communists, Krishna Menon cemented his control over the Commonwealth of India League, which Gandhi visited while in London for the second Round Table Conference in late 1931. In an executive council meeting held moments before Gandhi’s arrival to speak, the League changed its object to “support India’s claim for Swaraj,” and recommended altering the name from the “Commonwealth of India League” to simply “India League.”³⁵ The organization finally changed its name in January 1932, completing its transformation.³⁶

The new India League (IL) soon began to cooperate more fully with Reginald Bridgeman and the BS-LAI, although some tension remained evident. Bridgeman attended the IL’s women’s

³³ “Commonwealth of India League, Extract from New Scotland Yard Reports, Dated 10th December, 1930,” 2–3, L/P&J/12/356, BL IOR; “Indian Freedom. Large Meeting in London. Unanimous Demand for Self-Determination,” *The Indian News* 2, no. 6 (December 4, 1930): 8.

³⁴ “League against Imperialism, British Section, Misc. 730,” June 10, 1931, L/P&J/12/270, BL IOR.

³⁵ “Gandhi’s Exhortation to the Commonwealth of India League,” *The Indian News* 3, no. 17 (November 26, 1931): 2.

³⁶ “Commonwealth of India League, Extract from New Scotland Yard Report Dated 20th January 1932,” L/P&J/12/356, BL IOR; “The India League,” *The India Review* 4, no. 2 (January 30, 1932). For the detailed backstory behind this, see Chakravarty, V.K. *Krishna Menon and the India League, 1925-47*, volume 2.

conference in March 1932, and Krishna Menon prevented him from moving an amendment to the conference's resolution, on the basis that the IL "did not desire any Communist motion to be dealt with."³⁷ Two months later, though, Krishna Menon attended the BS-LAI's annual conference, and after spending most of the intervening months in India with an IL delegation alongside Labour's Ellen Wilkinson, the ILP's Monica Whately, and the journalist Leonard Matters, he seemed much more friendly to the BS-LAI and the CPGB.³⁸ On arriving back in Britain in November, Krishna Menon invited Bridgeman, Saklatvala, and Harry Pollitt to speak at an IL conference on November 26, 1932.³⁹ Moreover, whereas in 1931 he had refused to associate with the Meerut case, in early 1933 he earned credit from the BS-LAI by writing a letter to the *Manchester Guardian* on behalf of the prisoners.⁴⁰

By the time Krishna Menon returned from India in late 1932, the integration of the IL with the BS-LAI and other communist-backed organizations had progressed beyond Krishna Menon. Bertrand Russell, who had become the IL's chairman in early 1932, attended the World Congress against War held in Amsterdam in August 1932, drawing the IL into the BS-LAI's orbit.⁴¹ The conference was the brainchild of the League against Imperialism's original

³⁷ "India League: Extract from Scotland Yard Report dated 16th March 1932," 3, L/P&J/12/448, BL IOR.

³⁸ "Summary of Information and Action 1929-1933 Relating to Vengalil Krishnan Krishna MENON," ca 1934, 1, KV 2/2509, TNA; "Record Sheet of Vengalil Krishnan Krishna MENON Known as Krishna MENON Born 3.5.1897," ca 1972, 1, MEPO 38/107, TNA; on the IL delegation, see *Condition of India: Being the Report of the Delegation Sent to India by The India League, in 1932* (London: Essential News, 1933).

³⁹ "India League: Copy Extract from New Scotland Yard Report, dated 23rd November, 1932," 1, L/P&J/12/448, BL IOR.

⁴⁰ "League against Imperialism and the Anti-War Movement," February 14, 1933, 5, L/P&J/12/273, BL IOR.

⁴¹ The first instance of Russell's involvement with the India League appears in Krishna Menon to Sir Samuel Hoare, February 16, 1932, V.K. Krishna Menon Papers Microfilm, Cambridge South Asia Centre [hereafter KMP-Microfilm]. George Lansbury and Harold Laski were also present at the meeting Krishna Menon recounted (February 13, 1932).

mastermind, Willi Münzenberg, and Reginald Bridgeman chaired the British delegation to the conference, which Russell joined.⁴² Bridgeman doubled as the BS-LAI's secretary and the organizer of the British Anti-War Council, both of which he ran out of the same office - a great convenience for MI5, which tracked the two organizations in the same file.⁴³ Romain Rolland, Gandhi's biographer and popularizer in Europe, helped organize the Amsterdam Congress, and his written report after the gathering foretold where the French Communist Party and eventually Comintern would move in 1934 and 1935, when he told the assembled communists and non-communists to "proclaim, at the outset of this Congress, the slogan 'Above all parties - united front.'"⁴⁴

Russell and Rolland seem to have drawn Krishna Menon into the Anti-War Movement, as Rolland promoted Krishna Menon's IL delegation to India in an early 1933 column, and Krishna Menon then attended the British Anti-War Council's two-day congress in March 1933.⁴⁵ However, the old tensions between Krishna Menon and Indian communists re-emerged, as he and Saklatvala feuded over the communist's continued criticism of Gandhi.⁴⁶ Krishna Menon apparently never became involved in activism around the Scottsboro case, but along with Meerut and the Anti-War Movement, Scottsboro was another cause celebre which created an ad hoc

⁴² *The World Congress Against War* (New York: American Committee for Struggle Against War, 1932), 3, 25. For more on the Münzenberg-orchestrated Anti-War Movement, which became known as either the Amsterdam-Pleyel Movement or the World Committee against War and Fascism, see Larry Ceplair, *Under the Shadow of War: Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and Marxists, 1918-1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 78–81, 84–85; David James Fisher, *Romain Rolland and the Politics of the Intellectual Engagement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), chap. 7.

⁴³ "League against Imperialism (British Section) - Misc. 755," July 18, 1932, L/P&J/12/272, BL IOR.

⁴⁴ Address by Romain Rolland in *World Congress Against War*, 11-12.

⁴⁵ Romain Rolland, "Vers l'unité de l'Inde, par l'entente hindoue-musulmane," *Europe* 31, no. 121 (January 15, 1933): 107–110.

⁴⁶ "Peace Congress Scenes," *Manchester Guardian*, March 6, 1933.

unity among British leftists, and which centered on the BS-LAI, whose office hosted the Scottsboro Defence Committee's meetings.⁴⁷

Scottsboro notwithstanding, by 1934 the India League and the BS-LAI had become tightly linked at the same time that the French Communist Party was insisting on a united front strategy.⁴⁸ Krishna Menon's pivot to the BS-LAI must have come in part out of desperation, since the India League lost its main source of funds in late 1932. Krishna Menon had sided with the affiliationists against Brockway in the ILP's 1932 fight about splitting from the Labour Party, instead entering yet another league, Stafford Cripps' Socialist League, which remained within Labour, and the split led Brockway to resign from the India League.⁴⁹ The loss of Brockway, and especially the ILP's funding, represented a major blow for the India League, but seemingly through sheer force of will (and lack of sleep), Krishna Menon kept the organization going through 1933 and 1934, buoyed by its secretary's continued relationships within the Labour Party and the Quaker-aligned Friends of India.⁵⁰

As Krishna Menon himself and the India League languished, powerless to stop the advance of the National Government proceeding with its Government of India Act under committee review, Krishna Menon finally began to embrace the BS-LAI. In May 1934, Bridgeman convened a meeting of BS-LAI's executive "for the purpose of 'establishing some

⁴⁷ For the definitive account of London-based Scottsboro activism see Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich*, 17-65 and throughout. For the BS-LAI's office, see the invitations to the Committee's meetings sent to Jomo Kenyatta throughout KV 2/1787, TNA.

⁴⁸ Haslam, "The Comintern and the Origins of the Popular Front 1934-1935"; Santore, "Comintern's United Front Initiative."

⁴⁹ On disaffiliation, see Gidon Cohen, "The Independent Labour Party, Disaffiliation, Revolution and Standing Orders," *History* 86, no. 282 (April 2001): 200-221. For Krishna Menon and the Socialist League, see Michael Bor, *The Socialist League in the 1930s* (London: Athena Press, 2005), 286-90.

⁵⁰ Suhash Chakravarty, *Crusader Extraordinary: Krishna Menon and the India League 1932-1936* (New Delhi: India Research Press, 2006), 434; Owen, *The British Left and India*, 208-9.

form of organisational link between Indians in London who are opposed to foreign rule in India' and [BS-LAI].” Krishna Menon wrote to the group but could not attend, and even then, he specified that the letter came from him personally, not the IL.⁵¹ Later that year, the Anti-War Movement invited Krishna Menon to speak at a demonstration commemorating the outbreak of the Great War, and Bridgeman reached out to Krishna Menon personally about developing a joint strategy against the India Bill.⁵²

Another overlapping organizational link connecting the BS-LAI and the Anti-War Movement with the India League took shape in early 1934 as the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) formed in response to the Incitement to Disaffection Bill. Leftist fellow travelers such as D.N. Pritt and Neil Lawson, lawyers who had helped the Comintern-backed International Labor Defense in defending accused communists and trade unionists in Meerut and in Germany, connected the new NCCL to the Haldane Society, a socialist lawyers' club which Krishna Menon joined when he was called to the bar - also in 1934.⁵³ The BS-LAI and the NCCL also served as an institutional link reconnecting Krishna Menon with Fenner Brockway, who in May 1934 "congratulated the Council on their success in forming a united front against Fascism."⁵⁴ Brockway and Krishna Menon's mutual support for the NCCL represented an

⁵¹ "League against Imperialism and Connected Communist Activities," July 4, 1934, L/P&J/12/274, BL IOR.

⁵² N.B. Hunter to Krishna Menon, July 28, 1934, reproduced in Chakravarty, *Crusader Extraordinary*, 455. Bridgeman to Krishna Menon, December 8, 1934, referenced in Chakravarty, 444.

⁵³ "History Sheet for Neil Lawson, 28.9.32-20.9.35," October 3, 1935, 7 verso, KV 2/3592, TNA. On the Haldane Society in the 1930s, see Nick Blake and Harry Rajak, *Wigs and Workers: A History of the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers, 1930-1980* (London: Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers, 1980), 7-19. Menon represented the Haldane Society at an NCCL event in 1941: "Report on Third Session of National Council for Civil Liberty in the Colonial Empire," February 15-16, 1941, U DCL 56/9, HHC.

⁵⁴ "BROCKWAY Archibald Fenner. Vol. 1. of H.S. 1931 to 1939," ca. 1939, KV 2/1917, TNA. Krishna Menon corresponded with Ronald Kidd of the NCCL as early as March 1935: Kidd to Krishna Menon, March 11, 1935, reproduced in Chakravarty, *Crusader Extraordinary*, 655.

advantage inherent in maintaining a wide network of political connections: even when one relationship fell through (the IL-ILP connection), others can take their place (the BS-LAI), and the two parties can still work together through third parties (the NCCL).

By early 1935, the India League and the BS-LAI edged even closer, as an Indian BS-LAI member, Ishaat Habibullah, was the featured speaker for a major IL meeting.⁵⁵ Later in 1935, Bridgeman and Harry Pollitt offered Krishna Menon and the India League their support “without reservation,” with Bridgeman joining the IL and pledging not to do anything to “embarrass” it.⁵⁶ By the time Nehru got out of prison in 1935, then, Krishna Menon had assembled and been included in a network spanning from Quaker allies of Gandhi, through the left of the Labour Party, all the way to the Communist Party. Much to Nehru’s chagrin, all these groups united in October 1935 as a “Nehru Reception Committee” to welcome him to London.⁵⁷ After connecting with Nehru and enjoying his support, Krishna Menon would embrace Nehru’s 1927 vision of a united front, and through the new strength enjoyed by the India League, he could vitiate that front.

Nehru and Krishna Menon’s United Front, 1933-1935

Nehru and Krishna Menon seem to have first corresponded during Nehru’s brief respite from prison in late 1933, and publishing appears to have brought the two together. Krishna

⁵⁵ “India League: Extract from New Scotland Yard Report dated 13th February, 1935, No. 31,” L/P&J/12/450, BL IOR. For Habibullah’s BS-LAI affiliation, see: “India Independence Day Meeting: Extract from New Scotland Yard Report dated 30th January 1935,” L/P&J/12/274, BL IOR.

⁵⁶ Harry Pollitt to Krishna Menon, March 6, 1935, and Bridgeman to Krishna Menon, March 10, 1935, referenced in Chakravarty, *Crusader Extraordinary*, 439. For further examples of BS-LAI and IL cooperation in early 1935, see Chakravarty, 644.

⁵⁷ Nehru to V.K. Krishna Menon, October 23, 1935, KMP-Microfilm.

Menon, needing to support himself outside of his India League work, had become a general editor for Selwyn and Blount by mid-1933.⁵⁸ In this capacity, Krishna Menon apparently wrote to Nehru in November 1933 asking to publish an article of Nehru's, "Whither India?," and asking Nehru "to elaborate these articles and make them into a book."⁵⁹ Nehru rejected this proposal, but he continued to send Krishna Menon pamphlets and reports about official repression in India for circulation in Britain until he returned to prison in February 1934.⁶⁰

This brief correspondence apparently affected Krishna Menon intensely, as one of the subjects Nehru mentioned in his 1933 letter - calling a constituent assembly for India, as an alternative to the House of Commons drafting a Government of India Bill - subsequently appeared in Krishna Menon's India League activism. Nehru noted "a Constituent Assembly elected under an adult or near adult franchise...is the only feasible solution of the political problem as well as the communal problem in India." He then added, suggestively, "if this proposal is put forward in England also by responsible parties it would be very helpful."⁶¹ Seeking to please Nehru, in June 1934, Krishna Menon circulated a petition calling for a Constituent Assembly in India on the basis of full adult franchise, just as Nehru had requested.⁶² Krishna Menon also floated this proposal at the Labour Party Conference of October 1934, as an alternative to the government's Government of India bill.⁶³ In August 1935, Krishna Menon took

⁵⁸ "Summary of information and action 1929-1933 relating to Vengalil Krishnan Krishna MENON," 2, KV 2/2509, TNA.

⁵⁹ Nehru to Krishna Menon, December 21, 1933, KMP-Microfilm.

⁶⁰ Nehru to Krishna Menon, December 28, 1933 and February 1, 1934, KMP-Microfilm.

⁶¹ Nehru to Krishna Menon, December 21, 1933, KMP-Microfilm.

⁶² V.K. Krishna Menon, "A Constituent Assembly for India. A Memorandum," June 4, 1934, L/P&J/12/449, BL IOR.

⁶³ "Labour Party Conference," *Manchester Guardian*, October 4, 1934.

the liberty of publishing several of Nehru's speeches and pamphlets under Harold Laski's introduction as *India Speaks*, perhaps further attempting to link himself to Nehru.⁶⁴

At the same time, Krishna Menon had switched from Selwyn and Blount to The Bodley Head of John Lane, where he served as their India specialist and edited the "Twentieth Century Library" series, whose emblem (designed by Eric Gill) depicted "Laocoon, that is Man, fighting with the twin snakes of War and Usury."⁶⁵ Before departing Selwyn and Blount, Krishna Menon edited a collection of essays from Oxford graduates on war, in response to the Oxford Union's "King and Country" debate of February 1933. One of the debate's participants, future Labour Party leader Michael Foot, contributed an essay, beginning a long collaboration with Krishna Menon which drew Foot into anticolonial politics.⁶⁶ With both the title on anti-war sentiment and the Twentieth Century Library's orientation against war and usury, Krishna Menon began to identify himself in his day-to-day profession with leftist politics, sympathetic to the anti-war and anti-capitalist ideas of the ILP which also circulated through Communist-linked organizations such as the BS-LAI and the Anti-War Movement.

Publishing further helped Krishna Menon's political career through his work at John Lane on Nehru's autobiography, tentatively titled *In and Out of Prison*.⁶⁷ By coordinating Nehru's late October-early November 1935 visit to Britain and then handling Nehru's literary

⁶⁴ Cited in Chakravarty, *Crusader Extraordinary*, 646.

⁶⁵ From dustcover of Naomi Mitchison, *The Home* (London: John Lane, 1934), image at <https://seriesofseries.owu.edu/twentieth-century-library/> (accessed August 24, 2018).

⁶⁶ V.K. Krishna Menon, ed., *Young Oxford and War* (London: Selwyn & Blount, 1934); Martin Ceadel, "The 'King and Country' Debate, 1933: Student Politics, Pacifism and the Dictators," *The Historical Journal* 22, no. 2 (June 1979): 397–422.

⁶⁷ Nehru to Krishna Menon, December 9, 1935, *SWJN FS* 7, 16. Ellen Wilkinson seems to have suggested that Nehru utilize Krishna Menon as a literary agent, citing the work he had done on her 1934 book on fascism with Selwyn and Blount: Wilkinson to Nehru, November 5, 1935, Jawaharlal Nehru Pre-1947 Correspondence, Vol. 103, 55-56, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

affairs in London, Krishna Menon began to enter into Nehru's close circle: Nehru playfully chided Krishna Menon for first calling him "pandit," and then "Mr." Eventually Nehru succeeded in his requests that Krishna Menon call him by his given name, since "this ceremony in personal relations bores me."⁶⁸ After the 1935 visit to Britain, Nehru recognized Krishna Menon's abilities, describing him to Rajendra Prasad as "very able and energetic and is highly thought of in intellectual, journalistic and left-wing Labour circles," with all "the virtues and failings of the intellectual." Nehru admitted he "was very favourably impressed by him," recognized that he had led the India League in a "definitely socialistic" direction, and identified the India League as "the only really political organisation" working for Indian independence in Britain.⁶⁹

Krishna Menon's 1933-4 correspondence with Nehru, and his usefulness as a contact in the British publishing industry, help to explain why Nehru settled on Krishna Menon and his India League as the conduit for Congress activity in Britain. There were, after all, many groups purportedly working for Indian independence in Britain, some even led by Indians.⁷⁰ However, by the time Nehru arrived in London in 1935, only Krishna Menon's India League straddled the line Nehru himself had tried to walk from 1927-30, that of the united front: cooperating with communists and non-communists alike, but refusing to be dominated by communists. Just as it had for Nehru in 1927, the League against Imperialism provided a useful link to a wider network of Communist-backed organizations, while still allowing the India League to cooperate with others on the left. Krishna Menon demonstrated his ability to operate such a united front-style

⁶⁸ Nehru to Krishna Menon, December 31, 1935, KMP-Microfilm.

⁶⁹ Nehru to Rajendra Prasad, November 20, 1935, *SWJN FS* 7, 42.

⁷⁰ For the many Indian and India-related groups in London in the 1930s, see Owen, *The British Left and India*, 197-234. 239 gives Owen's understanding of Nehru's choice of the IL.

network by integrating the IL with the BS-LAI, Anti-War Movement, and the NCCL in 1934, as shown in the previous section. In keeping with the Comintern's own endorsement of a "united front" policy in the summer of 1935, Nehru also emphasized a "united front" throughout his European sojourn of October 1935-February 1936, describing the Congress as a "joint front (including many groups) - a *front populaire* - against British imperialism" in a piece for the French paper *Vendredi*, which backed the *front populaire* soon to become the government in France.⁷¹ Nehru also emphasized the popular and united front idea to the staid Labour party, again calling the Congress "a joint front against British imperialism," thus differentiating it from the Comintern vocabulary but still maintaining the concept of unity across ideology against imperialism.⁷²

Nehru demonstrated his continued commitment to the League against Imperialism on his arrival in London in October 1935, where he met Bridgeman and Saklatvala. (For the longer-term connections signified by this reunion, see the work of Michele Louro and particularly her chapter in this volume.) By the time of Nehru's arrival, even the communists within BS-LAI had accepted the Comintern's new line, with the CPGB's Ben Bradley (a former Meerut prisoner) telling the British Section at a September 1935 meeting that the organization would reach out to Nehru and the Congress.⁷³ Nehru proved more than ready to reciprocate, and when he returned to Britain in late January 1936, he especially made time to meet again with Bridgeman and "the Saklatvala group," deprived of its namesake due to his premature death from a heart attack days before Nehru's arrival. In his 1936 visit, Nehru also attended a BS-LAI meeting, lunched with

⁷¹ Jawaharlal Nehru, "India and the World," January 6, 1936, *SWJN FS 7*, 57.

⁷² Jawaharlal Nehru, "Speech at a Labour Party Reception," February 3, 1936, *SWJN FS 7*, 89.

⁷³ "Jawahar Lal Nehru, Misc. 824," March 14, 1936, 3, L/P&J/12/293, BL IOR.

the CPGB's Harry Pollitt, and met again with Reginald Bridgeman. In addition to this activity on the far left, a reception of Labourite members of the IL, from Ellen Wilkinson to Stafford Cripps and Harold Laski welcomed Nehru, as did the Indian Conciliation Group.⁷⁴ Since Nehru had left his itinerary entirely to Krishna Menon's discretion, the political breadth covered during Nehru's brief trip demonstrated the broad-minded approach Krishna Menon and Nehru took to engaging the British left.

Krishna Menon and Bridgeman's United Front, 1936-1937

After Nehru's return to India, Krishna Menon threw himself into cooperation with the various organizations which made up the network he had assembled in 1934 and 1935, often in lockstep with Reginald Bridgeman. Bridgeman and the organizations linked to him through the BS-LAI reciprocated: a few weeks after Nehru's departure from Europe, Bridgeman, Ben Bradley, and Ronald Kidd of the NCCL all spoke at an India League event, alongside such IL Labour stalwarts as Michael Foot, J.F. Horrabin, and Reginald Sorensen.⁷⁵ By May 1936, Indians affiliated with the BS-LAI – who in the early 1930s had harassed and interrupted IL meetings – were attending India League events, although at one event Bridgeman had to act as a peacemaker between Krishna Menon and BS-LAI members who still found him insufferable.⁷⁶

Krishna Menon's involvement in the NCCL provided another opportunity for Nehru to articulate his vision of a united front, as he argued with his new London protege about whether to

⁷⁴ "Jawahar Lal Nehru," February 12, 1936, 1-2, 5, L/P&J/12/293, BL IOR.

⁷⁵ "India League: Extract from New Scotland Yard Report dated 8th April, 1936," L/P&J/12/450, BL IOR.

⁷⁶ "India League: Extract from Scotland Yard Report No. 63 dated 6th May 1936," L/P&J/12/450, BL IOR. Specifically, Saty Brata Roy, C.B. Vakil, Promode Ranjan Sen-Gupta, and D.J. Vaidya attended IL events, all of whom had heckled Krishna Menon in the early 1930s.

affiliate a new Indian Civil Liberties Union with the NCCL. Nehru rejected a formal affiliation, as the Congress had with overseas branches ever since 1931, but urged Krishna Menon to serve as a personal link to the NCCL. Nehru admitted he did “not expect much” from the NCCL, “but my own tendency is to err on the side of inclusion rather than on exclusion.”⁷⁷ Accordingly, two weeks later Krishna Menon accepted an appointment to the NCCL’s Indian Civil Liberties Subcommittee.⁷⁸ In the spirit of inclusion, Nehru was most pleased when Stafford Cripps succeeded in securing a united front among the Socialist League, the ILP, and the CPGB in early 1937, and Nehru wrote Cripps to congratulate him on assembling “the joint front of left-wing elements in Britain,” echoing his own use of “joint front” to describe the Congress in India.⁷⁹

In addition to the NCCL, 1936 Krishna Menon participated in an international congress for world peace, held in Brussels, in the same palace where the League against Imperialism had first met in 1927. The 1936 congress represented a flowering of the Popular Front, with the communist-front Anti-War Movement coordinating with fellow travelers like Romain Rolland, women’s peace organizations, and League of Nations Union liberal internationalists such as the Liberal MPs Philip Noel-Baker and Lord Cecil.⁸⁰ Krishna Menon conveyed to Nehru his skepticism about the gathering, which summoned nearly 5000 delegates from all over the world, and even after attending he admitted that the wide ideological range of those who had agreed to

⁷⁷ Nehru to Krishna Menon, September 3, 1936, *SWJN FS* 7, 429.

⁷⁸ “Report on Steps taken by the NCCL on behalf of the Civil Liberties of the Indian people,” ca. 1943, U DCL/152/2a, HHC; “Record Sheet of Vengalil Krishnan Krishna MENON known as Krishna MENON born 3.5.1897,” ca. 1972, 2, MEPO 38/107, TNA.

⁷⁹ Nehru to Sir Stafford Cripps, February 22, 1937, *SWJN FS* 8, 31.

⁸⁰ On this complicated confluence, see Rachel Mazuy, “Le Rassemblement Universel pour la Paix (1931-1939) : une organisation de masse ?,” *Matériaux pour l’histoire de notre temps* 30, no. 1 (1993): 40–44; Louro, *Comrades against Imperialism*, 218–24.

form an International Peace Campaign (*Rassemblement Universel pour la Paix*, RUP) made the organization potentially untenable. Nonetheless, in the same spirit that had animated Nehru in Brussels in 1927, Krishna Menon insisted that “the wise way is to put forward our constructive programme instead of non co-operating or remaining just protestants.”⁸¹ Krishna Menon also found the presence of other fellow travelers in the RUP, such as its secretary Louis Dolivet, very encouraging.⁸²

1937 found Krishna Menon’s version of the united front at its very peak, as he maintained his existing organizational links - especially the India League, enjoying Congress’s immense victories in the 1936 elections - and expanded his ambit to include mobilization for Spain, China, and Ethiopia. After unsuccessfully lobbying Nehru to send Congress support to the Spanish Republic in late 1936, Krishna Menon independently started a campaign to send an ambulance in support of the anti-fascist cause.⁸³ Nehru’s daughter Indira, then a student at Oxford, even spoke alongside stalwart fellow travelers John Strachey and Isabel Brown at a rally for Krishna Menon’s Spain-India Aid Committee in March 1937.⁸⁴ Later in the year Krishna Menon spoke at a conference on Ethiopia organized by Sylvia Pankhurst, and he became a reliable member and speaker for the China Campaign Committee, another Popular Front-style organization which arose to support Nationalist China against invasion by Japan.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Krishna Menon to Nehru, September 19, 1936, 1, KMP-Microfilm.

⁸² Krishna Menon to Nehru, November 12, 1936, 3-6, KMP-Microfilm.

⁸³ See Krishna Menon-Nehru correspondence of November 19 and December 14 and 29, 1936, and January 4, 1937, KMP-Microfilm.

⁸⁴ “The Coming Week,” *The New Statesman and Nation*, March 13, 1937, 409.

⁸⁵ Arthur Clegg, *Aid China 1937-1949: A Memoir of a Forgotten Campaign* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2003), 21; “Summary of information and action 1937 relating to: Vengalil Krishnan Krishna MENON,” ca. 1937, 2, KV 2/2509, TNA.

Much of this flurry of activity occurred after May 1937, when the League against Imperialism finally wound up. Krishna Menon had attended its final conference, in February 1937, which nearly devolved into a fight as the veteran anticolonialist and international socialist George Padmore challenged the leadership of the BS-LAI over its attitude toward Ethiopia.⁸⁶ In the weeks after the February conference, the BS-LAI consciously wound itself up, with Ben Bradley circulating a letter to members in May, saying that organizational weakness and the BS-LAI's continued prohibition by the Labour Party led its leadership to decide its aims would be better served by "carrying on the anti-imperialist work through the broad channels of the Trade Union and Labour Movements, and through the rapidly developing Unity Campaign."⁸⁷

Bridgeman and Bradley certainly had black activists such as Padmore and Jomo Kenyatta in mind with this prompt to "channel" the personnel of the BS-LAI into other movements - such as the International African Service Bureau, set up along the lines of the BS-LAI with the League's remaining funds, which Bridgeman transferred to Padmore.⁸⁸ However, no person or organization could have better fit Bradley's description than Krishna Menon and the India League, through which Bridgeman, Bradley, and numerous other former BS-LAI activists continued to support socialist anti-imperialism for the rest of the 1930s and throughout the Second World War.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ "League against Imperialism - Annual Conference," March 10, 1937, 3-4, 7, L/P&J/12/275, BL IOR.

⁸⁷ Bradley's May 11, 1937 circular quoted in "League against Imperialism: Extract from New Scotland Yard Report No. 90 dated 19th May 1937," L/P&J/12/275, BL IOR.

⁸⁸ "Cross-Reference, Subject: Johnstone KENYATTA," July 20, 1937, KV 2/1787; Jean Jones, *The League against Imperialism*, Socialist History Occasional Pamphlet Series, No. 4 (London: Socialist History Society, 1996), 29.

⁸⁹ See Bridgeman's presence at nearly every IL event after 1937 in the IPI files for 1938 forward, as well as numerous other CPGB members (L/P&J/12/451-456, BL IOR).

After the outbreak of war in 1939, Bridgeman even shared Krishna Menon's office, and Bridgeman continued to work on behalf of the India League.⁹⁰ Bridgeman and Krishna Menon worked incredibly closely through the NCCL, writing a "A Minimum Programme of Civil Liberties in the Colonial Territories" together during the summer of 1941.⁹¹ Bridgeman's Colonial Information Bureau continued to faithfully report on IL conferences at least until 1943, and Bridgeman himself remained a member of the IL long after India had gained its independence, serving as the league's Honorary Treasurer in 1950.⁹²

All this was enabled in part by Krishna Menon's ideological evolution into what former Meerut prisoner-turned-anticommunist Philip Spratt would later call "the fellow-traveller who is more loyal than party members themselves."⁹³ In this sense of the loyal fellow traveler, Krishna Menon belongs alongside Bridgeman and figures such as D.N. Pritt, who would eventually leave Labour to join the CPGB. Unlike Pritt, though, Bridgeman and Krishna Menon were useful to their communist allies precisely because they remained in the Labour Party and the India League remained a "safe space" for leftists from across the spectrum to interact. For example, in 1940 Bridgeman's local Labour liaison rebuked him for attending a communist-front committee of

⁹⁰ "Brief Note on R.F.O. Bridgeman," July 30, 1942, L/P&J/12/277, BL IOR. On Bridgeman's IL work, see his letter to Krishna Menon of April 6, 1941, talking about recruiting a Labour MP for the India League: Bridgeman to Krishna Menon, April 6, 1941, KMP-Microfilm.

⁹¹ The Minimum Programme correspondence is found in the minutes of the NCCL's British Overseas Sub-Committee, on which Krishna Menon and Bridgeman served together: U DCL 99/1 Part 1, HHC and U DCL 275/1; Krishna Menon and Bridgeman also served together on the Standing Orders Committee of the NCCL's 1941 Colonial Conference: U DCL 56/9, HHC.

⁹² See the Colonial Information Bulletin of August 24, 1943 section on "India," 6, U DBN 26/1, HHC; and Bridgeman as Honorary Treasurer of the India League listed in U DCL 11/8, Part 1, HHC.

⁹³ Philip Spratt, *Blowing Up India: Reminiscences and Reflections of a Former Comintern Emissary* (Calcutta: Prachi Prakashan, 1955), 57.

Cypriots, pointedly contrasting that committee with the IL.⁹⁴ What differentiated the Cypriot committee from Krishna Menon's IL was the careful nurturing of ties with Labour and Labour leaders which Krishna Menon had maintained, despite his political disagreements, ever since his days as a moderate Besant devotee.

Conclusion: Communist Capture?

Precisely because Krishna Menon had maintained his relationships and political linkages despite his own leftward evolution, he had enmeshed himself in relationships spanning the British left. As I tried to map out all of Krishna Menon's organizational linkages, the image which emerged resembled a web far more than a network. And like a web, Krishna Menon's network proved sticky. Explaining to Nehru why he could not return to India to head up the civil liberties union there in late 1936, Krishna Menon explained that "the Indian work here is not to be defined in terms of an organisation," but rather in terms of his many "contacts."⁹⁵ This would prove true, as with the exceptions of his falling outs with Besant and Brockway in the early 1930s, Krishna Menon kept his relationships open, even when they proved difficult for him politically and for others because of Krishna Menon's prickliness. Thus, when the Labour government swept to power in 1945, Krishna Menon had a direct line to the party through his longtime mentor and friend Harold Laski, his collaborator Ellen Wilkinson, and his protege Michael Foot, among many others; and he still remained active in his relationship with the

⁹⁴ Letter to Bridgeman, July 16, 1940, quoted in Saville, "Bridgeman," 36.

⁹⁵ Krishna Menon to Nehru, November 14, 1936, 1, KMP-Microfilm.

CPGB and maintained his links to groups such as the China Campaign Committee, the NCCL, and the Colonial Information Bureau.⁹⁶

The crucial question for historians looking at Krishna Menon, and for the U.S. and British intelligence agencies at the time, remained whether this was an alliance assembled by Krishna Menon, or simply a case of the CPGB successfully capturing Krishna Menon and his organizational links for their own purposes. The BS-LAI had fully penetrated the IL by 1936 at the latest, with Chloe Davis serving as a secretary at the India League office and reporting back to Ben Bradley at the BS-LAI office.⁹⁷ (Of course, in addition to the usual Home Office Warrant for phone checks and police surveillance, MI5 had an undercover operative, “Miss X,” who worked at the BS-LAI and then at the Anti-War Movement since 1932, so the British security service was monitoring the CPGB’s own monitoring operation.⁹⁸) Indian Political Intelligence certainly felt that by early 1937, Krishna Menon had become a communist agent in all but name, noting his “eulogistic references to the USSR” over Spain and his “ever-increasing intimacy” with the CPGB.⁹⁹ At the same time, Nehru detected a shift in Krishna Menon’s politics after Krishna Menon wrote him cautioning against signing a letter in support of Trotsky and against the show trials in Moscow.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ The best single document covering all of Krishna Menon’s activities is the Special Branch’s file on him, closed only after his death in 1972: “Record Sheet of Vengalil Krishnan Krishna MENON known as Krishna MENON born 3.5.1897,” ca. 1972, 2, MEPO 38/107, TNA.

⁹⁷ Telephone Check, Holborn 8915, October 6, 1936, KV 2/1022, TNA.

⁹⁸ “The Woolwich Arsenal Case,” November 18, 1950, 8, KV 2/1023, TNA; for further details on “Miss X,” see Calder Walton, *Empire of Secrets: British Intelligence in the Cold War and the Twilight of Empire* (New York: Overlook Press, 2012), 19.

⁹⁹ Memorandum for Mr. Silver, February 1, 1937, L/P&J/12/323, BL IOR; “India League: Extract from New Scotland Yard Report No. 83 dated 10th February, 1937,” 2, L/P&J/12/450, BL IOR; “India League and Communist Party of Great Britain: Extract from Scotland Yard Report No. 87 dated 7th April, 1937,” L/P&J/12/450, BL IOR.

¹⁰⁰ Footnote 2, Nehru to Krishna Menon, May 22, 1937, *SWJN FS* 8, 659.

While we should acknowledge to an extent the “success” of the CPGB in converting Krishna Menon into a committed fellow traveler by 1937, it would be a mistake to assume that Krishna Menon acted simply as a CPGB proxy, any more than Bridgeman had since the creation of the BS-LAI. Moreover, we ought to distinguish between the CPGB’s actual success and the real success, which came from the fellow traveler Bridgeman, who made the early overtures to Krishna Menon through the BS-LAI in 1934. Rather than “capturing” Krishna Menon, he himself came to share Bridgeman’s commitment to anti-imperialism as a cause above all others, which Bridgeman articulated in 1932 as “whether...he believes in Imperialism, or wishes to overthrow it.”¹⁰¹ If, as Bridgeman believed in 1932 and Krishna Menon believed by 1937, that the Soviet Union represented a force against imperialism, then Krishna Menon’s alignment with the CPGB after 1937 simply followed Nehru’s dictum from 1929 to “cooperate with any organization or state” no matter its politics, “so far as its activities are anti-imperialist.”¹⁰² Krishna Menon applied the same standard to the ideologically diverse RUP, which he had hope in 1936 would combine “with the positive contributions made by Russia and by popular movements like our own” to “avert war and liquidate imperialism and capitalism with it.”¹⁰³

Moreover, Krishna Menon saw his role as a personal connection linking Nehru and socialist elements in India to various causes in Britain, and especially the CPGB, as a series of “second rate jobs” making an important if unglamorous contribution to India’s freedom. As he explained to Nehru in 1936, Krishna Menon felt “that the situation in India will soon develop in such a way when these contacts however unimportant they are in terms of a mass struggle would

¹⁰¹ Letter from Bridgeman to a Labour colleague, September 16, 1932, excerpted in Saville, “Bridgeman,” 31.

¹⁰² Nehru to Taraknath Das, August 25, 1929, *SWJN FS* 3, 311.

¹⁰³ Krishna Menon to Nehru, November 12, 1936, 12, KMP-Microfilm.

still be invaluable as a necessary element in our fight.”¹⁰⁴ The next ten years largely bore this out, as Krishna Menon’s India League became a key lifeline for Nehru and the Congress under the restrictions of the Second World War.¹⁰⁵ And, with Labour’s victory in 1945, the connection bore fruit long after institutions such as the BS-LAI, China Campaign Committee, or even the IASB had passed from the stage.

The weakness of Krishna Menon’s approach emerges most clearly not in terms of his “capture” by communists, but rather in the thin-ness of the web: like a spider’s web, Krishna Menon’s network remained sticky, but it could also be brushed aside once Krishna Menon passed from the stage. As Nehru explained to Krishna Menon about a similar thin-ness of the socialist left in Congress in the 1930s, with a panoply of organizations “a handful of people have to carry on with them, usually the same people.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, once Krishna Menon left Britain in 1952, he never quite found the same dense network in which he could exercise influence, and once he lost his influence over Nehru after the 1962 war, he became a liability rather than an asset even for his allies in the KGB.¹⁰⁷ (However, Krishna Menon *did* remain thickly enmeshed in the networks which arose around various Asianisms, though with the exception of the 1955 Bandung Conference he largely hovered just behind the direct action of the actors covered in Carolien Stolte’s chapter in this volume. Mrs. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, in particular, did not care for Krishna Menon.¹⁰⁸ But then, who did?)

¹⁰⁴ Krishna Menon to Nehru, November 16, 1936, 2, KMP-Microfilm.

¹⁰⁵ For the details of this connection, see especially Owen, *The British Left and India*, 251–98.

¹⁰⁶ Nehru to Krishna Menon, August 7, 1937, *SWJN FS* 8, 293.

¹⁰⁷ Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The World Was Going Our Way: The KGB and the Battle for the Third World* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 314–15.

¹⁰⁸ On taking over leadership of the Indian delegation to the UN General Assembly in 1963, Mrs. Pandit was charitable enough to admit that not *all* the delegation’s problems were due “to my predecessor,” Krishna Menon, but

Even when large organizations interacted, the new problems would emerge, since the largest member organization would take on the burden of labor, “and yet others interfere and make work difficult. It is fairly easy to cooperate in a demonstration, but it is far more difficult to do so organizationally.”¹⁰⁹ Krishna Menon’s IL and his many allies could have made the same critique of the CPGB, or at times the communists might have made the same critique of Krishna Menon. Never without his fair share of critics, Krishna Menon nonetheless never found himself without his fair share of friends, at least until 1962. In this sense, the legacy of the League against Imperialism as a united front served Krishna Menon very well.

she damned him with the faintest of praise: “It would be unfair to him to attribute all that has gone wrong to his temper or his misinterpretation of policies.” V.L. Pandit to M.J. Desai, September 21, 1963, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, Series no. 1, II Installment, Subject Files – 1: Relating to the United Nations, File 5, pp. 17-18, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

¹⁰⁹ Nehru to Krishna Menon, August 30, 1937, *SWJN FS* 8, 719.