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Beyond the Moral Violence of Nations

A critical historiography of peace activism in the decolonizing world



Iconographies of peace and decolonisation: white doves are released towards Asia, Africa, and the Middle East on Indonesian stamps published during the Bandung Conference in 1955.

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Abstract

As the field of peace history awakens to its provincializing moment, scholars are increasingly demonstrating how activists and networks from across the global South opposed war and violence throughout the latter half of the 20th century. Arguably, historians are moving beyond expressions of peace from postcolonial nations, like the idea of ‘moral violence’ by Indonesian President Sukarno at the 1955 Bandung Conference. This paper assesses the work of historians seeking to overcome Eurocentric models and chronologies of peace activism and peace movements. It has three aims. First, it briefly sketches the broader historiography of peace history by demonstrating how Eurocentric perspectives slowly give way to more global ones. I then touch upon three key aspects that global peace history historians grapple with: scale, definitions, and fault lines. Finally, I assess the potential of global peace history for the fields of global history and peace studies. I argue that peace activism in the decolonizing world cannot simply be added to ‘canons’ of peace history, nor can concepts from peace studies be bluntly applied to global peace history. Instead, definitions of and engagements with peace must be historicized and localized worldwide to build new approaches that take the global South as a starting point.

Keywords

Global peace history, peace activism, global South, decolonization, peace studies

*“Yes, we! We, the peoples of Asia and Africa, 1,400,000,000 strong, far more than half the world’s human population, can mobilize what I have called the Moral Violence of Nations in favor of peace. We can demonstrate to the minority of the world (...) that we, majority, are for peace, not war, and that whatever strength we have will always be thrown onto the side of peace.”*¹

Until Indonesian President Sukarno uttered these words, it had been still dead during his opening address at the 1955 Asian-African conference. Now, a thunder of clapping rolled through the art-deco halls of *Gedung Merdeka* (Freedom Building). Built by Dutch architect Charles P. Wolff Schoenmaker twenty-three years earlier for the colonial upper class to enjoy the resort city that was Bandung, the same building now faced dozens of flags from countries that just before had been under European colonial rule or were well on their way to independence.² So did Sukarno’s regime of Indonesia welcome its guests to the first Asian–African or – as it is better known – Bandung Conference uniting anti-imperialist Asians and Africans from across the globe. Hundreds of delegates from twenty-nine countries, ex-colonies of the global South, and numerous representatives of liberation movements filled the streets of Bandung and its main venue for the next week. Their goal was to define a vision of Third World solidarity that could combat the threats of nuclear proliferation, cold war power struggles, and imperialism, the latter of which Sukarno saw embodied in the former life of the building now refashioned for a decolonized future.³

In the halls of *Gedung Merdeka*, Sukarno unfolded his vision of a peaceful world, coning the concept of *moral violence of nations*. With this, he conjured up an image of a global South on the rise, which would use its experience of colonialism and imperialism for ethical rather than military goals. Sukarno was not alone in propagating peace. Indeed, the Bandung conference at large can be interpreted as a reaction of postcolonial politicians to the wars in Vietnam and Korea. At the conference, leaders of newly independent nations sought a neutralist and peaceful solution to the global cold war struggle that had dragged both Asian countries into war.⁴ Hundreds of present attendants expressed widely shared concerns over Japanese re-armament, American militarism, cold war power struggles, and colonial violence. The resulting 10-point declaration *Dasasila Bandung* (‘Bandung’s Ten Principles,’ styled after Indonesia’s state ideology of *Pancasila*), stipulated the ‘settlement of all international disputes by peaceful means.’⁵

¹ *Asia-Africa Speaks from Bandung*, 11.

² In an ironic twist of history, Wolff Schoenmaker himself had been the mentor of Sukarno during his studies as an architect in Bandung at the Technische Hoogeschool Bandoeng during the late colonial period. Often called “the Frank Lloyd Wright of Indonesia”, Wolff Schoenmaker designed the *Sociëteit Concordia* building on Braga Street (1921) which would later become *Gedung Merdeka*. Dulleman, *Tropical Modernity*.

³ Until 1945, the same hall was called *Sociëteit Concordia* and its surroundings had served as a venue for the celebration of the marriage of then Dutch princess Juliana with prince Bernhard in 1937. Dulleman, 65.

⁴ Goscha and Ostermann, *Connecting Histories*, 10.

⁵ Havas Oegroseno, ‘The Bandung Declaration’, 1.

The peace ‘call’ of the Bandung conference was not an event in itself. From the Second World War onwards, as the cold war and decolonization gathered steam, a politics of peace burst onto the scene of global activism. Postcolonial politicians and anti-imperialist activists alike engaged with abolishing war and demolishing empire. Recent memories of unprecedented mass violence and genocide, rising superpower competition, and the prospect of nuclear warfare led to a widely shared belief that pushing for peace was needed more than ever before. Advocates across the decolonizing world crossed paths at various conferences and meetings, discussing new routes for a decolonized and peaceful world.

Scholars are increasingly engaging with global peace history. In the process, they aim to reform our understanding of peace and peace activism. This paper assesses the work of historians seeking to overcome Eurocentric models and chronologies of peace activism and peace movements. First, it briefly sketches the broader historiography of peace history by demonstrating how Eurocentric perspectives slowly give way to more global ones. I then touch upon three key aspects that historians of global peace history are grappling with scale, definitions, and fault lines. Finally, I assess the potential of global peace history for worldwide history and peace studies.

Historiography

To a considerable degree, the study of peace movements has been wedded to Euro-American history. Take, for example, scholar and peace activist David Cortright’s 2009 *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas*, an overview of the rise and development of post-war peace activism. While highlighting non-Western ideas about peace and pacifism, Cortright stresses their importance for Western activists and largely fails to include groups and activists from the global South.⁶ Another case in point is *The Struggle against the Bomb*, a three-volume study on the ‘World Nuclear Disarmament Movement’ by historian and peace activist Lawrence S. Wittner. Despite the self-claimed global focus of his research, Wittner lumps together postcolonial statesmen in brief paragraphs on ‘Third World nations’, glossing over the diversity and complexity within and across the decolonizing world, the case of Japan notwithstanding.⁷

A similar lacuna can be found in the 2019 study *The Politics of Peace* by historian Petra Goedde. Presenting us with ‘A Global Cold War History’, Goedde devotes a chapter on ‘decolonization’s challenge to the global politics of peace’. Her analysis, however, almost exclusively focuses on the male anti-imperialist theoreticians and activists Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon and the effect of their writings on Western peace campaigners.⁸ Other groups or individuals from the global South remain marginalized. In sum, while studies like these have contributed to our understanding of peace movements in the

⁶ Cortright, *Peace: A History*.

⁷ Wittner, *One World Or None*; Wittner, *The Struggle Against the Bomb*; Wittner, *Toward Nuclear Abolition*; Wittner, *Confronting the Bomb*.

⁸ Goedde, *The Politics of Peace*, 161–89.

global North, the ideas, and initiatives of peace activists in and across the decolonizing world have flown under their scholarly radar.

In recent years, however, the field of peace history is awakening to its provincializing moment.⁹ A predominant focus on Western peace movements and their interactions with the Soviet world is slowly giving way to explorations of north-south and south-south forms of engagement. This new field challenges the still predominantly Euro-American historiography on peace movements by asking about the intersections of peace, decolonization, and anti-racism in activist struggles across the global South. Part of this literature demonstrates how interwar resistance to empire and the emergence of postcolonial nation-states were bound up with a politics of peace. Existing studies, for example, illustrate that Gandhian ideas about nonviolence were tied to the establishment of the Indian nation-state and the internationalist outlook of Indian politicians.¹⁰ The rise and development of anti-nuclear activism, too, has become partially globalized. A broader historical focus on resistance to nuclear proliferation and testing includes countries like Ghana, Japan, Thailand, and South Africa.¹¹

A more recent body of work emphasizes the bottom-up work by non-state peace activists in the global South by explicitly moving away from a strong emphasis on postcolonial statesmen. In other words, scholars go beyond the ‘moral violence’ of nations of a rising global South that Sukarno once preached at the 1955 Bandung Conference. These accounts emphasize how networks of activists formed part and parcel of ideas about peace that were not only thought or practiced but also felt and embodied across societies.¹² As some authors of the *Afro-Asian Research Networks Collective* have argued, desires for peace were felt in the hearts and minds of audiences in various locales of the decolonizing world. In short, peace in the global South became experienced on a collective level. Besides other things, current research on peace in the global South thus adds affective and popular perspectives to scholarship on decolonization movements and peace activism.

Rethinking peace (activism)

Recent studies on peace activism in and across the decolonizing world urge us to rethink the definition of peace activism and to calibrate it to the context of the global South. Some scholars have argued that

⁹ See, for example, Peterson, Knoblauch, and Loadenthal, *The Routledge History of World Peace*; Howlett et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Peace History*.

¹⁰ Bhagavan, *The Peacemakers*. For work on peace internationalism from India during the interwar years, see Louro, *Comrades against Imperialism*, 214–56. For ‘travelling’ ideas of nonviolence to the United States and the decolonizing world, see Bennett, *Pacifism Not Passivism*; Prasad, *War Is a Crime*; Castledine, *Cold War Progressives*; Bois, *In Battle for Peace*; Hodder, ‘Toward a Geography of Black Internationalism’; Hodder, ‘Casting a Black Gandhi’; Stolte, ‘Fellow Travelers’.

¹¹ For Thailand, see Takahashi, ‘The Peace Movement in Thailand’. For Japan, see Sherif, ‘Thermonuclear Weapons and Tuna’. For Ghana, see Allman, ‘Nuclear Imperialism’; Skinner, ‘Bombs and Border Crossings’. For South and Central Africa see Sutherland and Meyer, *Guns and Gandhi in Africa*; Presbey, ‘Strategic Nonviolence in Africa’; Hodder, ‘Waging Peace’; Tiel, ‘The Black Man and the Bomb’.

¹² Iber, *Neither Peace Nor Freedom*; Leow, ‘A Missing Peace’; Stolte, ‘The People’s Bandung’; Liu, ‘Decolonization Is Not a Dinner Party’; Chase, ‘Hands Off Korea!’, Stolte, ‘Fellow Travelers’; Presbey, ‘Nonviolent Movements in the Caribbean’.

peace activism from the global South did not integrate one of the crucial aspects linking different parts of the decolonizing world: the structural violence of colonialism.¹³ Together with slavery, the colonial wars that raged in parts of Africa and Asia were the most extreme form of this structural violence. Colonial violence and imperialist war urged activists and movements across the global South to reconsider their thoughts and actions. Thinking about colonialism, addressing Western interventions, and general self-determination became critical in many peace movements of the global South. This dynamic invites us to develop new definitions and aspects of peace activism that move beyond ‘no war-only activism’ but can remain flexible to be relevant in various contexts across the decolonizing world. Historians have done so in multiple ways. I argue they have done so about questions of scale, definitions, and fault lines.

One of the first examples of rethinking peace activism relates to scale. In other words, on what level (national, transnational, global) did peace activists and movements from the global South organize themselves? Scholars have asked whether the assumed non-statism in the term ‘activism’ holds when considering the political networks that advanced ideas of peace in the decolonizing global South. In his discussion of anti-nuclear movements in Africa, for example, Rob Skinner notes that European peace movements, transnational peace activists, and postcolonial African leaders crisscrossed each other in opposing nuclear war.¹⁴ Skinner proposes to use the notion of the network to account for the various interactions and overlaps between state, semi-state, and non-state actors. This approach is relatively at odds with scholars emphasizing the more non-state and popular utterances of peace activists in the decolonizing world, including scholars from the Afro-Asian Research Network. However, as all these accounts demonstrate, the question of to what extent boundaries and distinctions need to be softened and blurred remains tantamount.

A second aspect of current scholarship is how to formulate peace activism in the decolonizing world. This aspect mostly boils down to a reformulation of what peace movements as such entailed. Take, for example, the discussion of the 1952 Asia-Pacific Peace Conference by Rachel Leow. In discussing the conference, Leow critiques the lack of studies on peace movements in the global South. Scholars, Leow argues, have been guided by a stark cold war perspective glossing over peace activism in diplomatic accounts or dismissing peace initiatives as ‘communist’ fronts. She suggests “to consider popular anti-colonial Afro-Asianism itself *as* one of the largest peace movements in history.”¹⁵ Another case in point is work done by Gail M. Presbey, who discusses political struggles in the British Caribbean colony of Trinidad and their influence on Pan-Africanist thought between the 1930s and 1950s. Reading nonviolence broader than previously assumed, Presbey argues that demonstrations and strikes, among

¹³ For the application of the idea of ‘structural violence’ to colonialism see among others Bentley, Sullivan, and Wilson, ‘British Colonialism’; Vaidya, ‘Shadows of Colonialism’; Rivera, ‘Disaster Colonialism’. For the original term see Galtung, ‘Violence, Peace, and Peace Research’.

¹⁴ Skinner, ‘Bombs and Border Crossings’.

¹⁵ Leow, ‘A Missing Peace’. Emphasis added.

other efforts to seek justice, especially the establishment of self-rule, can also be considered tactics of nonviolence.¹⁶ These and other authors demonstrate that to study peace movements in the global South, it is imperative to reconsider the basic concepts that peace historians have hitherto used and how they apply differently to the decolonizing world.

A third aspect relates to the fault lines that peace activism in the decolonizing world crossed and created at the same time. In other words, where did activists converge, and on what points did they diverge? Whether to prioritize decolonization over peace or vice versa arguably became the most significant bone of contention. In her discussion of Gandhian 'peace work' in India and beyond, Carolien Stolte argues that the main difference between Indian and Western advocates lies in their approach to organizing peace.¹⁷ Indian actors operated from the bottom up as they worked towards popular campaigns for world peace to pressure national governments. On the other hand, Western advocates sought to organize peace activism more hierarchically, arguing for the top-down implementation of human rights and cooperation with international organizations like the United Nations.

Another central fault line has been identified by Petra Goedde, who argues that the Vietnam War and national liberation movements in Asia and Africa brought about a seminal shift in thinking about nonviolence. By the mid-1960s, she argues, 'revolutionary warfare' overshadowed ideals of nonviolence and pacifism almost completely in the global South and some parts of the Western world.¹⁸ Key in explaining this divergence, Goedde concludes, is the new 'global' generation of youngsters that stood up in the 1960s, demanding more radical change than mere antimilitarism. Although this explanation can be fruitful to some extent, Goedde does not engage extensively with other parts of the world, except for the United States and Europe. As mentioned, Goedde bases herself on the writings and actions of two individuals – Frantz Fanon and Che Guevara – to paint a picture of the global South. Her account thus lumps together the ideas and activities of most of the world's population.

What becomes apparent from the accounts of Stolte and Goedde is the need to design historical narratives that are capacious enough to include multiple and specific narratives. A truly 'global' story of peace activism can only include a plurality of, sometimes very conflicting and diverging, histories. Indeed, as many historians have shown, peace activism in the decolonizing world knew multiple trajectories that crossed paths with the global cold war and decolonization. However, these historical 'tracks' did not run parallel and were just as much tied to specific local dynamics. Like tectonic plates hidden under the earth's crust, peace activist movements in and across the global South knew various fault lines that are not easily identified.

This brief discussion on several aspects of global peace history demonstrates the need for further inquiry into the notion and practice of peace in the decolonizing world. Much remains

¹⁶ Presbey, 'Nonviolent Movements in the Caribbean'.

¹⁷ Stolte, 'The People's Bandung'; Stolte, 'Fellow Travelers'.

¹⁸ Goedde, *The Politics of Peace*.

unknown about how and to what extent activists and movements crossed borders and political levels, how we can (re)define them, and how they sought to overcome or reproduce certain fault lines with their contemporaries. These aspects ultimately boil down to a discussion within global history about connection and disconnection, solidarity, and rupture. Further research needs to be attentive to the category of the global South and to what extent it can be applied to a plethora of experiences, activities, and emotions that belong to more than half of the world's population. While writing a united global peace history remains a very utopian task, it remains important to seriously examine what peace meant to individuals or groups at different times and places. Such a historical perspective, I argue, contributes to global history and infuses peace studies with critical insights.

Contributions

Historicizing peace from across the global South contributes to scholarly work in at least two significant ways. First, 'peace' can be used as a lens through which to view the world. As Michele Goode has argued in his recent article 'The Future of Peace History', it can be a perspective 'with which to view the past, akin to how historians use race and gender to comprehend relations of power.'¹⁹ Such a framework can significantly contribute to global histories of colonialism and imperialism. Consider, for example, the current historical debate on the Indonesian Revolution (1945-1949). Perhaps understandably, a substantial amount of – predominantly Dutch – scholarly effort has gone into assessing and explaining the violent developments that characterized Indonesia's late colonial and early postcolonial periods. Many accounts have focused on the violent nature of colonial war and its so-called 'extreme' properties during the Indonesian Revolution (1945-1949).²⁰

This violent 'turn' is important to understand the utterly oppressive character of (the end of) the Dutch colonial enterprise. What it does not include, however, is how such violence was justified by Dutch discourses on 'peace and order' that legitimized the colonial war in the first place. Additionally, these studies do not shed light on how Indonesian individuals and movements resisted colonial violence and thought about it during and immediately after the colonial war. The 'moral violence' of Sukarno mentioned in the introduction of this paper, for example, was not only part of a move to consolidate anti-imperialist solidarity but also to mobilize countries to enforce the 'unification' of the Indonesian nation-state, including the neo-colonial incorporation of then Dutch New Guinea into Indonesia.²¹ Thus, a peace perspective on discourses on peace, both within and outside the (post)colonial state, can yield new insights into how the idea of 'peace' enforced or limited new relations of power during processes of colonization and decolonization. Studying how colonizers and colonized

¹⁹ Goode, 'The Future of Peace History', 4.

²⁰ Luttkhuis and Moses, *Colonial Counterinsurgency and Mass Violence*; Limpach, *De Brandende Kampongs van Generaal Spoor*; Hagen, *Koloniale Oorlogen in Indonesië*; Groen et al., *Krijgsgeweld en kolonie*; Zaalberg and Luttkhuis, *Empire's Violent End*; Oostindie et al, *Beyond the Pale*.

²¹ Icaza and Soukotta, 'Bandung as a Plurality of Meanings'.

– and all the different layers in between and beyond – agreed or disagreed about peace sheds new light on the violent nature of imperialism and its afterlives.

Secondly, global peace history can contribute to peace and conflict studies. Strictly speaking, peace history itself is a sub-field of peace studies. However, these two fields barely interact with one another. As Goode has argued, ‘peace research outside history is poorly historicized, and peace as a subject within history is poorly theorized.’²² This yawning gap, Goode contends, is the product of a fundamental difference in scholarly focus. On the one hand, the field of peace studies identifies and analyses violent conflict to understand political and social processes toward peace and ultimately achieve a more desired state of human behavior. On the other hand, peace history focuses on the past and does not wish to acquire any ‘results’ in the contemporary world. However, as Goode argues, if the field of peace history is to achieve full flower, peace studies scholars need to pay serious attention to the work being done by their history colleagues. Without proper historicization and the stories that historians tell, the argument goes, contemporary peacebuilding and conflict transformation cannot confront the past and thus are limited in their capacity to prevent future violence.

A more fundamental point can be made here. Colonialism has been, amongst many other things, a system of imposed forgetting and sanctioned amnesia. Many scholars have gone to great lengths to demonstrate how knowledge production and the colonial enterprise were bound up in many, sometimes contradicting, ways.²³ By broadly applying concepts from the global North to other parts of the world, scholars of peace studies are perpetuating, or at least refraining from countering, epistemic violence caused by European imperialism. This dynamic has spurred many critical debates over the legitimacy of peace studies and the need for integrating non-Western perspectives.²⁴ Scholars advocating this approach argue that knowledge production from the global South needs to be taken as a fundamental starting point for research. Historians of global peace have a role to play here. After all, historians are not only storytellers but, most of all, knowledge producers. With their research, they can infuse current debates by introducing concepts of various non-Western paradigms about peace that were developed before, during, and after imperialism. As such, they can theorize parts of global peace history by offering insight into how peace and peace activism was conceptualized in specific decolonizing contexts. While activists and movements sought to marry ideas about peace with conceptions of self-determination and anti-imperialism in various locales, they ultimately developed new notions of peace activism. Thinking from the global South, not about, should thus be imperative for global historians for peace.²⁵ Ideally, they can lay the historical groundwork for a more decolonized

²² Goode, ‘The Future of Peace History’, 1.

²³ Taiwo, ‘Colonialism and Its Aftermath’; Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*; Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*; Bloembergen, ‘The Open Ends of Dutch Empire’; Nordholt, ‘Africanising African History’.

²⁴ Walker, ‘Decolonizing Conflict Resolution’; Fontan, *Decolonizing Peace*; Te Maihāroa, Ligaliga, and Devere, *Decolonizing Peace*.

²⁵ For the need for concepts from the global South see Menon, *Changing Theory*.

peacebuilding that starts with instances and discourses of peace using concepts of the global South. Such a shift makes it necessary to move away from Euro-American formulations to a conversation across regions that is also necessarily multilingual.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued for including diverse narratives and a broader understanding of peace in studying global history. In doing so, I have critiqued the Eurocentric approach of previous studies on peace movements, which often overlooked the contributions of activists from the global South. The emerging field of global peace history seeks to rectify this by examining peace activism in diverse contexts and addressing questions of scale, definitions, and fault lines. Scholars are exploring how peace movements were organized and what tactics were employed, highlighting the bottom-up efforts of non-state peace activists. The paper calls for expanded definitions that consider the structural violence of colonialism and the intersections of peace, decolonization, and anti-racism. Crucial in this endeavor is to recognize the fault lines within global peace activism, such as the tensions between prioritizing decolonization or peace and the shift towards revolutionary warfare in some parts of the global South and beyond.

Ultimately, peace can serve as a lens through which to analyze power relations and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the violence of (post-)colonialism and (anti-)imperialism. In conclusion, studying peace activism in the decolonizing world leads to more inclusive and nuanced approaches to global history. By examining the scale, definitions, and fault lines of peace movements, scholars can shed light on the diverse experiences and contributions of activists from the global South. This perspective contributes to global history and peace studies, providing critical insights into power relations, decolonization, and the pursuit of peace. In examining expressions of peace by anti-imperialist activists and postcolonial politicians alike – like Sukarno's 'moral violence' – scholars might move beyond the violence that still haunts scholarly knowledge production today. The future of global peace history is wide open.

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