

MILITARISM IN ASIA:
THE OBLIGATIONS OF EUROPEAN
WORKERS

by M. P. T. ACHARYA

Translated from the German by SMARAN DAYAL

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We extract the following remarks from a comprehensive article by an Indian comrade.²

The idea of a systematic style of militarism is essentially a modern, Western idea. After the war, it increasingly proliferated among government circles in the Eastern countries as well. Fortunately, the introduction of militarism on a European scale was too expensive for it to have been fully implemented in the East. As a result, even mighty England could not recruit more than 2.5 million soldiers in India during the war, of which only a small percentage actually went to the front. India has a population of 320 million!

One must distinguish between countries in Asia with Western-style militarism and those with an “independent” style of

1. This translation has benefitted immensely from Lauren K. Wolfe and Joe Keady's feedback. I am grateful to Ole Birk Laursen for sourcing this article. For a collection of M. P. T. Acharya's English-language essays, see the volume of his writings edited by Laursen, *We Are Anarchists: Essays on Anarchism, Pacifism, and the Indian Independence Movement, 1923-1953* (AK Press, 2019).

2. This is an editorial remark by the editors of *Der Syndikalist*.

militarism. The former is the militarism of colonial imperialism. Among these we must also include Russian colonial imperialism in Central Asia and the Caucasus—keeping in mind the Chinese areas bordering on Siberia. There is no difference between this [Russian] and Western imperialism other than the fact that the countries colonized by Russia directly border the motherland.

In the absence of statistics it is difficult to establish what percentage of their revenues the governments of Turkey, Persia, Egypt, Afghanistan, etc. spend for military purposes. Agnes Smedley recently wrote in Indian newspapers that the Nanking government spent ninety percent of its revenue for military purposes—in so doing, it has already burdened its peasantry for a generation to come; no wonder that large provinces are time and again beset by famine. The costly militarism of the Bolsheviks has a similar effect.

India is a typical example of foreign militarism.

Seventy percent of all revenue is spent on the army—only two percent for education and five percent for healthcare.³

3. All emphases are reproduced here as in the original.

It is natural, therefore, that ninety percent of farmers have been indebted for generations and cannot cultivate their fields. Herein lies the justification for the farmer revolts pro-

claimed by Gandhi.⁴ The farmers of Indochina and Annam⁵ as well as Indonesia appear to be following this example—in the latter cases battling French and Dutch imperialism. This farmer revolt consists in their refusal to pay the land tax and must be seen as a prototypically antimilitarist movement, which ought to be emulated by the rest of the Eastern peasantries.

Prospects for a successful antimilitarist struggle are excellent around the whole world, above all in Asia. Which is why the great powers are making a frantic effort to reduce their own expenditures on militarism and to cut back their armaments—even though they are faced with the necessity of arming themselves for war with one another and plunging the whole world into another bloodbath.

Whereas Asia, particularly in the colonial countries and the so-called independent countries, is battling militarism, we nonetheless have a sad fact to register on the other side: The oppressed workers of Europe, who are so proud of their political knowledge and experience, profess only a purely platonic relation to antimilitarism.

In no way do they make a conscious effort to destroy the bankrupt and antisocial militarist state order because they are far too

4. Acharya is referring to the various satyagraha (or passive resistance) revolts of farmers led by Gandhi, beginning with the Champaran satyagraha in the Champaran district of Bihar in 1917. In his autobiography, Gandhi called this satyagraha India's "first direct object-lesson in Civil Disobedience." (M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography, or The Story of My Experiments with Truth: A Critical Edition*, trans. Mahadev Desai, ed. Tridip Suhrud, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 640.)

5. Trung Kỳ, present-day Central Vietnam.

entangled in state politics and bereft of any genuine social perspective.

The European workers believe in something like a “social” politics, which they take to mean an approximation of socialism. But politics, in the sense of involvement in the life of states and their apparatuses of power, leads to wars and therefore to militarism. The workers, in their political confusion, betray themselves and thereby also forgo fighting shoulder-to-shoulder with the masses, who, without socialist theories, are struggling against militarism in Asia and Africa. Meanwhile, these workers in America and Europe, at the behest of their so-called workers’ parties, wait for socialism and fail to take action against the militarism of their exploiters in the Far East, in Africa, and South America because the struggle of the peasant masses there in the colonial and semi-colonial countries is allegedly not a socialist struggle. Indeed, the workers are even called on to directly support domestic and colonial capitalism and militarism and do so out of the belief that this development will bring them closer to socialism. In the meantime, workers in the mother countries are themselves required to suffer and die. . .

Right now, Western capitalists are investing enormous amounts of money for the purposes of war, primarily in Asia, and China in particular. A loan given to a government that is waging or preparing for war is tantamount to a direct investment in war. The workers of the West go unpaid for overtime work carried out in expectation of a slow death by starvation in order thereby to strengthen the competitiveness of their exploiters’ products on the world market. However, making the

accumulated profits of weaker governments available for purposes of war also proves to be extraordinarily profitable.

Thus loans are given in order to achieve power and influence and thereby opportunities for exploitation. But all of that is only possible when workers in the capitalist countries voluntarily pay the toll of their drudgery and support the plans of their exploiters.

Is this what socialism is supposed to mean? We can undoubtedly speak of a crisis in the development of socialist ideas and of socialism per se, even of Bolshevism.

The British regime in India has been financially bankrupt for a long time and, despite enormous tax increases, is incapable of covering its military expenditures. It maintains 130,000 soldiers in India, of which 60,000 are Whites. Every English soldier receives £5 per month, the sergeants more, and the Indian soldiers naturally only receive between half a pound or £1 per month for their loyalty, since millions of starving people in India don't even earn so much as a portion of that. The British soldier, however, only operates at the rear-guard, above all in order to gun down his own comrades at the front-line should they become fractious. All artillery, tanks, and airplanes are operated exclusively by British soldiers.

The British government in England must rustle up the funds to maintain this militarist system and English capitalists would rather part with their capital for these purposes than for the employment of workers in their own country, who are unemployed by the millions.

This depresses the wages of those still working—and every reduction of their earnings reduces consumption and in turn production—even without economization. Such is the

state of things in a mighty colonial empire such as England, whose example other countries are called on to follow as a model of prosperity and civilization.

It is not only English workers who suffer and not only the English capitalists who reap profits as a result of colonial militarism, but this also applies to workers on the continent and their exploiters. The continental capitalists attempt to produce armaments at cheaper prices and with greater profits when a revolution in India or a civil war in China provide them occasion to. It was only recently that a Hamburg newspaper wrote about how weapons had been shipped from there to India. But Indian revolutionaries cannot buy weapons because the English government prevents this and the Gandhi "movement" treads a different path for which no weapons are needed. British, continental, and American workers suffer under this system—not to speak of the ethical and moral corruption that is a consequence of this state of affairs.

Even though Europe's socialists talk day in and day out about class struggle on an international basis, they do not fight on the side of the enslaved farmers of India and other Eastern countries, but instead condone wage reductions as well as the production of armaments, because they are scared of otherwise losing their livelihood.

If the workers of England and Europe had a real sense of their own interests, they would refuse the production of armaments and move towards a general strike against the capitalist attacks on Asian, African, and South American farmers and workers.

It is precisely through these means that they would be fighting for themselves, for socialism, and against war. To

struggle against capitalism, militarism, and imperialism abroad, one has to begin the struggle in one's own country against those who, in one way or another, band together with these forces. That is the lesson that the politically confused European workers must learn from the great struggle against European imperialism and militarism that is underway in Asia.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE:¹ Mandayam Prativadi Bhayankaram Tirumal Acharya (1887–1954) was an Indian freedom fighter, anticolonial activist, anarchist, and one of the founders of the Communist Party of India. He participated in revolutionary activities across three continents with the aim of furthering India's struggle for independence from British colonial rule.

After being persecuted by the British colonial government for his involvement in the publication of revolutionary literature, Acharya went into exile, first in the French colonial enclave of Pondicherry and then in Europe, traveling between Lisbon, Paris, Berlin, Munich, and Istanbul (then Constantinople).

Moving from Europe to the United States, Acharya traveled first to New York, then to San Francisco, where he joined the anticolonial Ghadar Party (the Hindustan Association of the Pacific Coast) and produced translations of Party texts for the Tamil edition of its official publication, the *Hindustan Ghadar*.² With the outbreak of WWI, he returned to Europe, where he was involved in the so-called Hindu-German Conspiracy,³ spent two years in Stockholm, and was among the first Indian delegation to meet Lenin in 1919. Though a co-founder of the Communist Party of India in Tashkent in October 1920, Acharya never embraced communism and instead turned

1. I am indebted to Ole Birk Laursen for his corrections and feedback on this Introduction.

2. Cf. Ole Birk Laursen. 2019. "M.P.T. Acharya: A Revolutionary, an Agitator, a Writer." In Ole Birk Laursen, ed. *We Are Anarchists: Essays on Anarchism, Pacifism, and the Indian Independence Movement, 1923–1953*. Chico, CA: AK Press.

3. The so-called Hindu-German Conspiracy was a plan by Indian anticolonialists based in the United States to overthrow British rule in India. Its locus was the Ghadar Party, which was headquartered in San Francisco. For a comprehensive study of the Ghadar Party as a case of global anticolonial radicalism, see: Maia Ramnath. 2019. *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

to anarchism and published extensively in several languages—English, Spanish, German, Dutch, and French—on anarchism, pacifism, European imperialism, and the freedom struggle in India.

This article was published in *Der Syndikalist*, the journal of the German anarcho-syndicalist trade union, the *Freie Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands*, in 1930. Acharya theorizes what he sees as the central function of internationalism in socialism and the workers' struggle during a period of global European dominance and offers a succinct analysis of the role that European workers must play in the overthrow of colonialism, capitalism, and militarism. Acharya argues that European workers need to understand that they have more to gain by allying with their colonized fellow-workers and farmers than from compromises with European capitalists. As a consequence, he calls on them to enact

a general strike in defense of both their own interests and those of the colonized. In a particularly accurate and terrifying prediction of the state of Europe a decade before Germany's invasion of Poland, he argues that the same forces behind colonial militarism were at risk of "plunging" the world into "another bloodbath." Following the rise of the Nazis, Acharya and his Russian-Jewish wife, the painter Magda Nachman, were forced to leave for India in 1935, where Acharya lived until his death in 1954 in Bombay.

It is Acharya's avowed anarchism that sets him apart from other South Asian anticolonialists of his time. Until recently, the role of anarchism in South Asian anticolonialism has remained fairly under-researched, with the scholarship focusing largely on M. K. Gandhi's Tolstoyan anarchist tendencies and the occasional discussion of Bhagat Singh.⁴ However, recent studies, such as Maia

4. Cf. J. Daniel Elam, "The Arch Priestess of Anarchy Visits Lahore: Violence, Love, and the Worldliness of Revolutionary Texts" (2013). In *Postcolonial Studies*, 16.2: 140-54.

Ramnath's book *Decolonizing Anarchism: An Antiauthoritarian History of India's Liberation Struggle*, have begun to solicit greater interest in South Asian anarchism.⁵

As a translator, one of the glaring questions I was faced with was that of the provenance of this text. How fluent was Acharya really in the various languages that he published in—from Dutch and French to German and Tamil? Did he have assistance in writing this and other articles of his? And if so, what portion of the thoughts and arguments contained in them are his alone and what portion stem from his interlocutors and comrades at organizations like the *Freie Arbeiter-Union Deutschlands*? Acharya clearly wrote with a multilingual and global readership of leftists, anticolonial nationalists, communists, and anarchists in mind. A salient example of this is an article Acharya wrote for Hippolyte

Havel's New York City-based anarchist journal *Road to Freedom* (which was a successor publication to Emma Goldman's own *Mother Earth*). That article was first published for an Anglophone audience in April 1928 as "Mother India," but then appeared the following month in the German anarcho-syndicalist journal *Die Internationale* under the title "Der Antimilitarismus in Indien." This is, arguably, the equivalent of a simultaneous publication in the era of the telegraph, and it is something that occurred often with Acharya's articles. Many of the periodicals Acharya published in, such as *Der Syndikalist* (Germany), *Road to Freedom* (United States), *La Voix du Travail* (France), and *De Syndikalist* (Netherlands), were affiliated with the International Workingmen's Association, or the First International. When an article appeared in one of these publications, editors

5. For a discussion of the Ghadar Party's anarchism, see Harjot Oberoi, "Ghadar Movement and Its Anarchist Genealogy" (2009) in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44.50: 40-6.

of the others would translate and republish them in other venues—sometimes at the request of Acharya himself. This article, “Militarism in Asia,” appears to have only been published by *Der Syndikalist*.

A central preoccupation of academic fields such as postcolonial studies and world-systems theory has been the question of what is termed “the international division of labor.” It describes the manner in which, during and in the wake of the global spread of European colonialism, production and labor have come to be divided and stratified between the metropolitan and colonial countries (the “core and peripheral zones” in the language of world-systems theory,⁶ or the First and Third Worlds in the parlance of the Cold War). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak glosses the term as follows:

The contemporary international division of labor is a displacement of the divided field of nineteenth-century territorial imperialism. Put in the abstractions of capital logic, in the wake of industrial capitalism and mercantile conquest, a group of countries, generally first-world, were in the position of investing capital; another group, generally third-world, provided the field for investment, both through the subordinate indigenous capitalists and through their ill-protected and shifting labor force.⁷

However, for world-systems analysis, “core-periphery is a *relational* concept, not a pair of terms that are reified, that is, have separate essential meanings.”⁸ Thus, to account for the shift in capitalist relations in the period after formal decolonization in the mid-twentieth century, which has been marked by the rise of new centers of capital accumulation in East and Southeast Asia, scholars now often write of the “new

6. Immanuel Wallerstein. 2004. *World-systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 17.

7. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 2010 [1985]. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In Rosalind C. Morris, ed. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. New York: Columbia University Press, 41.

8. Ibid. Wallerstein.

international division of labor."⁹

Acharya offers us a way to think about the role of workers and unions on the core or dominant side of the (new) international division of labor in organizing against capitalist exploitation, along with the militarism that accompanies it. He dramatizes the global situation of the interwar period when colonized peoples across Asia and Africa were engaged in full-blown liberation struggles against European colonialism while "politically confused" European workers at best did nothing to prevent market and state forces in their countries from continuing to violently occupy and economically exploit the colonized countries and at worst actively abetted this oppression by producing armaments for the colonial powers and compromising with them by accepting wage reductions.

Acharya ends his article with an unambiguous plaidoyer to British and European workers to act, not in the interests of their colonized comrades, but in fact in their *very own* interests, which, if they endeavored to see clearly, coincide with those of the colonized on the other side of the international division of labor—and the other side of the world. European workers, Acharya says, must enact a general strike and disrupt the production of arms that enables their countries to subjugate the colonized countries and their workers.

"Militarism in Asia" offers a glimpse into the political thought of an anticolonial revolutionary from the colonized world, one who had found his way to the imperial centers of Europe, Russia, and the United States. Acharya was able to offer European left-wing politics and labor organizing a wider perspective

9. Cf. Pheng Cheah. 2010. "Biopower and the New International Division of Reproductive Labor." In Rosalind C. Morris, ed. *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*. New York: Columbia University Press, 179–212; Étienne Cantin. 2010. "New International Division of Labor." In Barney Warf, ed. *Encyclopedia of Geography*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

on their own local struggles against capitalism and on the implications of those struggles for workers elsewhere, i.e. on the disadvantaged side of the international division of labor, by situating them within a global framework.

Acharya's argument about the necessity for European workers to strike in solidarity with workers in the colonized world, and that their doing so would mean acting in their own interests, is a view that was held by other Indian anticolonialists as well. For instance, in her discussion of Shapurji Saklatvala in *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent*, Priyamvada Gopal argues that "Saklatvala's signature project" was to "illuminat[e] the workings of empire as inextricably tied to the workings of capitalism, thus tying together the fates of

all those at the mercy of the 'spread of the cult of private enterprise,'" and that, for Saklatvala,

imperialism was not simply about forcing nations under foreign subjugation and thus violating British values—though it was that too—but also about putting in place systemic inequalities and exploitation that rebounded as damagingly on British workers as on colonial subjects. From this perspective, anti-imperialism—a rejection of the economic workings of empire—was as essential to the health of British society as it was to colonized ones.¹⁰

Acharya, it must be said, was correct in his diagnosis of European labor politics and its relationship with empire at the time. When Indians began burning clothes produced in Britain and boycotting British goods at the height of the *Swadeshi* movement,¹¹ some in the British Labour Party and on the British Left interpreted these actions not as

10. Priyamvada Gopal. 2019. *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent*. London: Verso, 224.

11. *Swadesh* is a compound of two Sanskrit words, self (*swa*) and country (*desh*) and can be glossed as "of one's own country." For a helpful discussion of the *Swadeshi* movement, see Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2011) and Dilip Menon, "The Many Spaces and Times of *Swadeshi*" (2012) in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 47.42: 44–52.

anticolonial protest, but rather as the protection of Indian bourgeois interests and, ironically, deployed a rhetoric of international labor solidarity to discourage Indians from their boycott.¹²

We are currently witnessing a historical moment marked by the Indian farmers' protests of 2020–21, which have been called "the single largest protest in human history."¹³ Farmers, primarily from the agricultural states of Punjab, Haryana, and Uttar Pradesh, are striking against three "pro-corporate" farm laws, which would deregulate the agricultural sector, jeopardizing the livelihoods of farmers with small land-holdings. In a moment when an unprecedented number of farmers are actually enacting a general strike (*Bharat Bandh*, lit. "close" or "shut down" India), it is

worth pausing over what Acharya has to say about an earlier moment of farmers' revolts. For him, the Satyagraha farmer revolts led by Gandhi in the first half of the twentieth century were a "a prototypically antimilitarist movement, which ought to be emulated by the rest of the Eastern peasantries." Just as he was calling on European workers to enact a general strike in their home countries in support of antimilitarism, he saw immense potential in a parallel strike by farmers in the colonized world. Had he lived to witness the "largest organized strike in human history," he would undoubtedly have seen great emancipatory potential in it.¹⁴

Acharya is an understudied figure in South Asian intellectual history. There exists no compre-

12. Cf. Nicholas Owen. 2007. *The British Left and India*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

13. Nitish Pahwa, "India Just Had the Biggest Protest in World History." *Slate*. Dec. 9, 2020. <<https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/12/india-farmer-protests-modi.html>>

14. Iris Kim, "US should pay attention to India farmer strike, largest protest ever." *Business Insider*. Jan. 2, 2021. <<https://www.businessinsider.com/indian-farmer-strike-largest-protest-history-us-world-pay-attention-2020-12>>

hensive biography of his life, nor were many of his essays available in print until very recently, when Ole Birk Laursen published a collection of his work under the title, *We Are Anarchists: Essays on Anarchism, Pacifism, and the Indian Independence Movement, 1923–1953*. Laursen, as noted above, is also in the process of writing a biography of Acharya, which is bound to do an immense service to the study of South Asian intellectual and political history. For my part, I hope for this translation to contribute, however slightly, to the continuing study of M. P. T. Acharya, South Asian anticolonialism, and the global intellectual history of anti-authoritarian political thought.

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MANDAYAM PRATIVADI BHAYANKARAM TIRUMAL ACHARYA (1887–1954) was an Indian freedom fighter, journalist, anticolonial activist, and anarchist. He participated in revolutionary activities across three continents with the aim of furthering India's struggle for independence from British colonial rule. At different times in his life, he was associated with the Ghadar Party in California, the Hin-

du-German Conspiracy in Europe, the confluence of anticolonialists at the India House in London, and was a founding—but short-lived—member of the Communist Party of India at its birth in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Acharya actively participated in the international anarchist movement for over three decades and was a frequent contributor to publications such as *Der Syndikalist*, *De Arbeider*, the International Workingmen's Association's *Press Service*, *L'en dehors*, *Acción Social Obrera* and *Road to Freedom*. His combined articulation of antimilitarism, anticolonialism, and anarchism is unique in its theoretical approach.

