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Everyone with an interest in imperialism and decolonization has a route by which they came to see the significance of the 1955 Bandung conference. My path began with Robin Kelley and Elizabeth Esch’s “Black Like Mao” and Robert Young’s Postcolonialism. But in 2005, a year or two after I had read and was deeply impressed by the set of connections Kelley and Esch delineate and by Young’s comprehensive overview, and, not coincidentally, 50 years after the Conference itself, I attended two events that fixed Bandung in a central place in my mind’s conception of the twentieth century. The first was a lecture by Vijay Prashad, entitled “Backlash Blues,” where he spoke forcefully about Bandung as a site of anti-imperialist contestation. The second was at a conference in honor of Jack O’Dell, at which the Bandung Conference and the African National Congress’s “Freedom Charter,” also of 1955, kept coming up across a range of conversations. From there I found my way to Prashad’s Darker Nations and progressed through various essays, monographs, edited collections, and novels, before arriving at the book I am working my way through as I write this review: Luis Eslava, Michael Fakhri, and Vasuki Nesia’s insight-packed doorstopper collection of essays, entitled Bandung, Global History, and International Law. These works shore up interpretations of the


twentieth and indeed twenty-first centuries that foreground the anticolonial ethos which gave rise to the Conference and carried on its legacies. They also suggest that what Bandung meant and continues to mean beyond being important remain far from settled questions. To pick only the last work mentioned, between, for example, Rose Sydney Parfitt’s argument that the Conference’s narrative strategies “take on a far more revolutionary aspect than it appears at first glance” and Umut Özsu’s contention that “Bandung was a missed opportunity, and this missed opportunity was anything but an accident,” it is not difficult to establish that the event continues to inspire divergent analyses.3

With so much scholarship now available that takes Bandung seriously, it is also not hard to trot out a decent reading list on the topic, even one as admittedly idiosyncratic as my own tabulation. And so, it might reasonably be asked: beyond arguing back and forth about Bandung’s ultimate meaning and legacy, is there really anything else to say on the topic? Cindy Ewing’s recent *Cold War History* article, “The Colombo Powers,” makes that an easy question to answer.

That answer, it becomes clear within the article’s first four paragraphs (though let me stress that the full article is required reading), is an unqualified affirmative. Evoking postcolonial continuity and the force of political personality with a dramatic opening scene, Ewing pulls her readers in with the suggestion that in order to understand Bandung we need to know about Colombo, and to understand Colombo we need to know about the managers of the postcolonial state. More specifically, Ewing introduces a 1954 conference held in Colombo and hosted by John Kotelawala, Ceylon’s prime minister from 1953 through 1956 (independent since 1948, the country was renamed Sri Lanka in 1972). This 1954 meeting brought together five prime ministers in total, and saw the debut of the “Colombo Powers”: Ceylon, India, Pakistan, Burma, and Indonesia. Enacting transnational Asian solidarity and aspiring toward greater South Asian influence on global affairs, the Colombo powers might be read as *avant la lettre* exemplars of what would come to be called the Bandung spirit. But that would be a misreading, as Ewing’s central argument makes clear, because it would accept at face value a myth-laden, romanticized view of Bandung. Instead, Ewing convincingly argues that attending to Colombo does much more than offer some forgotten origin story for Bandung. It makes us understand Bandung differently. Uninterested in “revolution or liberation struggles of the kind they themselves waged to gain independence,” Ewing contends, “the Colombo Powers sought to bring onto the

international stage a new coalition of Asian sovereigns that stood independently of bloc politics and yet were actively engaged in international relations” (2). This was the group that staged the Bandung conference, and so if its agenda, even if it was in aid of Asian unity, was not one of fostering liberation movements but instead consolidating state power within their region and respective nations, then Colombo put the brakes on Bandung before it had the chance to build real momentum.

That the Colombo project itself was over within three years helps explain its near-absence in the scholarly literature. If a mere Bandung-origins footnote was what it amounted to, it probably would not justify the research and reading which might increase its prominence. But what Ewing’s research, and more importantly her interpretation, does for the Colombo Powers is to show how their fleeting alliance sheds light on major themes of historical discussion and debate. First, in tracing the ideas about how Asia should counter western imperialism back to figures like writer and educator Rabindranath Tagore and philosopher and politician Sun Yat-sen, Ewing demonstrates that the Colombo Powers were rooted in a specifically Pan-Asian sensibility that was not subsumable under Afro-Asian solidarity, however much Bandung narratives later bent in that direction. Next, Ewingcatalogues the more immediate historical background which gave the emergence of the Powers its urgency: the perceived need to exercise sovereignty through official diplomatic protocol, to be a mediating factor in the Korean War, and to establish a presence at the United Nations.

Relevant background thus established, Ewing shows not only that the Colombo Powers were interested in promoting the perspectives of their leaders in Asian affairs, but that the circumstances were conducive for doing so. Kashmir notwithstanding, the 1950s were a decade of enhanced South and Southeast Asian connection, and at the Colombo Conference itself, Kashmir remained notably off the agenda. It was Vietnam in the aftermath of Dien Bien Phu that presented the most pressing business for the delegates, not least because the Geneva Conference had opened to consider that same issue just two days before John Kotelawala welcomed his guests to Ceylon’s Senate Building. In a sense, between Indian communication with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and British Prime Minister Anthony Eden’s regular correspondence with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru throughout the Swiss meeting, India took part in both confabs. In keeping with the focus on Asian concerns, the Colombo meeting saw agreement that the United Nations should not involve itself in a settlement on Vietnam absent PRC input. The Conference took up issues beyond Vietnam, as Ewing documents, but the talks in Geneva – which carried on almost two months beyond Colombo’s conclusion – remained foremost in the minds of the Colombo leaders. Owing in part to good relations between China and India at that moment, the Colombo Powers continued to support the PRC at Geneva, and were content that ‘Asian opinion’ had influenced the proceedings, which fatefully recognized a divided Vietnam. It was also during the Colombo conference that Indonesian Prime Minister Ali Sastroamidjojo recommended that the group enlarge its circle by holding a future Afro-Asian gathering, and from there the idea gathered support. Colombo, in this sense, launched the Afro-Asian politics that Bandung in turn brought to a wider audience. In the process, colonialism and the meaning of independence became more pronounced themes. And although the widening group brought in actors, like Indonesia’s President Sukarno, who did not attend Colombo and were more amenable to supporting liberation movements, the Colombo prime ministers’ focus on postcolonial sovereignty did not fade from view. In the end, as other observers have noted, Bandung remained open to interpretation, by participants in the moment and by those who would read Bandung through subsequent developments along the Suez Canal and on the streets of Budapest. The Colombo Powers condemned the 1956 invasions of Egypt and Hungary, but did not prove to have a forceful or unified impact on the course of these crises.
Ewing’s conclusion underscores what the Colombo Powers, in the final analysis, accomplished. They legitimated the idea that Asian voices should be brought to bear on Asian issues. They put forward a multilateral diplomatic vision for Asia, which ran counter to the discredited notion that any single power could bring the continent together under one or another co-prosperity sphere. And they further opened an Asian view onto the wider world. This article strikes the right balance between acknowledging these considerable achievements while remaining alert to their limitations.

Which brings us back to Bandung. For this reviewer, Bandung’s importance is now well established. And indeed, this is the starting place for “The Colombo Powers.” This article, then, shows the significance of Colombo, which is often left out of the historiography, while enabling historians to think anew and more deeply about Bandung. No matter how brilliant or radically conceived, no one conference in 1955 could have produced a political vision by which imperialism and gendered racial capitalism might have been overturned. But in uncovering Bandung’s background in Colombo, one of the contributions of this article is to show that such a vision was not a goal of its original designers. The road from Afro-Asian Bandung to, say, Tricontinental Havana, is in this view best surveyed by keeping in mind the influence of the road that led to Bandung from Colombo. Colombo matters on its own terms, in other words, but it also matters because Bandung matters. Furthermore, although it does not speak to the question at length, this article is certainly suggestive as to colonialism’s relationship to the Cold War, in that if the Colombo Powers helped bring about Bandung and later gave at least rhetorical support to Egypt and Hungary in their hour of need, then the Colombo powers also made room for seeing the Cold War as itself a colonial process. This article is thus poised to push beyond noticing the temporal overlap between Cold War and formal decolonization and toward a clearer grasp of just what constitutes the substance of their connection. In any case, given the political outlook and elite position of the Colombo leaders, it is clear that they would not have wanted a Bandung which held up popular movements, which were nonetheless pushing ahead in this moment but which this article keeps offstage. Perhaps in future work, Ewing will make more of the social movement dimension of the political developments she charts here at the high diplomatic level. Perhaps not. Either way, as more of her work makes its way into print, it seems we will all have plenty to learn from Cindy Ewing’s research and the larger lessons she teaches us from it.


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