A Clash of Concepts

Communist Agitation and Organized Labor in Lebanon during the French Mandate

Thomas E. Jakob

When votes in the first elections held in an independent Lebanon were counted in 1943, it quickly became clear that all four candidates of the Communist Party of Lebanon (CPSL) had failed. For an attentive reader of the history of the Levant, this may at first seem strange: After all, the Communists were strongly involved in the independence movement, were able to accumulate symbolic capital during this period, and were quite moderate in their demands. Only a year later, the then chairman, Khalid Bakdash, summed up the position of the CPSL once again:

> All we demand is the implementation of some democratic reforms the masses agree on. And it is not part of our program to expropriate the national capital or the local industrialists. We assure the national owners of capital and the national industrial owners that we will not regard national manufacturing with envy and hate, on the contrary, we hope for its blossoming and development.[1]

The reasons for this defeat are certainly multiple and include the amended electoral law of 1934, in which list voting was abolished,[2] as well as the dominance of local notables (*zu'ama*) in the power structure of the country.[3] It may even be that progressive voters in 1943 proved reluctant to trust a party that had flirted with France via

1 Translation by the author from: Walid Dhu: "Al-Haraka Al-'Umaliya Wa an-Naqabiya Fi Lubnan: Tarikh Min an-Nidhalat Wa Al-Intisarat [Workers' and Trade Union Movement in Lebanon: A History of Struggles and Victories]", in: *Al-Thawra Al-Da'ima* 3 (2013), 12–39, here 14–15, who quotes Khalid Bakhdash from Tony Cliff: *International Struggle and the Marxist Tradition* (London: Bookmarks, 2001) without page reference. Another English instance can be found in Tareq Y. Ismael: *The Communist Movement in the Arab World* (London: Routledge, 2004), 18, where the Beirut-based Communist magazine *Al-Sha'ab* from 9 May 1943 is mentioned as the source.

2 Iliya Harik: "Voting Participation and Political Integration in Lebanon 1943–1974", *Middle Eastern Studies* 16:1 (1980), 27–48; Decree No. 2/LR, 2 January 1934; Decree No. 95/LR, 4 May 1934.

3 Kais M. Firro: *Inventing Lebanon: Nationalism and the State Under the Mandate* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2002), esp. chapter 4.

the Popular Front. The very idea of Communism had certainly been damaged internationally by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.[4] While most of these explanations focus on the period after 1936, this chapter scrutinizes the two decades before, especially the period between 1925 and 1936.

This chapter argues that, although the formation of trade unions was an essential part of the strategy of the CPSL, as it was for the Soviet Comintern and the left-wing international French trade union federations with which the CPSL was allied, the Communist movement failed to build a sustainable ideological and institutionalized base among Lebanese workers and the Lebanese population during that particular window of opportunity. More precisely, it failed in exporting its version of organized labor into the country.

Considering labor unions as institutions in the field of organized labor, it becomes evident that organized labor in Lebanon and Syria had traditional origins that differed from the models developed in Europe. Unions in the Levant crossed paths with Communist ideology, yet ultimately took a different direction than the Communist forces had hoped for. Labor unions, even more than political parties, proved not only to be a pivotal part of the Communist strategy of pursuing world revolution, but also turned out to be a contested and bumpy terrain. As organized labor is much older than the Communist ideology, the new current had to try to enforce organizational and institutional change upon existing forms of professional organization – and mindsets – in order to form 'red' trade unions.

The method: A configuration of variables for a single case study

By scrutinizing these forms of institutional change,[5] this chapter identifies different factors or variables, while assuming a model of multiple conjunctural causation in which variables are strongly interwoven and build on, reinforce, enable, and favor each other. This kind of method takes an unusual approach and incorporates elements from case-study research and comparative research. In a sample with n=1, a configuration in which a Boolean *and* connection is postulated is formed using a combination of variables. In that way, it is stressed that, for the time being, facing little systematization in the field, we must assume that all the factors are only necessary but not yet sufficient conditions. Unlike conventional methods of comparative

4 Julián Vadillo Muñoz: "The Lebanese Communist Party: Continuity Against All Odds", in: Laura Feliu/Ferran Izquierdo-Brichs (eds.): *Communist Parties in the Middle East 100 Years of History* (London: Routledge, 2020), 97.

5 For a more comprehensive overview of the research agenda with a dominant emphasis on how institutions emerge from and are embedded in concrete temporal processes, see Kathleen Thelen: "Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics", in: *Annual Review of Political Science* 2:1 (1999), 369–404, or, more recently, John L. Campbell: *Institutional Change and Globalization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

social science, the validity of this configuration is not to be proven via comparison with other cases, but by causal inference and elaborated internal connections between the variables, as practiced in Case Study Research (CSR) or case-oriented research.[6] The study stops one step short of a comparative configurational analysis and remains a heuristic single case analysis. Additionally, and consequently, the study does not use previously undisclosed sources but seeks to give a systematic corset to previously used literature and material.

This framework lends itself to the study, as most of the literature on the Communist movement and especially on trade unions in the interwar years, consists of atheoretical and interpretative case studies, which do not lend themselves to generalization; indeed, no significant variable-driven attempts at generalization have yet been made.[7] The choice of a case in which a particular outcome was possible – yet was not realized – is a contribution to the collective endeavor of science.[8] Consequently, the study aims at laying cornerstones for a more systematic study of Communism and organized labor in the historical Middle East.

The structure of the study is determined by methodological considerations. In order to create a solid background of knowledge to build on, the first part of the chapter introduces the reader to the world of the left spectrum from 1919 onwards, i.e., at the start of the century of internationalization of organized labor, at least in Europe.[9] Building on this, the guild dispositive[10] is introduced as the first variable. It shows how organized labor was traditionally lived in the Levant and what residues of this persisted into the middle of the 20th century. It also shows that although the Communist movement was active in and had contacts with the world of organized labor, the degree of actual control over these organizations was low. In the following part, the rise of the Nationalist current as an alternative in the field of anti-colonialism is introduced as another variable. Increased self-confidence of non-Communist

6 Charles Ragin: *The Comparative Method. Moving Beyond Qualitative and Quantitative Strategies* (University of California Press, 1987), esp. chapter 3.

7 For a comprehensive distinction between different kinds of case studies and the critique of their ontologies, see Attilia Ruzzene: *Using Case Studies in the Social Sciences. Methods, Inferences, Purposes* (PhD dissertation, Erasmus University Rotterdam, 2014), esp. chapter 1.

8 James Mahoney/Gary Goertz, "The Possibility Principle: Choosing Negative Cases in Comparative Research", in: *American Political Science Review* 98:4 (2004), 653–669.

9 Stefano Bellucci/Holger Weiss: "1919 and the Century of Labour Internationalisation", in: Stefano Bellucci/Holger Weiss (eds.): *The Internationalisation of the Labour Question: Ideological Antagonism, Workers' Movements and the ILO Since 1919* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 1–19.

10 Loosely based on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault, I define a dispositive as knowledge and institutionalized techniques that emerged in the past from necessities or junctures, and which still shape the contemporary view of decisions about economic governance and norms of conduct. For a deeper dive into the history and use of the term, see Sverre Raffnsøe/Marius Gudmand-Høyer/Morten S. Thaning: "Foucault's Dispositive: The Perspicacity of Dispositive Analytics in Organizational Research", *Organization* 23:2 (2016), 272–298.

forces through partial political successes such as the tram boycott in Beirut, as well as the Bolshevization of the CPSL at the expense of grassroots activists (which could also be regarded as a variable in itself), led organized labor increasingly away from the Communist spectrum. The third variable, the role of the French mandate and its measures in the field of labor politics, also explains much of the impediments faced by the Communist current. Three factors are scrutinized: Labor legislation, the attempts to cut ties between leftist political activists and international organizations, and the establishment of counter-institutions. Eventually, an atmosphere of inhibition about international solidarity, in which it became clear that the grassroots of the workers' movement in France showed no sympathy for putting more resources into distant, anti-colonial struggles, builds another variable.

One framework touching multiple discussions

This hypothesis touches upon at least three major discussions in the field. First, it backs Franz Borkenau's often criticized 1938 observation that the Middle East and the Arab region seemed "immune towards the attempts of the international Communist movement to penetrate its sociological structures."[11] By diving deeper into these sociological structures mentioned by Borkenau, the chapter finds that there were indeed reasons for the weakness of the Communists among the workers' movement, rooted in Levantine dispositives of organized labor, which can be traced even into the late 1930s.

Second, this chapter aims at reassessing much of the existing literature on organized labor in the Levant, which can often be characterized by a certain posthumous mythologizing of its emergence and alleged strength, as Longuenesse has already argued for Syria.[12] Literature about organized labor in Arab countries is often published by authors and institutions that are close to the remnants of Communist groups – and often a hard core left over from previously thriving organizations.[13]

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11 Franz Borkenau: *The Communist International* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, n.d.), 295; reinforced in Fredrik Petersson: *'We Are Neither Visionaries Nor Utopian Dreamers.' Willi Münzenberg, the League against Imperialism, and the Comintern, 1925–1933* (PhD dissertation, Åbo Akademi University, 2013), 82; criticized by Sana Tannoury-Karam: "Long Live the Revolutionary Alliance Against Imperialism: Interwar AntiImperialism and the Arab Levant", in: Heather Streets-Salter et al. (eds.): *The League Against Imperialism. Lives and Afterlives* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 623–648.

12 Elisabeth Longuenesse: "Labor in Syria: The Emergence of New Identities", in: Ellis Goldberg (ed.): *The Social History of Labor in the Middle East* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 99–130.

13 See, for instance, Dhu, "Al-Haraka Al-'Umaliya Wa an-Naqabiya Fi Lubnan"; Tareq Y. Ismael/Jaqueline S. Ismael: *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998); Fawwaz Traboulsi: *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London: Pluto Press, 2007).

They tend towards the merely descriptive, sometimes glorify their subject and often seem uninterested in "infer[ing] beyond the immediate data to something broader that is not directly observed," which many consider the central feature of modern social science.[14]

This also holds true for Jaques Couland, who has produced the most seminal and comprehensive work on syndicalism in Lebanon and who was an active member of the *Parti Communiste Francais* (PCF) until his death in May 2021. His writings became the major source of information on trade unionism in Lebanon in the interwar years and also found their way into the reappraisal and documentation in recent Arab publications on the topic.[15] Although it draws on many of Couland's writings as well as the sources he used, this chapter provides a more systematic, variable-based approach to deriving causal effects from the data in a framework that makes the research more transparent and replicable.[16]

Third, Communist movements and trade unions in the Middle East have so far not been affected by the discussions between traditionalists, revisionists, and post-revisionists of Cold War history. In the field of Communist party politics and trade unionism, post-revisionists, in particular, have argued with respect to the cases of the United States, United Kingdom and Canada, that the role of Moscow's interventions in the local Communist branches – beginning already in the interwar period – has been exaggerated in the literature, albeit while acknowledging Russia's limited influence.[17] Little effort has been made to scrutinize the role of organized labor in Lebanon in a post-revisionist manner that explores both local conditions and external influences at a time when new concepts of economic organization and organized labor from the outside were coming into contact with structures that had evolved within the country. From a rather traditionalist position, Louis Massignion had stated that, since 1917, ancient Muslim guilds had developed into labor unions and were tending to become dependent on the Third International. This statement,

14 Gary King/Robert O. Keohane/Sidney Verba: *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 7.

15 See, for instance, Muhammad Wahabi Djama'hi: *Al-Naqabat Al-'Umaliya Fi Lubnan. Nashatha, Tatawrha Wa Nizamha Al-Qanuni* [Workers' Unions in Lebanon. Their Emergence, Development, and Legal Regimes] (Beirut: Manshurat Zin Al-Huquqiya, 2019); Antoine Messara (ed.): *Al-Naqabat Wa Al-Hay'iat Al-Mihnia Fi Lubnan: Mubadara Wa Musharaka Fi Al-Tanmia Wa Al-Sha'an Al-'Aam* [The Trade Unions and the Organs of Professions in Lebanon: Initiative and Involvement in Public Affairs] (Amman: Al-Mu'assa al-lubnaniya lil-salam al-ahli al-da'im, 1999).

16 King/Keohane/Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry*, 8.

17 Andrew Thorpe: "Comintern 'Control' of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920–43", in: *The English Historical Review* 113 (June 1998), 637–662; John Manley: "Moscow Rules? 'Red' Unionism and 'Class Against Class' in Britain, Canada, and the United States, 1928–1935", in: *Labour/Le Travail* 56 (2005), 9–49; Bryan D. Palmer: "How Can We Write Better Histories of Communism?", in: *Labour/Le Travail* 83 (2019), 199–232.

which was later criticized by Baer in passing[18] shall be refuted completely by means of this chapter. While the chapter finds that the Bolshevization of the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon did indeed take place, it argues that the workers' movement was not affected in a lasting manner. Besides the local structures of organized labor, the reaction of the French Mandate, shaped by anti-Communism and the willingness to domesticate and eradicate organized labor, also prevented a deeper Communist penetration of the workforce.

Having said this, Lebanon is a particularly worthwhile case to use in studying these topics and as a contribution to the aforementioned discussions, as it did appear at first to undergo a seemingly radical turn in terms of the organization of the workforce. When it came under the French Mandate in 1920, the country lacked a significant industrial sector and labor-related associations were set up according to the old Ottoman Guild model. Some fifteen years later, the country witnessed large-scale and comparatively well-organized labor protests, which were often planned and coordinated by anti-colonial and Nationalist forces and local organizations. These protests placed the French Mandate under pressure and were eventually a key reason for the concessions made in the Franco-Syrian and Franco-Lebanese treaties of 1936.

A split based on theory: Labor internationalization and the ascendance of the Comintern

While the Levant was becoming the target of the great powers' mandate ambitions after the First World War, tectonic shifts in the perception and role of organized labor were occurring in Europe. This included an unprecedented level of network-building and internationalization; the century of internationally organized labor had just begun. In this politically volatile and innovative time, individuals, parties, peoples and states – of which many became mandatory powers – were confronted with profound questions towards which they had to orient and finally position themselves. It quickly became clear that the Soviet Comintern, in particular, wanted to take up the fight for the hearts and minds of the working class throughout the world. Many European governments, as well as more moderate left forces organized in the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Amsterdam International, adopted moderate to reactionary tones.

18 Gabriel Baer: "Guilds in Middle Eastern History", in: Michael Cook (ed.): *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East from the Rise of Islam to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 30.

Moscow or Amsterdam? Organized labor goes international

After the Second International – arguably the most important international leftist organization in Europe – had been paralyzed and eventually imploded during World War I, the question arose as to how the internationalization of Marxist organization in Europe should proceed. Concerning the failure of the Second International, some blamed communication problems and travel restrictions, other voices, especially from Russia, blamed the "scandalous betrayal by a majority of the official Social Democratic Parties,"[19] which had often supported their governments despite the latter's pro-war policies. Indeed, the Russian Revolution had straightforwardly hit the fault-line between moderate and radical forces, creating severe fissures throughout the movement. The founding of the third international, or Communist International (Comintern) in March 1919, the reorganization of the Second International under Social Democratic leadership in summer 1920, and the establishment of the International Working Union of Socialist Parties (Vienna Union) in February 1921 openly sealed the definitive split within the once cooperative Marxist movement. When the last two founded the Labor and Socialist International (LSI) in 1923, the bipolarity of international Marxist oriented currents was finally established.

These developments had repercussions for the international trade union movement. In meetings in February 1919 and July 1920, the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) was resuscitated – with a stronger role for the British and French organizations. As before the war, it was still dominated by social-democratic currents.[20] Russian trade unions were also invited, but only responded by attacking the initiative.[21] With most of the trade unions in Russia under their control, the new Soviet leaders viewed them as a pivotal pillar for achieving their ideological aims. However, as early as January 1918, the Russian Trade Union Congress found that the "Russian Trade Union Movement cannot fulfill its gigantic task without entering into the closest association with the international trade union movement." But in the perception of the Comintern leaders and leading Bolsheviks, the most dangerous enemy of the Comintern was neither the League of Nations nor the Second International, but the IFTU. In their thinking, this "Amsterdam International", as it was also called due to the location of its founding conference it held from 26 July until 4 August 1919, was the only body outside the Comintern that was

19 Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov Lenin: *The collapse of the Second International* (Glasgow: The Socialist Labour Press, 1922), 9.

20 For an elaborate account of the re-foundation of the IFTU, see Geert Van Goethem: *The Amsterdam International. The World of the International Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU), 1913–1945* (London: Routledge, 2017), 13–19.

21 Stefano Bellucci: "The Ascent of African Labour Internationalism: Trade Unions, Cold War Politics and the ILO, 1919–1960", in: Stefano Bellucci/Holger Weiss (eds.): *The Internationalisation of the Labour Question* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 6.

capable of mobilizing mass support.[22] As a consequence, the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU) was founded in Moscow in 1921.

For the Soviet Union and the Comintern, trade unions became the battleground on which they wanted to overpower the "reformist" tendencies. The Amsterdam International was very aware of that strategy. Consequently, and keeping that attitude during the entire interwar period, the IFTU declared as early as May 1921 that membership of the RILU and the IFTU was mutually exclusive.[23] The relationship between the Comintern and the RILU, on the one side, and the ILO, IFTU, and League of Nations, on the other, remained frosty throughout the twenties – and the race for predominance among the workers of the world had only just begun.

The Comintern's overall strategy towards the "East"

The Soviet leaders, however, had their problems in setting up connections to the Levant. Nevertheless, in contrast to the IFTU and the LSI, the Bolshevik leadership showed considerable interest in the global spread of Communist ideas early on, including to the "East" or "Orient", which was a very broad concept in those days, covering everything from the Levant to Japan.

Shortly after the October Revolution, an "appeal to the Muslims of Russia and the East" was drafted by Stalin, then Commissar of Nationalities, and also signed by Lenin. It emphasized anti-colonialism, declared all international agreements between European powers concerning the East for void, and – long before the Wilsonian credo – promoted the self-determination of nations.[24] In September 1920, the Congress of the Peoples of the East was held under the auspices of the Comintern in Baku. The invitation was published in *Izvestia*, the mouthpiece of the Bolsheviks, on 3 July of the same year, directly addressed the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean.[25]

However, besides some utterances of good will and the call for a "holy war" against imperialism, the congress blatantly showed how weak the Soviet connec-

22 Reiner Tosstorf: *The Red International of Labour Unios (RILU) 1920–1937* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 52, 92.

23 Edward Hallett Carr: *Socialism in one country 1924–1926* (London: Macmillan Press, 1964), 526.

24 Council of People's Commissars: "Appeal to the Muslims of Russia and the East", *Izvestiia*, 7 December 1917, 1–2.

25 The wording was: "Peasants of Syria and Arabia: the English and French have promised you independence, have occupied your country, they are dictating their laws to you, and you, after liberation from the Turkish Sultan and his government, have now been made slaves of the governments of Paris and London, which differ from the Sultan's only in that they held you down more firmly and plunder you more severely." (Mohammed Nuri El-Amin: "The role of International Communism in the Muslim world and in Egypt and the Sudan", in: *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 23:1 (1996), 29–53, note 9 quoting *Izvestia* (3 July 1920)).

tions in the region still were. None of the Arab visitors (of which the official records counted only three, though some participants did not specify their nationality in the survey) is noted to have played a decisive role in the congress,[26] and eventually, Vice-Commissioner for Foreign Affairs Karl Radek – an intimate of Lenin's – took charge of criticizing the behavior of Britain and France in Syria.[27]

This poor performance was no coincidence. After the 1917 revolution, many of Russian Empire's experts on the Orient had been marginalized, and knowledge about the region was still scarce among the cadres of the party.[28] Realizing the need for a deeper understanding of the region, the All-Russian Scientific Association of Oriental Studies within the Commissariat of Nationalities was founded in December 1921. Its "New Orientalism" focused on researching the interests of the laboring masses in the colonies as a means of eventually winning the leadership in potential revolutionary struggles.[29] On a more practical level, the Communist University of the Toilers of the East was established the same year to train Communists in the anti-colonial movements.

Reality beyond theory: Organized labor in Lebanese history

By the late 1920s, both the trade union movement and the Communist movement lagged behind what local organizers – and observers from the Comintern – had hoped to achieve in the Levant. At the Fourth Congress of the Red International of Labor Unions in 1928, the resolution on Syria noted that trade union organizations were scarcely present in the desired form. At the same time, however, it was also noted that – in Syria, unlike in other Middle Eastern countries – labor organizations outside the Marxist spectrum were also scarce and, if they existed, underdeveloped.[30] Such an assessment is better understood if we recall that the definition of organized labor or labor unions is quite specific in the ideological jargon of the

26 Enver Pasha, whose appearance at the congress was highly controversial in any case, claimed to be the representative of revolutionary organizations of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Tripoli, Egypt, Arabia, and India. This, however, turned out to be a fiction designed to gain allies for his fight against Mustafa Kemal.

27 *Congress of the Peoples of the East. Baku September 1920. Stenographic Report* (London: New Park Publications, 1920), 41–42.

28 Mikhail Rodionov: "Profiles under pressure. Orientalists in Petrograd/Leningrad, 1918–1956", in: Micheal Kemper/Stephan Conermann (eds.): *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies* (London: Routledge, 2011), 47–57.

29 Craig Brandist: "Marxism, early Soviet oriental studies and the problem of 'power/knowledge'", in: *International Politics* 55 (2018), 809–811.

30 Jaques Couland : *Le Mouvement Syndical au Liban 1919–1946* (Paris : Editions Sociales, 1964), 152.

young Bolsheviks and did not cover forms of professional organization in the Levant. Thus, I argue in this section that a structural remainder, a dispositive, remained rooted in Lebanese society and inhibited the spread of Communist ideas among its workers organizations.

The dispositive of the Guilds

Depending on the definition, workplace or craft organization has a history that dates back to the 9th century in the Middle East.[31] A conglomeration of profession-based organizations working to improve the position of their members is today grouped together under the diffuse term "guild". This term includes corporations known as *ḥirfa/ḥiraf*, *ṣinf/aṣnâf*, *mihna/mihan*, or the youth organizations called *futuwwa*.[32] Each of these bodies had a system of initiation and a concern for training and teaching, for passing on their ideology and each organization had internal systems of secrecy and discipline. Nonetheless, the nature, organization, first appearance, and especially the independence of guilds is historically contested. For instance, some authors found examples suggesting that these organizations were politically autonomous by exploring literature about the *hisba* (a market inspection)[33] others claimed that market inspectors (*muhtasibs*) regulated the markets with the help of *'arifs* from different professions, but that these *'arifs* were only agents for policing and not true representatives of their professions.[34]

Nonetheless, at the end of the 19th century, three major organizational features of the remaining guild organizations in the Levant can be determined as constituting a dispositive distinct from what would become the dominant current of organized labor in Europe. First, they encompassed nearly all members of a trade, from the apprentice and simple worker to the owners of private shops or manufactories. Issues between masters and workers could be addressed in special committees, and the organizations provided a possibility for upward mobility within a hierarchical bureaucratic structure. Second, mechanisms of labor action were known, however, these mechanisms were invoked against the outside and not within the craft. Guilds, often represented by the *sheikh al-kar* (guild master), entered negotiations and me-

31 Louis Massignon : "Les corps de métier et la cite islamique", in : *Revue Internationale de Sociologie* 28 (1920), 473–489.

32 Abbas Hamdani: "The Rasa'il Ikhwan Al-Safa' and the Controversy about the Origin of Craft Guilds in Early Medieval Islam", in: Nelly Hanna (ed.): *Money, Land, and Trade. An Economic History of the Muslim Mediterranean* (London: Routledge, 2002), 51–65, here 61.

33 E. Ashtor-Strauss: "L'administration urbaine en Syrie medievale", in: *Rivista Deli Studi Orientali* 31 (1959), 711–728.

34 Samuel Miklos Stern: "The Constitution of the Islamic City", in: Albert Hourani/Samuel Miklos Stern (eds.): *The Islamic City. A Colloquium* (Oxford: Brune Cassier, 1970), 25–50.

diation over disputes between customers and guild members.[35] If that mediation failed, it could be ordered that that particular customer should be excluded from using any service provided by the guild's members until the dispute had been solved in a satisfactory manner. Third, the power that emerged out of this collective action and the hierarchical structure made it possible for the organizations to exert political influence and propose policies to the ruling elite. Conversely, local notables had a long-term interest in staying in good standing with the guilds and their leadership, and in drawing them to their side in political and administrative matters. The ruling Ottoman elites had even been known to support and instrumentalize socio-economic grievances and labor struggles: Sultan Abdülhamid II, who was well-known for his authoritarian rule, in fact supported the workers' strike against the French port administration in the Port of Beirut in the early 1890s. He also used strikes in tobacco facilities owned by the international Régie consortium across the empire to secure loyalty from the workers.[36]

Looking across the Levant of the early 1920s, the classical guilds had been severely weakened by the influx of cheap imported goods and by Ottoman policies and legislation or had disappeared completely in their traditional form. But some form of organizing along professional lines remained, and mutual-aid associations emerged. Although these have been considered forerunners of labor unions,[37] they had little in common with workers-only unions of the kind promoted by the Red International of Labor Unions, for instance. Such associations were indigenous initiatives and tended to be instituted in a top-down manner, often with the leadership of intellectuals. A good example is the Workers' Union in Zahlé. It was institutionalized openly in 1923 and was instigated by the journalist Shukri Ghanim and the publisher Ibrahim Al-Rai.[38] These organizations included employers and employees without distinction. Furthermore, journalists, poets, and local notables were also often members. Such mutual-aid associations heavily outnumbered orthodox Marxist organizations.[39]

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35 Muhannad Moubaydin: *Sheikh Al-Kar. Al-Sulta Wa-Al-Suq Wa-Al-Nas Fi Dimashq Al-Uthmaniyya* [Master of Crafts. The Authorities, the Marked, and the People in Ottoman Damascus] (Al-Rayyan: Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press, 2018).

36 Can Nacar: "Labor activism and the state in the Ottoman tobacco industry", in: *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46:3 (2014), 533–551.

37 Couland, *Le Movement Syndical au Liban 1919–1946*, 91–96.

38 Djan Bakhash : "'Zahle al-fataa' wa-al-'amal al-niqabi ['Young Zahle' and Trade Union Work]", in : Antoine Messara (ed.) : *Al-Naqabat Wa Al-Hay'iat Al-Mihnia Fi Lubnan : Mubadara Wa Musharaka Fi Al-Tanmia Wa Al-Sha'an Al-'Aam* [The Trade Unions and the Organs of Professions in Lebanon : Initiative and Involvement in Public Affairs] (Amman : Al-Mu'assa al-lubnaniya lil-salam al-ahli al-da'im, 1999), 105–106.

39 In the remainder of the text, unions comprising employers and employees are labeled *mutualist unions*.

A union is not a labor union: Levantine organized labor and the Communist Party

In 1924, aided by the Palestinian Communist party, on whose behalf Joseph Berger visited Beirut, Yusuf Yazbek, Fuad Shimali and a dozen intimates formed the Lebanese Peoples' Party (*Hizb al-Sha'ab al-Lubnani*, hereafter LPP).[40] A Commission for Union Organization (*al-Lajnah al-Naqabiyah al-'Uliya*; CUO) was also established in 1925. Eventually the Communist Party of Syria and Lebanon (CPSL) was formed, absorbing the LPP, and it was admitted to the Comintern at its Sixth Congress in 1928 in the presence of its leader, Fuad Shimali, who was urged to put more effort into the formation of trade unions in the country.[41]

Back in Lebanon, Shimali soon became a pivotal figure in the setting up of the Tobacco Union of Bikfaya, which would become an important ally of the Communist Party. He had gathered experience organizing labor in Egypt, where he was a militant member of the Communist Party – which had been affiliated with the Comintern since 1922 – and of the General Confederation of Workers of Alexandria which, as Egypt's leading trade union organization, was affiliated to the Red International of Labor Unions. The tobacco union, set up in the factories of the French dominated Régie, is claimed as the first workers-only union in Lebanon.

Beyond that union, the CPSL claimed relations with 12 associations (railway workers, tailors, hairdressers, carpenters, tramway workers, chefs and housekeepers, musicians, construction workers, weavers, coachmen and drivers, shoemakers, and teachers) though there is no evidence that these organizations had a workers-only approach. Couland labels them "formal associations (*associations formelles*)".[42] However, if they were legal, there were two possibilities: Either they came under the 1909 Ottoman Law of Associations – which would have made them rather mutual aid associations – or they came under the Ottoman Law of Professional Organizations of 1912 – which would make them professional associations, including all levels of hierarchies of a profession. However, as these laws were rarely enforceable in the late Ottoman period, few craft organizations – whether closer to the guild ideal or that of a Western union – adhered to the requirements of the law. Many organizations lacked written rules or any legal status until the late 1930s.[43]

40 Couland, *Le Movement Syndical au Liban 1919–1946*, 105.

41 Ibid., 148–149.

42 Jaques Couland : "Mouvement Syndical En Situation Coloniale : Le Cas Du Liban", in : *Le Mouvement Social* 59 (1969), 57–76.

43 Geoffrey D. Schad: "Colonial Corporatism in the French Mandated States: Labor, Capital, the Mandatory Power, and the 1935 Syrian Law of Associations", in: *Revue Des Mondes Musulmanes Et de La Mediterranee* 105 (2005), 5–32.

Moreover, it seems reasonable to assume that these organizations were aware of how much political weight they possessed, and used this to search for the best deal, changing partners as necessary. As a consequence, while they had links with the Communists, they were probably not under their influence. An intuitive example is the above-mentioned driver's association – which actually consisted of a motley assembly of garage owners, repair staff, drivers, and vehicle owners. The association was politically close to the industrialist Henri Fir'awn, who also became their honorary president in 1930. He managed to establish trust, for instance, by offering reasonably priced insurance against car accidents, and Fir'awn and the union leadership exchanged favors.[44] These organizations did not obey the Communist Party or their ideology, and Communist figures were not exclusively recognized as negotiators and spokespersons. For instance, the Nationalist Yusuf Al-Sawda was the leading spokesman and mediator during the strike of streetcar and electricity workers that was joined by seven other professions in 1925.[45] We can conclude that the nature of organized labor in the Levant, where a guild dispositive was involved, hampered the spread of Communist influence during the interwar period.

The Nationalist current as a competitor in anti-colonialism

Besides the often-persistent traditional forms of organized labor, the rise of Nationalism as alternative to Communism for those who sought to push the anti-colonial struggle posed a problem for the Communist tendency. This variable is interconnected with the guild dispositive, as workers' organizations tended to choose allies freely, even if much of the existing literature suggests that they were affiliated to the Communists. The burgeoning Nationalist movement was probably the biggest beneficiary there, especially after it discovered organized labor as a means of mobilizing against the French mandate. The Communists, in turn, did not agitate aggressively against the merger of Nationalist forces and organized labor due to Comintern policy, which allowed and welcomed nationalist agitation as a means of weakening imperialist rule.

The boycott of the Beirut tramway lines in 1931 was the first time that the city's workers managed to present a united front and coordinate collective action, and unrest quickly spread all over the region, including to the cities of Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus. However, though some unions, including the typographers' union, were

44 Thomas A Pianka: *An Appraisal of the Labour Movement in Lebanon* (PhD dissertation, American University of Beirut, 1963).

45 Carla Eddé : "La mobilisation populaire á Beyrouth á l'epoque du mandat (1918–1943) : L'apprentisage progressif de la participation", in : Nadine Méchouchy/Peter Sluglett (eds.) : *The British and French Mandates in Comparative Perspective* (Leiden : Brill, 2004), 623–648, here 628.

decisive to the protests, the main organizational efforts were not made by the Communists and their allies. An independent boycott committee was set up, which was not organized along trade lines, but around the confessional urban communities. The immediate, direct, and powerful impact of these self-organization measures surprised even their initiators. Committees developed strategies, communications and propaganda were quickly developed and distributed (especially with the help of the typographers' union), and internal security forces were even formed to maintain the pacifist character of the protests.[46] This experience led various actors from the non-Communist spectrum, who increasingly saw organized labor as a means of putting pressure on the mandate power, to take a greater interest in sustainable organizing and mobilization. The anti-colonial Nationalist current, especially around Riad-Al-Sulh, gained influence and attractiveness and became a real alternative to the Communists in the field of anti-colonialism.[47]

The policy of soft indoctrination and Lebanese organized labor

The tramway boycott and the increase in unofficial strikes sparked new interest in labor organization, and more associations were founded as a consequence. While the Red International of Labor Union's 1924 call for more trade unions went largely unheeded, the organization of workers increased markedly across a broad spectrum from Nationalism to Communism in the 1930s. In particular, professional white-collar associations of physicians, pharmacists, and lawyers, which tended to display Nationalist inclinations, emerged in 1934.[48] Moreover, during this period, the Communists and Nationalists began to collaborate in several sectors, with the former following Moscow's recommendations and relinquishing many of the goals of orthodox Marxism. For instance, the official lists of demands issued in the course of labor protests in the tobacco sector – which were also supported by trade unions and the Communist Party – stressed the right of Lebanese Capital to invest in the monopoly.[49] In 1931, the Syrian Lebanese Communist Party and the Palestinian Communists held a joint congress to adopt a resolution in accordance with the theses of the 6th Comintern World Congress (July–September 1928).[50] These theses included the division of countries into three categories, of which Lebanon would fall into the third, the colonial countries, which displayed a certain degree of industrialization but were yet not ready for the dictatorship of the proletariat. To achieve the

46 Ibid., 633–634.

47 Pianka, "An Appraisal of the Labour Movement in Lebanon".

48 Couland, *Le Movement Syndical au Liban 1919–1946*, 222.

49 Dhu, "Al-Haraka Al-'Umaliya Wa an-Naqabiya Fi Lubnan", 15.

50 Taline Minassian Ter : *Colporteurs du Comintern. L'Union soviétique et les minorités au Moyen-Orient* (Paris : Presse de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1997), 167.

latter, these countries had to pass first through a stage of a bourgeois-democratic revolution that would eventually lead to a social revolution.[51]

The degree of organization was given another push by the formation of a committee of trade union centers in 1936. Led by the prominent typographer Mustafa Al-Aris, who had recently finished a two-year prison sentence, the committee became a pillar of resistance to the Mandate. The committee was open to sharing its knowledge and to connecting and coordinating the existing workers organizations within a revolutionary and Marxist-inspired framework. Mutualist and Nationalist unions could therefore seize the opportunity to join or cooperate.[52] This was the result of discussions that had already taken place in the Soviet Union before the founding of the Red International of Labor Unions and was actually aimed at dealing with social-democratic trade unions. Unionists worldwide were encouraged to stay in their existing trade unions, even if these were led by reformists, and were urged to refrain from forming their own, purely Communist counter-unions. The idea was to drag the existing and nascent union organizations – which represented a great step forward by their sheer existence according to Lenin – into the Communist spectrum.

The typographers' association: Communist influence, yet not revolutionary

An example of how these infiltration tactics worked out can be observed in the case of the typographers' association. Originating in a form that resembled the Ottoman guild model, the association grew increasingly professional throughout the 1920s, becoming an important opponent of the French mandatory power and its policies. Indeed, when France took over the Mandate of Syria and Lebanon in 1919, civil society was ready to hit the ground running: Spurred by the 1909 Law of Associations, the printing of all kinds of media flourished and became an important means of communication for the young civil society, but also for the administration, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals from all the many communities. In the next 22 years, the French authorities would register 401 associations in and around Beirut compared to 31 registered associations in total under Ottoman rule before the war, and 338 in the rest of Lebanon.[53]

51 Jay Lovestone: "The Sixth World Congress of the Communist International", in: *The Communist* 7 (1928), 663–664.

52 Couland mentions rather casually in passing that the licensed workers' organizations in the committee's network were often on the mutualist or nationalist spectrum. He writes that the committee managed to coordinate all licensed labor organizations – yet up to 1936, it was only mutualist organizations that had received a license. His fixation on the typographers is also noteworthy here (Couland, *Le Movement Syndical au Liban 1919–1946*, 221–231).

53 Elizabeth Thompson: *Colonial Citizens. Republican rights, paternal privilege, and gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 91.

The typographers' association grew in importance against the backdrop of this flourishing civil society and with the introduction of bureaucratization. After it had repeatedly objected to the mandate leadership regarding the increasing number of bans on magazines, newspapers, and journals, the decisive break came in 1930: When no concrete result was achieved in negotiations, even though the association had access to a number of prominent MPs and ministers, the radical wing led by Muhi ad-Din al-Kuza gained the upper hand in the elections to the leadership bodies.[54] The typographers' union would thus become one of the closest allies of the Communists and is often used as an example of Communist influence in the young trade union movement. This was particularly true in the time of activity of Mustafa Al-Aris. He was a member of the CPSL, chairman of the CUU, and would later become Lebanon's delegate at the World Trade Union Federation (WFTU).[55]

Nonetheless, although the association was visible, First, there is little evidence that it had a significant impact on Lebanese society as a whole. The union had some 400 members in a country of approximately 800,000 inhabitants with an illiteracy rate of about 50% (about 70% of them Muslims).[56] Bearing that in mind and recalling that the first important Communist figures were well educated members of the upper strata of society – something that also applies to the trade union movement generally – it is clear that Communism and workers-only unionism remained an intellectual matter – and of interest largely to intellectuals.

Second, even if it can be argued that there were revolutionary elements inside the association, reformist or even just pragmatic currents also played a decisive role. Against that background, a member of the CPSL complained at the 7th Congress of the Comintern in Moscow in 1935:

> In preparing the typographers' strike in 1933, we tried to send a list of 15 demands, whereas there were only three demands which interested the workers: freedom for their dissolved trade-union, eight hours of work, and regular payment of salaries. It is true that we succeeded in submitting our list to a vote in the strike meetings, but in practice, it was only on the basis of the three demands that the workers struggled for ten days.[57]

54 Couland, *Le Movement Syndical au Liban 1919–1946*, 169–180.

55 Couland, "Mouvement Syndical En Situation Coloniale", 67, note 13.

56 Hasan Qubaysi: "The State and Public Education in Lebanon", in: M. Bashur (ed.): *Al-Dawla Wa Al-t'alim Fi Lubnan* [The State and Education in Lebanon] (Beirut: Lebanese Association for Higher Educational Studies, 1999).

57 Report on the Syrian Communist Party, supposedly delivered at the Congress' 10th session, as a continuation of the discussion of the reports by Pieck, "On the activity of the Executive Committee of the Communist International", and by Angaretis, "On the activity of the International Control Commission". As the reports of smaller parties were not included in the final reports, it does not appear in most collections about the Congress. An original can be

Hence, although the leadership of the typographers' union cooperated with the Communist party, the members displayed limited interest in their ideology. Similar to other professional associations, they benefited from the experience of the Communist Party, but considered this only one opportunity for cooperation among many with other political players. Even the anti-colonial attitude that had fascinated intellectuals such as Yazbek could also be found among Nationalists, especially after the success of the Beirut tramway boycott. Ties between the typographers and Nationalist leaders also grew stronger, as seen, for instance, in the fact that the Nationalist leader Riyadh Al-Sulh wrote the opening article for the third issue of the important workers' magazine Al-Waqtah. Moreover, the appeal of workers-only unionism remained limited, and mutual-aid associations and associations of the old Ottoman guild type still made up more than 80% of workers' organizations in Damascus of 1937.[58] Often organized in a hierarchical and traditional manner, and with links to local notables, these organizations were closer to the Nationalist current than to the kind of red, workers-only union desired by the Comintern.

The positive and negative repercussions of Bolshevization

The organizational skills that made the Commission for Union Organization an interesting platform and partner for all politically active members of Lebanese society were also a result of the professionalization of the party. Just as France feared, this went hand in hand with a greater influence on the part of Moscow. The insights of the "New Orientalism" and Moscow's collected experiences supporting Communist organizations in colonized countries had produced significant knowledge about the region and its internal dynamics. The Bolshevik leadership was increasingly eager to use that knowledge as a resource in attempts to subordinate independence movements across the colonial world to its foreign policy.[59]

From the late 1920s, we find evidence that the CPSL became more dependent on Moscow and indeed came increasingly under its control, just as much of the traditionalist literature would suggest. The influx of money from the Comintern solidarity funds and the Red International of Labor Unions played their role in strengthening organizational structures and building capacity. Comintern influence also started to become visible in terms of personnel decisions: Yusuf Yazbek was expelled from the CPSL in 1926, allegedly on the urging of Elias Teper, an influential pro-Moscow leader of the Communist Party of Palestine, in order to change the leadership from the intellectual Yazbek to the worker Shimali. Shimali,

found in: Stanford Libraries, Hoover Archives, Archives of the Soviet Communist Party and Soviet State (RGANI), Fond 494, Opis' 1, delo 186.

58 Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 102.

59 Brandist, "Marxism, early Soviet oriental studies".

who was crucial for setting up first ties to the Comintern, was ousted by Khalid Bakdash in 1932. The latter had joined the Party in 1930 at the age of 18, was recruited by agents of the Comintern at the University of Damascus, and graduated from the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in 1934. His ascendancy to Secretary-General of the CPSL was accompanied by serious accusations against Shimali, with Bakdash stating among other things that the other was an agent of the French police. The policy of proximity to the Soviet Union – and hence to the policies of Stalin – that followed in the era of Bakdash's leadership would make his companion Rafiq Rida attack the Communist Party after World War II as a "satellite of a foreign power".[60] The tone did indeed become overwhelmingly pro-Moscow and pro-Stalin. Addressing Stalin as "great comrade, beloved leader of the world proletariat", the CPSL sent a telegram from a meeting in Damascus on 6 November 1937 stating:

> On the victories won by the USSR during the 20 years under Your wise leadership, a leadership of genius, [the meeting] sends You, who laid the first mighty cornerstone in the cause of freeing all the oppressed peoples of the world, heartfelt greetings and their most sincere and warm wishes.[…] We wish You, our dear and great comrade, long life, so that you may lead the land of the Soviets to Communism and help the working masses of the entire world to free themselves from capitalist exploitation, fascist barbarism, and the imperialist yoke.[61]

This turn towards Moscow had some repercussions. With the ouster of Shimali, the party lost a central figure for the workers' movement who had set up the first workers-only unions. Moreover, with the ouster of Yazbek, a founding father of the party, the CPSL lost an important and well-connected contact among the Lebanese intellectuals. Hence, by focusing on the Communist agenda and as a result of Comintern's influence, the CPSL cut ties with grass-root activists who were initially attracted by Communism due to its anti-imperial rhetoric. In the 1980s, Yazbek stated with hindsight that the fascination of young intellectuals of his generation for the Soviet Union had anti-imperialism as its main cause and that it "must be understood against the background of the early 1920s with the West in occupation of the Arab lands and the Soviet Union a revolutionary state extending its hand to the rest of the oppressed world."[62] Moreover, Yazbek and Shimali were two of the members of

60 Michael W. Suleiman: "The Lebanese Communist Party", in: *Middle Eastern Studies* 3:2 (1967), 134–59, note 16.

61 Fridrikh I. Firsov/Harvey Klehr/John Earl Haynes: *Secret Cables of the Comintern, 1933–1943* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 10.

62 Ismael/Ismael, *The Communist Movement in Syria and Lebanon*, 12.

the five-person internal trade union committee of the CPSL and thus responsible for links to the world of organized labor.[63]

The Nationalist current was often supported by notables and a large part of the intelligentsia. Less comprehensive and ideologically overloaded than its Communist counterparts, it also had a clear anti-colonial agenda and prominent leaders in Europe. It provided fierce competition for the Communists, which can also be seen in party figures. As all parties appear to exaggerate equally, the comparison of their claimed membership numbers is an interesting indicator of influence. The increase of CPSL members from 2000 in 1939 to about 10,000 in 1944 is impressive. Still, in contrast to the membership of the Syrian Nationalist Party (44,000), the Phalangists (35,000), and even the Sunni-dominated Najjada (13,000),[64] the Communists' numbers appear somewhat less spectacular.

The strategy of the French Mandate: To domesticate, cull and isolate organized labor

Besides the guild dispositive and competition from the Nationalist current in the fields of both unionization and anti-colonialism, the Communists – and organized labor – also struggled with the French Mandate authorities. Their harsh measures were part of a general mindset, as Anti-Communism was integral to the political culture of the late Third Republic and made its mark in colonial policy.[65] They also have to be understood against the backdrop of the concept of the *Mission Civilisatrice*, which was well described by, of all people, left-wing deputy Leon Blum:

> The thought of France, the French civilization, it is by other means that we want to see spreading in the world. […] We admit that there can be not only a right, but a duty of the so-called superior races, […] to attract to themselves the races which have not reached the same degree of culture and civilization. […] and to make them benefit by a kind of duty, solidarity and human protection of what they themselves have been able to conquer by the effort of science, industry and thought.[66]

The will to guide, protect, and "educate" colonial peoples and teach them the benefits of Western civilization was an important factor in understanding the thinking of

63 Jehan Saleh: *The Making of a Resistance Identity: Communism and the Lebanese Shi'a 1943–1990* (PhD dissertation, University of Edinburgh, 2015), 147.

64 Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 234–35.

65 Martin Thomas: "Albert Sarraut, French Colonial Development, and the Communist Threat, 1919–1930", in: *Journal of Modern History* 77:4 (2005), 917–955, here 919.

66 Translation by the author : Chambre des députes : 12° Législature – Session Ordinaire de 1925, 2° Séance du 9 Juillet 1925, *Journal Officiel de la République française*, 10 July 1925, 3316.

large sections of the French public. The diligent, at times military pursuit of the *Mission Civilisatrice* – itself a discriminatory concept that legitimizes exploitation – in combination with other racist attitudes had real impacts that would directly affect the work of the Communist parties in Lebanon and other Mandates and colonies. Large sections of French politics and society simply did not trust the colonial peoples to organize themselves independently. The mandate power and its leaders were therefore inclined to suspect emerging Nationalist organizations of either Communist control or Communist influence. This was perpetuated, as the French secret police (*Sûreté générale*), which provided the model for establishing secret police corps in the colonies, was headed from 1924 by a determined anti-Communist in Jean Chiappe. As a result, the power of popular nationalism was grossly underestimated and the dominance of Communist ideology overestimated to the same degree.[67] True, the Communists in Lebanon became very visible during the Syrian uprising by enticing French soldiers and local volunteers/recruits to rebel against their commanders and to refuse to fight in Syria[68] – which encouraged *Sûreté* officials to conflate anti-colonialism with Communist influence even more.[69]

But focusing on the Communists and no other indigenous forces was based on a misconception. By 1925, the Communist Party of Lebanon had about 20 members[70] and barely any international contacts. At that time, the clandestine Jewish-Palestinian party remained the only palpable Communist force in the region and gave as much assistance to cells in Syria and Lebanon as its resources would allow – which did not amount to much. At a secret meeting in Tel Aviv in 1927, after four years of affiliation, the party's chairman, Haim Auerbach, noted the difference between expectations and reality regarding Comintern support:

> We were the only Communist front in the Arab Orient and in the absence of anybody else we had to pay attention to every question. All the duties in relation to the revolution fell on our shoulders. […] We were not glad of our relations with the International; no replies were regularly made to our letters, no decisions were regularly passed in regard to the matters affecting us and we used to receive very small assistance.[71]

67 Thomas, "Albert Sarraut", 933–935.

68 Tannoury-Karam, "Long Live the Revolutionary Alliance Against Imperialism", 116.

69 Thomas, "Albert Sarraut", 934.

70 Aleksandr B. Rezikov: "The Strategy and Tactics of the Communist International in the National and Colonial Question", in: Rostislav Ulyanovsky (ed.): *Comintern and the East: Struggle for the Leninist Strategy and Tactics in National Liberation Movements* (London: Routledge, 2011), 158.

71 Haim Auerbach cited by John Batatu: "Some Preliminary Observations on the Beginnings of Communism in the Arab East", in: Jaan Pennar (ed.): *Islam and Communism: A Conference Sponsored by the Institute for the Study of the USSR at the Carnegie International Center, New York City, June 25, 1960* (München: Institut zur Erforschung der UdSSR e.V., 1960), 46–69, here 57.

The (mis-)perception of anti-colonialism as an exclusively Communist endeavor tied up much of the resources of the French authorities and helped the spread of Nationalist ideologies rather than Communist ideas among politically active progressive workers. But the French Mandate also attempted to limit and control organized labor in general, especially because strikes and boycotts proved costly. The French authorities therefore pursued a threefold strategy: Seeking to limit the scope for organized labor as much as possible by means of specially created laws, targeting the international contacts of the Communist movement, and simultaneously creating mandate-friendly counter-institutions.

Labor legislation as a strategic pillar against a labor movement

Alongside security measures and surveillance, the Mandate also attempted to suppress the emergence of a strong workers movement by legislative means. Although the International Labor Organization became a member of the Permanent Mandates Commission, and although its first president, Albert Thomas, stated that Syrian labor conditions were rapidly approaching the level of industrial countries and thus that solutions implemented in industrial countries should be applied here as well, the Mandate refrained from reforming labor legislation. The Ottoman laws of association of 1909 and of professional associations of 1912 – which were tailored for mutualist associations that included both employers and employees – remained in force.

In 1924, the French authorities even refused to enact reforms – actually demanded by the International Labor Organization – concerning working-hours legislation, occupational accidents, and measures against unemployment. The official reasoning behind the refusal was claimed to be the potential risk of abuse and the need to avoid jeopardizing the economic development of the region.[72] In 1927, the Lebanese government was dominated by pro-French delegates, who rejected a proposal to hold employers responsible for particular occupational accidents because, as it was argued, such a law would harm nascent industries.[73] This reasoning was used recurringly until the end of the French Mandate, and influenced, for instance, the Mandate's opposition to Syria's Legislative Decree No. 152 of 18 September 1935. During that period, approximately one quarter of Lebanon's workforce was employed in the industrial sector,[74] but reports to the League of Nations stated that the establishment of social protection laws would equal to "arm workers against their employers".[75] However, the decree was far from

72 Couland, *Le Movement Syndical au Liban 1919–1946*, 79.

73 Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 63.

74 Ibid., 101.

75 Couland, *Le Movement Syndical au Liban 1919–1946*, 244.

being as progressive as particularly the Communist sections of the labor movement would have liked. Indeed, the decree did not include the formation of workers-only unions but promoted a concept that was close to that of the old guilds. Members had to practice the same crafts in a given district (Article 3), while there could be only one association for any trade in a district, and no association was allowed to extend its activity beyond its own province (Article 4).[76] Interestingly, the French administration responsible for Beirut and Mount Lebanon also criticized the 1935 law on the ground that it would destroy the old corporations and ensure preponderance of workers.[77] This can be read as based on fear of harming important allies who drew their own political support from professional organizations. These ties were particularly important, as a second tactic consisted of creating a bulwark in the form of counter-institutions. This targeted Nationalists, in particular, who knew how to mobilize workers – or how to profit from workers' protests – but was also aimed at a perceived Communist threat. Part of this strategy took the form of legislation: Although the Ottoman laws lagged behind what either the Comintern or the International Labor Organization recommended, in 1926, they were kept and even amended further to give the Mandate the power to dissolve any union that was not organized according to the stipulations of the Ottoman laws.[78]

Limiting contacts to international organizations

Aware of the dangers that could arise from a mobilized – and probably indoctrinated – labor movement, the Mandate implemented a policy of repression, education, and restriction. Contact with internationally organized labor was one factor that often boosted the young leftist movement. The formation of the first union committee in 1925, for instance, was suggested by – among others – André Herclet, one of the United General Confederation of Labor (CGTU)[79] leaders and a functionary of the RILU, who had made a brief trip to Beirut shortly before.[80]

76 For a detailed discussion of the Syrian law, see Schad, "Colonial Corporatism".

77 Couland, *Le Movement Syndical au Liban 1919–1946*, 244.

78 Pianka, "An Appraisal of the Labour Movement in Lebanon", 80.

79 The Comintern-affiliated United General Confederation of Labor (*Confédération générale du travail unitaire*) was initially a pacifistic and revolutionary minority that had split from the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT) in 1922. The split was a result of differences among reformist socialists, anarchists, and communists that occurred in the early years of the French Communist Party (*Partie Communiste Francais*; PCF), which was founded in 1920. The PCF itself was a splinter group of the French Section of the Workers' International (*Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière*; SFIO), which had been founded in 1905 and had always remained close to the orbit and policies of the Second International.

80 Couland, *Le Movement Syndical au Liban 1919–1946*, 121.

The French Communist Party had become increasingly active in national liberation matters and backed the first North African Congress, which was held in Paris in 1924.[81] The CGTU also participated in the anti-colonial struggle in North Africa, in line with the theses and program of the Comintern and Red International of Labor Unions. The infrastructures and traces the CGTU left behind would later help to form the powerful *Union Génerale des Travailleurs Algerien* (UGTA), which was to play a decisive role in Algeria's war of independence.

The French authorities were eager to limit contact with these organizations, which were subject to the maximum level of surveillance in the motherland. This was particularly true during the critical time of the 1925–1927 Syrian uprising – which was indeed when the connection between the *Parti Communiste Francais* and the CPSL was established for the first time. In clandestine meetings between the young CPSL and the Communist Party of Palestine (CPP), it was decided to immediately send Abu Zayyam to Paris, Berlin, and Moscow to demand that the relevant Communist parties and the Comintern provide support in the form of weapons, personnel, money, and public relations.[82]

The CPSL attempted to act as a middleman between the PCF and the rebels under Sultan Atrash in Syria, but this plan was thwarted by the close monitoring of the mandate power. In January 1926, Yusuf Yazbek was intending to transmit documents and information on the revolt that he had obtained from his close friend Ali Nassir al-Din to Paris in an effort to gain support from the French Communist Party and Shakib Arslan. However, before his journey, he was incarcerated by the French authorities. His arrest alongside other prominent figures of the Communist and Nationalist movements not only prevented the flow of information and resources between French leftist groups and leftist groups in the Levant, it also stopped Yazbek and Shimali from attending the first meeting of the League against Imperialism (LAI) in Brussels in 1927.[83] The close surveillance and detention of prominent figures from the Communist movement was also used in other cases, continuously and in a needle-like manner, to prevent contact with international networks. When Shimali, Mayodan, and Bakdash attempted to join the Sixth CGTU Congress in November 1931, they were denied exit from the mandate territory. Mustafa Al-Aris, the prominent leader of the typewriters union who had also actively entertained international contacts, also spend most of the first part of the 1930s in prison.

81 Jaan Pennar: "The Arabs, Marxism, and Moscow. A historical survey", in: *Middle East Journal* 22:4 (1968), 433–447, here 438.

82 Tannoury-Karam, "Long Live the Revolutionary Alliance Against Imperialism", 116.

83 For the background of the LAI, see the penultimate section of this chapter.

The establishment of counter-institutions

The impediments to international contacts set up by the Mandate were accompanied domestically by a struggle over interpretive hegemony and predominance in the trade union sector. These measures can best be understood against the background of French economic policy. When France was granted the mandate over Syria and Lebanon in 1920, it had already invested in infrastructure and set up business connections within the country. As early as January 1919, the Chamber of Commerce of Marseilles had hosted a well-attended conference on the future of Syria.[84] One strategy of the mandatory power was to make the country economically profitable as soon as possible.

Lebanon's Maronite Christian families were expected to play a pivotal role in that. Under Ottoman legislation, Christians were not allowed to occupy a range of professions in crafts and public administration and had often become skilled and successful merchants as a result. Facing uncertainty and perceiving other ethnic and confessional groups as a threat, the Maronites and other minorities in Greater Lebanon were eager to collaborate with the new Mandatory power. In 1921, the General Workers Party of Greater Lebanon (*Hizb al-'Ummal al-'Am fi Lubnan al-Kabir*; GWPGL) was founded and broadly promoted by the French authorities. It resulted from an initiative of a General Workers Union (*Ittihad al-'Umal al-'Am*).[85]

But this organization was not what a contemporary European would have considered to be a trade union. First, in line with Lebanese or Ottoman traditions and laws, it included both employers and employees. Because the official text of the Mandate stipulated the development of an "organic law", which was to include local legislation as much as possible, much of Ottoman legislation was still in force – and would remain in force until the end of the mandatory era. In this context, Ottoman Law No. 8, issued on 27 April 1912, addressed the establishment of professional associations in general, and mainly revamped and democratized the structures of the few remaining guilds. It did not, however, allow for workers-only professional associations.

Second, the membership fees of five francs for passive and 15 francs for active membership of the GWPGL were beyond the reach of most simple workers. As a consequence, the organization consisted mostly of notables, lawyers, physicians, and merchants, and the membership base did not significantly extend beyond Christian and bourgeois circles within the capital.

At the same time the mandatory power sought to limit opportunities to organize in a legal manner and restricted the freedom of movement of pivotal figures of the

84 Couland, *Le Movement Syndical au Liban 1919–1946*, 67.

85 Ibid., 83–85.

workers' movement outside the designated framework. In 1930, revolutionary propaganda was punished with five years of forced labor. In 1931, public meetings were banned, and a year later the provision of premises for conspiratorial meetings was also made a punishable offense by Decree 41/L. As almost none of the workers' associations was technically legal, that decision affected the bulk of organized labor. In 1933, the powerful typographers' association was banned.

The old organizational forms of organized labor were also attacked. Decree 284/LR of December 1934 limited associations of working men to persons practicing the same or similar trades.[86] This was a direct attack on many workers' organizations that emerged out of local mutual aid associations with a broad local base, such as the workers' solidarity association in Zahlé. Moreover, the Mandatory power tried to steer the emergence of new organizations by implementing a policy of selective licensing and capacity-building favoring societal currents that were supportive to the mandate and eager to establish counter-organizations to the Nationalist and Communist unions. In this context, the authorities were especially supportive of labor organizations founded along sectarian lines such as the Christian Union of Employees of Trade and Industry (*al-Djama'iya al-Misihiya al-Mustakhdam al-Tidjara wa-al-Sana'iya*).[87]

Internationally organized labor and the boundaries of solidarity

One final variable that may be invoked, especially in comparison with other countries, concerns the increasing weakness of international forces in Europe in terms of their capacity to promote the emergence of workers' organizations.[88] The failure of the Comintern and its affiliated organizations to penetrate the trade union landscape to gain momentum for a worldwide revolution was also apparent in other countries. A leading force against any kind of unity between the Red International of Labor Unions and the International Federation of Trade Unions were the German trade unions, which rejected all overtures.[89] While European trade unions in the core lands of the Amsterdam International did gain a voice inside the International Labor Organization, for organized labor in the Mandates, such options did not exist. Moreover, international solidarity on the anti-colonial spectrum soon reached its

86 Pianka, "An Appraisal of the Labour Movement in Lebanon", 81.

87 Dhu, "Al-Haraka Al-'Umaliya Wa an-Naqabiya Fi Lubnan", 16.

88 Vivid examples which might give a good comparison are Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. For Algeria and the role of internationally organized labor in a historical perspective, see e.g., René Gallissot: "Syndicalisme Ouvrier Et Question Nationale En Algerie: Les Positions de La C.G.T.U. Dans Les Annees 1930–1935", in: *Le Mouvement Social* 66 (1969), 3–9, here 3.

89 Tosstorf, *The Red International of Labour Unios*, 609–673.

limits, as the socio-economic and socio-political problems of the European continent remained in the foreground and grew constantly more important.

High hopes, sobering performance: The International Labor Organization and the colonial clause

After World War I, the forces that were less close to the radical Marxists and more skeptical about the October Revolution had also managed to put the issue of workers' representation on the international agenda. The foundation of the International Labor Organization in Paris in February 1919 had already been a central demand of those currents that also were the driving force behind the foundation – and reawakening – of the International Federation of Trade Unions. The ILO was set up as a permanent institution of the League of Nations and aimed at "securing world peace on the basis of social justice," according to its constitution, which is annexed to the Versailles Treaty as Chapter 13.

Nevertheless, two features of the ILO were constantly under attack, especially from the Soviet side: First, it was evolutionary and reformist rather than a revolutionary organization. From the very beginning, it had a tripartite structure, in which delegations to the annual international labor conferences (the organization's policy-making body) were composed of two government representatives, one representative of employers, and one trade-union representative. The organization's executive also followed this tripartite pattern. Second, the organization was accused of actively contributing to upholding the status quo of the mandates and colonies. According to Article 421 of the Treaty of Versailles, mandatory powers were to ensure that ILO conventions were in force and respected in all their territories – except where "the Convention is inapplicable owing to the local conditions or subject to such modifications as may be necessary to adapt the Convention to local conditions." Although this "colonial clause" – whose basic tone was very redolent of the *Mission Civilisatrice* mindset – disappointed some members of the IFTU, the federation nonetheless constantly stressed its support for the organization. This, of course, made the rhetoric of Comintern functionaries against the trinity of the Amsterdam International, IFTU, and League of Nations even sharper.

Despite the colonial clause, the hope of spreading organized labor – albeit more along social democratic lines – to non-European regions was long maintained. At the 1921 International Labor Conference, it was agreed that the countries under mandate were probably the ones where the ILO could "accomplish work of the most importance and the greatest urgency" as "labor is unorganized and the workers defenseless."[90] In 1929, however, a resolution was adopted that urged the office in

90 Susan Zimmermann: "'Special Circumstances' in Geneva: The ILO and the world of non-metropolitan labour in the interwar years", in: Jasmien van Daele et al. (eds.): *ILO Histories.*

Geneva to focus more on the collection of data about organized labor. It was a result of the observation of just how few delegates from the non-metropolitan world were attending the International Labour Congress.[91] Indeed, while the ILO Bureau of Statistics had significantly increased its capabilities to collect economic data, information about labor organizations – and their representatives – remained scarce. This resulted in an underrepresentation of non-European emissaries. As a consequence, the ILO agenda tended to focus on Europe – and therefore also mostly on the countries that had sent the greatest numbers of delegates – as that was the way they could get the most credit from their direct clientele.

In the meantime, the topic of anti-colonialism had also triggered discussions among the followers of the Amsterdam International, though there was little will or ability in that organization to engage or even adopt a united position. At the Fourth International IFTU Congress in August 1927, the British President of the IFTU, A.A. Purcell, publicly accused the IFTU Secretariat of focusing too much on the ILO and on Europe. Among other shortcomings, in Purcell's view, too little attention had been paid to important issues such as the expansion of the trade union movement in Asia and Africa. He also attacked the federation's anti-Russian stance, which he considered a serious mistake.[92] Yet many delegates did not see the need to foster the development of trade union structures in regions under mandate rule, frequently also referring to the leadership role that the ILO was supposed to take. But the effectiveness of the ILO was largely thwarted by the colonial clause, and the organization was unable to fulfill many of its self-proclaimed initial goals.

Anti-colonialism, the Rif Crisis, and the limits of solidarity

The so-called 'colonial question' led to numerous divisions inside the French Socialist spectrum. It revolved around the matter of when and how colonized territories should be granted independence and integrated into international solidarity networks. These discussions were carried out against the backdrop of Marxian dialectics and modernization theory, which in certain circumstances considered states to be either not yet ready for proletarian revolution, or not yet ready for administrative self-determination per se.

As far as the French Socialists and their trade union movement are concerned, it can be argued that "two socialisms, two unionisms and perhaps even

Essays on the International Labour Organization and Its Impact on the World During the Twentieth Century (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 221–250, here 228.

91 Ibid., 244.

92 Patrick Pasture: "The interwar origins of international labour's European commitment (1919–1934)", in: *Contemporary European History* 10:2 (2001), 221–237, here 228–229.

two communisms"[93] existed. The 1913 French Section of the Workers' International Congress in Brest had already shown how little coherence there was on the colonial question among French socialists at that time: While Édouard Vaillant and Alexandre Desrousseaux called for complete withdrawal from the colonies, Francis de Pressensé argued that French socialism should return to the old policies of gradual assimilation and autonomy, as they were best suited to peoples who were "still in an infantile period" of their development.[94] Both the currents that remained inside the SFIO after the split of 1920 as well as the CGT adhered to that reasoning during the time of the Mandate. The CGT started to form trade unions in regions under French administration in North Africa, but these unions consisted almost exclusively of civil servants or European employees and were, thus, regarded as "French".[95]

While one group of socialists supported the restrictive policies towards organized labor in the colonies and the Levant, the more progressive side around the *Parti Communiste Francais* soon realized that agitation in the colonies would be limited by growing unwillingness to support such measures on the part of French society, and especially in the French trade union movement.

This split was mercilessly exposed during the Rif Crisis, especially at its peak in 1925, and was particularity evident in the United General Confederation of Labor, where the fear of losing even more members to the already numerically superior CGT – if the domestic economy was no longer to be the number one priority – dominated among the delegates. United General Confederation of Labor leaders met four times to assess the prospects for an anti-war general strike as called by the PCF in late 1925, but the member unions' willingness to support this diminished. Moreover, the union federation was already pursuing an expensive project in North Africa, where it had managed to become the dominant union federation among the local population in Algeria.

Information about the problems the French working class had in following calls for an anti-imperialist struggle soon arrived in the Soviet Union. Joany Berlioz, the Paris representative of the Red International of Labor Unions, wrote in a review of the whole anti-war campaign to Moscow that the evacuation and fraternization slogans alienated many workers, reduced the influence of the SFIO left, and thus lent strength to conservative currents. In fact, these conservative forces were dominant within the SFIO: For example, the spokesman of the Moroccan SFIO section, Emile Kahn, warned that the withdrawal of French troops from the protectorate would lead

93 René Gallissot : "Présentation : Question coloniale, question nationale", in : *Le Mouvement Social* 78 (1972), 3–5.

94 Daniel Gaido/Manuel Quiroga: "Marxism in the Age of Imperialism – the Second International", in: Alex Callinicos/Stathis Kouvelakis/Lucia Pradella (eds.): *Routledge Handbook of Marxism and Post-Marxism* (London: Routledge, 2020), 51–65, 57.

95 Bellucci, "The Ascent of African Labour Internationalism", 355.

to a massacre of Europeans. Moreover, Kahn also claimed that Muslims only understood violence and that the insurgents would therefore interpret any offer of negotiation or any other conciliatory gesture as a sign of weakness. Thus, in his highly pessimistic report, Berlioz went on to give the damning assessment that the anti-war campaign had failed because the French workers "despised" the Arabs and Riffian Berbers, as a result of which no solidarity could be expected.[96]

In neighboring Germany, events in Syria caused the organization Workers International Relief (*Internationale Arbeiterhilfe*) to plan a campaign "Against Atrocities in Syria". This was based on successful aspects of the previous "Hands off China" campaign, such as petitioning government agencies, collecting signatures and money, and holding both public demonstrations and international congresses. Although cooperation with the Amsterdam International had failed, the "Hands off China" campaign been very successful in spreading knowledge about anti-imperialism and in mobilizing activists, especially in Germany. Internationally, too, declarations of solidarity were issued across Europe and even the United States.[97] Moreover, it had successfully attracted the attention of the Comintern.

Nonetheless, just like the *Parti Communiste Francais*, the "Against Atrocities in Syria"-Committee failed to gain a foothold in the Levant. The committee eventually merged into the League Against Imperialism, founded in 1927, which aimed to promote anti-colonial work in a non-aligned manner across the left spectrum. Although this attempt was promising at first, there was a split in 1929, when representatives from the Amsterdam International and the International Federation of Trade Unions felt that Moscow's influence was too strong. As a result, most of their representatives left the league, including prominent individuals such as Edo Fimmen, who was IFTU president until 1923. The LAI continued its work until the mid-1930s, with an Executive Committee that also included Shimali.[98] However, its importance was marginal.

Concluding remarks and outlook

The "Theses on the Communist International and the Red International of Labor Unions" issued as a resolution at the Third Congress of the Communist International in 1921 warned that the representatives of bourgeois nationalism were eager to disguise their own interests as class-interests, thus diverting the proletarian unions

96 David H. Slavin: "The French Left and the Rif War, 1924–25: Racism and the Limits of Internationalism", in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 26:1 (1991), 5–32, here 22–25.

97 Petersson, *Willi Münzenberg, the League against Imperialism, and the Comintern*, 74–78.

98 Ibid., 354.

from the immediate tasks of organizing along class lines and stalling progress towards the proletarian revolution.[99]

Yet even if there is an element of truth in this statement, things were probably more complicated. What in Communist terms is labeled bourgeoisie nationalism surely played a role. But after all, the forms of organized labor in the 1920s and 1930s in Lebanon and in European countries were worlds apart. Mutualist unions that echoed the dispositive of ancient guilds prevailed, and the main appeal of the Bolshevik ideology, its anti-colonialism, was soon also offered by Nationalists, bourgeois and local notables. Moreover, this current had fewer problems with the old form of organized labor. The Bolshevization of the Communist cells and parties in the region, which excluded grass-roots activists, certainly played into the hands of the Nationalist currents. However, this very Bolshevization was also an alarm signal for the French mandate power, which spent considerable resources on hindering the development, spread, and networking of the new ideology. This form of anti-Communism was the result of thinking rooted in a sense of racial superiority and an accompanying disbelief in the organizational capacity of the colonial peoples. Boosted by the inability of the International Labor Organization and the anti-colonial movement to actually gain a foothold in the region and spread their versions of organized labor, Communist influence and institutional change in organized labor was severely limited. Formalizing that variable-outcome relation, the following configuration can be established:

- Presence of Guild Dispositive (AND)
- Presence of Emerging Nationalist Current (AND)
- Presence of Anti-Communist Focus of Mandatory Power (AND)
- Absence of Extended International Support
- → Weakness of Communist Influence in Organized Labor

Future research can build upon this configuration and challenge, amend, refute, or confirm the variables and their interconnectedness. In comparison with other countries, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, but also in Europe, many questions may arise against the background of that configuration. Can it be concluded that the role of the adversary, played in other countries rather by social-democratic labor organizations, was played in Lebanon by the mutualist associations which still carried much of a guild dispositive inside of them? Is that a reason, why the collaboration in the field of organized labor in North Africa seems to have been more successful? Are the local notables in Lebanon and their connection to Nationalism comparable at any level to other Middle Eastern or European countries? Are there dif-

99 John Riddell (ed.): *To the Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 953–965.

ferences between countries under the French and the British mandates, e.g., Iraq or Jordan? And how did connections between international organized labor and these other countries develop? Many questions remain, which shows that the more systematic approach taken in this chapter yields more scientifically falsifiable hypotheses for theory building than much of the rather descriptive and ideology-bound literature in the field up to now.