

THE MEERUT CONSPIRACY

*A Microcosm of Shifting British Attitudes
Toward Imperialism*

ABSTRACT

Kashif Azam's (NYU '19) paper contextualizes the Meerut Conspiracy Case, which began in British India, within the broader realm of popular support for the British Empire. The legacy of the Meerut Conspiracy Case with respect to interwar imperialism has been largely overlooked, but through an analysis of parliamentary discussions, newspaper reports, letters, pamphlets, and theater, Azam illuminates the scope and nature of a profound transformation within the British psyche regarding imperialism. The initial Meerut arrests were met with enthusiastic support in the press, and only minor qualms among leftist organizations. However, a series of government blunders, beginning with a jurisdictional conflict and culminating in tyrannical sentencing, transformed the Conspiracy Case from an anti-communist crusade to a rallying cry for anti-imperialism. The Conspiracy Case was a public humiliation for the British Empire during the interwar period and revealed the tensions that would chip away at the U.K.'s imperial status in succeeding decades. The British would grant the crown colony independence less than fifteen years after the trial concluded. Meerut was a footnote in the grand scheme of the Indian independence movement; however, by examining the case through the lens of British popular support, Azam reveals how the case embodies a microcosm of shifting British attitudes towards imperialism. This shift was not instant, nor caused entirely by events in Meerut, but ultimately it contributed to the dismantling of the British Empire in India.

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Pamphlet cover calling for the release of the Meerut Conspiracy prisoners. [1]

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MEERUT

RELEASE
THE PRISONERS!



INTRODUCTION

ON THE MORNING of March 20, 1929, British authorities in India took action against a plot to overthrow the Raj.¹ Across the cities of Bombay, Calcutta, and Poona, thirty-two plotters were arrested and charged with “conspiring to deprive the King of his sovereignty in India.”² Among the accused were three Englishmen: Ben Bradley, Lester Hutchinson, and Philip Spratt, all of whom were accused of being agents of the Comintern invited to travel to India with “the specific task of engendering a revolutionary esprit de corps within India's own growing trades union movements.”³ The British Raj hoped to use the subsequent trial—referred to in the press as the Meerut Conspiracy—to stamp out Communist influences in India in one swift strike. Unfortunately for them, the trial was anything but swift. The prosecution dragged on for four years, becoming the longest trial in Indian history and costing the British Empire £120,000 from start to finish (the equivalent of over £7,450,000 in 2017).⁴

The arrests were initially met with jubilation, a symbol of the might of the British Empire in the face of destabilizing forces following the Great War. However, as the trial dragged on, public opinion shifted to favor the defendants—who categorically denied their involvement in any conspiracy. By 1933, both domestic and

international activists decried the Raj as tyrannical and accused them of purposefully misrepresenting the accused as Bolshevik agents. Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the preeminent political figures in the Indian subcontinent, remarked that the prosecution was “trying to understand without great success what communism and the various internationals are.”⁵ The Meerut trial saw a convergence of British anti-communist and colonial policy.

This inquiry into the Meerut Conspiracy examines the reception of the Conspiracy Case in British popular media in order to uncover the evolution of British receptions of the event throughout the trial. British sympathies underwent a significant shift from 1929 to 1933, from anti-Communist to anti-imperialist. In order to contextualize the analysis within the greater body of Meerut scholarship, I first survey the developments and limitations in the present historiography.

An Alternative Reading of the Meerut Case

WHILE THE MEERUT CONSPIRACY features prominently in histories of Indian Communism and Nationalism, scholarship on the impact of the event in Britain is virtually nonexistent.⁶

1 The British Raj was the central administrative apparatus of the Indian subcontinent. The system was instituted after the Indian Sepoy Rebellion against the East India Company in 1858. Queen Victoria officially adopted the title “Empress of India” in 1876, and subsequent British monarchs would maintain that title until the decolonization and subsequent partition of India in 1947.

2 Meerut Case, “*Daily Telegraph* (London), Apr. 12, 1933, p. [11]. *The Telegraph Historical Archive*, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/8HmZL4>. Accessed November 7, 2018.

3 John Callaghan, “Indian Communists and Trade Unionists on Trial: The Meerut Conspiracy, 1929-1933,” British Online Archives. Accessed November 26, 2018. <https://microform.digital/boa/collections/36/indian-communists-and-trade-unionists-on-trial-the-meerut-conspiracy-1929-1933>.

4 Reuter, “Famous Indian Trial Ends.” *Daily Telegraph*, Jan. 17, 1933, p. 9. *The Telegraph Historical Archive*, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/8HmGB3>. Accessed November 7, 2018.

5 Michele L. Louro and Carolien Stolte. “The Meerut Conspiracy Case in Comparative and International Perspective,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, & the Middle East* 33, no. 3 (2013): 310-15. doi:10.1215/1089201X-2378103.

6 References to the Conspiracy can be found in a plethora of texts on Indian independence and Indian communism. While a comprehensive review would be unfeasible, I have provided a few examples below.

“While by the Meerut trial, the British government succeeded in neutralising communists, breaking up the communist-led Workers and Peasants Party, the more radical national elements were won over by the Congress leadership through its new mass movement.”: Irfan Habib, “The Left and the National Movement.” *Social Scientist* 26, no. 5/6 (1998): 3-33. doi:10.2307/3517546.

“Meerut was the place of many events of all India importance connected with the Indian freedom struggle. It was the place from where the Revolt of 1857 started. The other events of all India importance connected with the nationalist movement were, trial of labour leaders in the so-called Meerut Conspiracy...”: Girija Shankar, “Meerut and the Nationalist Movement: Summary,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 34 (1973): 61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44138690>.

Today, interpretations of the Meerut Conspiracy range widely from communist and nationalist perspectives, to more social lenses such as youth activism and trade unionism. The traditional narrative—that the trial backfired for the British and bolstered anti-imperialist movements—has recently been undermined. However, a significant shortcoming in the recent scholarship is that the authors ignore the impact of the trial as a global phenomenon, instead restricting the analyses to India and its institutions and political movements.⁷

In “Separating the Wheat from the Chaff,” Ali Raza bewails that “the literature [of the Conspiracy] generally contends that the Raj failed in its ob-

jective to administer a fatal blow to ‘communism’ in India. Instead, it is commonly thought that the trial actually provided a fillip to communist politics in India.”⁸ Raza challenges a traditional narrative that portrays the accused as veteran Communists, arguing that reality was far less black-and-white. His work expands the horizon of acceptable topics of analysis, but does not dislodge the Indo-centric framing of the Conspiracy Case.

Michele L. Louro and Carolien Stolte attempt to remedy Raza’s ambiguity in “The Meerut Conspiracy Case in Comparative and International Perspective.” The authors build on Raza’s complaint and make two crucial arguments about the nature of



Calcutta, India 1930s. By Marc Ryckaert [2]

Modern historiography on the subject is particularly limited, with the most recent group of articles being published simultaneously in the *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (CSSAAME) in 2013. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/cssaame/issue/33/3>. Another significant contribution to the literature is *Insurgent Empire*, in which Priyamvada Gopal describes the significant role of colonial political movements in shaping and informing later domestic movements. Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent* (New York: Verso Books, 2019).

7 Barring a brief mention in Luoro’s 2017 article on the Johnstone Affair in which she states “For such an extensive and significant trial, little has been written on the Meerut Conspiracy Case.” Michele Louro, “The Johnstone Affair and Anti-Communism in Interwar India,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 53, no. 1 (January 2018): 38–60. doi:10.1177/0022009416688257.

8 Ali Raza, “Separating the Wheat from the Chaff: Meerut and the Creation of ‘Official’ Communism in India,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, & the Middle East* 33, no. 3 (2013): 316–30. doi:10.1215/1089201X-2378112.

the conspiracy as well as the scholarship surrounding it. Their first assertion echoes Raza in claiming that the Meerut prisoners were not a monolithic entity, and that the accused “varied widely in their political affiliations within India and internationally.”⁹ Thus, any future scholarship on the subject should refrain from making such broad generalizations. Their second claim is that the “trial remains a significant but understudied aspect of histories of leftist politics in South Asia,” and emphasizes the influence of the trial in both domestic and regional politics. Louro and Stolte argue that the Meerut Conspiracy is not an end, but rather a means to an end.¹⁰ Although it provides an international perspective, the work fails to account for global developments such as Stalinism and the Great Depression.

In “Where National Revolutionary Ends and Communist Begins,” Luoro tackles the notion that the Meerut trial uniformly furthered Indian anti-imperialist movements, and in “Trade Unions on Trial: The Meerut Conspiracy Case and Trade Union Internationalism,” Stolte provides an “alternative reading of the Meerut case as situated at the heart of anti-imperial internationalism in the interwar years.”¹¹ Stolte illuminates the ideological differences present within the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) at the time of the trial and demonstrates how the Meerut trial exacerbated these rifts. She develops a framework that distinguishes the Meerut Conspiracy Case as a focal point for histories of colonialism, international communism, and Indian nationalism, and concludes that “paradoxically, it was the Comintern, the primary target of the Meerut case, that helped drive a wedge between the [League Against Imperialism] and [the Indian National Congress].”¹² Both authors attempt to interve-

ne into existing historiographical interpretations of the Meerut Conspiracy, but fail to acknowledge the impact of the incident outside the subcontinent.

A final addition to the recent historiography on the Meerut Conspiracy Case comes from Franziska Roy and Benjamin Zachariah. In “Meerut and a Hanging: ‘Young India,’ Popular Socialism, and the Dynamics of Imperialism,” the authors discuss another dynamic of the conspiracy—the youth movement. Roy and Zachariah reiterate the divisive nature of the trial, and assert that “wider solidarities [among the Indian public] around the persecution of anti-imperialists... broke down under the weight of the many political divergences that manifested themselves at the time [of the trial].”¹³ Critiquing the traditional historiography, the authors claim that the trial succeeded in damaging the Communist movement in India; however, this analysis solely pertains to India.

In my study, I analyze the impact of the Conspiracy Case on British sentiment. British anti-imperialist movements first came to the forefront during the 1890s, a time when the public learned of atrocities committed by British soldiers during the Boer Wars, such as Emily Hobhouse’s investigation into Lord Kitchener’s concentration camp program.¹⁴ Expressions of anti-imperialism in the domestic theater varied dramatically from mild critiques of colonial policy in newspapers to mass demonstrations and organized protest. These growing sentiments were not limited to private citizens, as anti-imperialist—and even outright communist—Members of Parliament began to hold more sway in office following the war.¹⁵ While the Meerut Conspiracy would eventually come to dominate anti-imperialist activism, initial reporting of the arrests framed it as more of an anti-communist operation.

9 Ibid., 313.

10 Ibid.

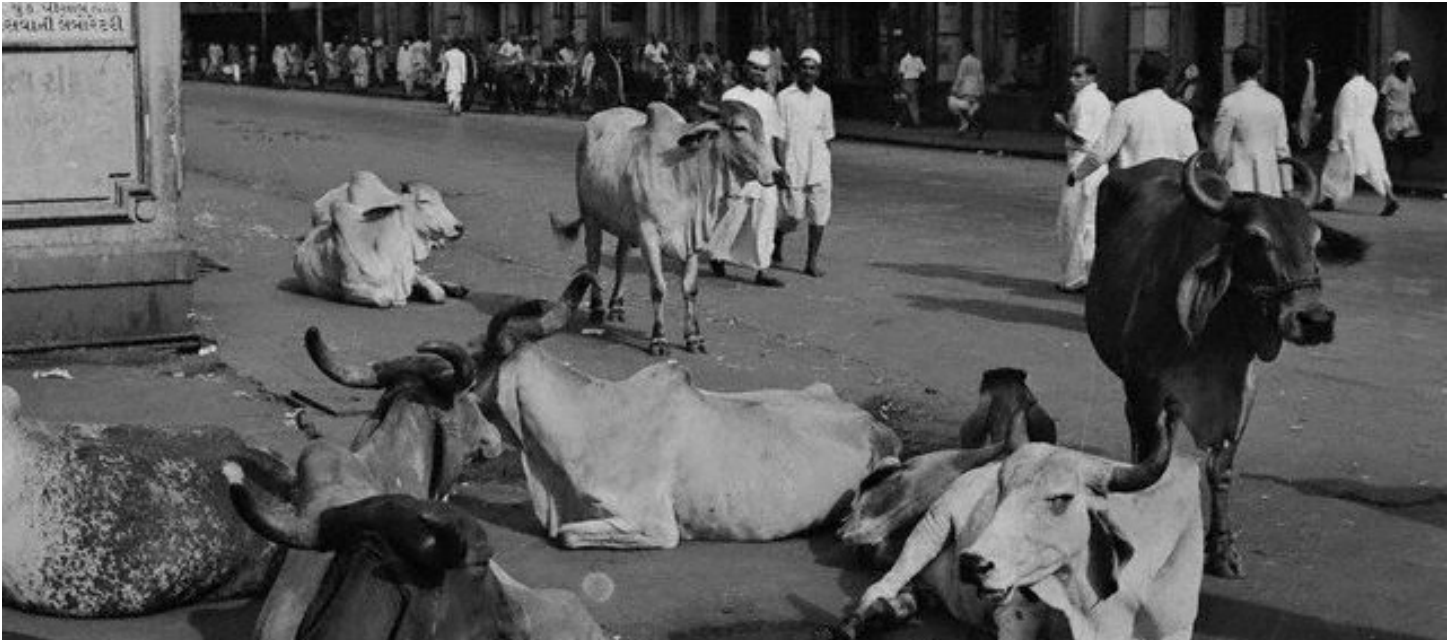
11 Carolien Stolte, “Trade Unions on Trial: The Meerut Conspiracy Case and Trade Union Internationalism, 1929-32,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, & the Middle East* 33, no. 3 (2013): 345-59. doi:10.1215/1089201X-2378130.

12 Michele L. Louro, “‘Where National Revolutionary Ends and Communist Begins’: The League against Imperialism and the Meerut Conspiracy Case,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, & the Middle East* 33, no. 3 (2013): 331-44. doi:10.1215/1089201X-2378121.

13 Franziska Roy and Benjamin Zachariah, “Meerut and a Hanging: ‘Young India,’ Popular Socialism, and the Dynamics of Imperialism,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 3 (2013): 360-377.

14 Perhaps the most prolific historian on the subject of domestic perception of the British Empire is Bernard Porter. His scholarship has raised significant questions and offered concrete solutions about the nature of the British Empire throughout its history. For more information see: Bernard Porter, *Critics of Empire: British Radical Attitudes to Colonialism in Africa 1895-1914* (London: Macmillan, 1968). Alternatively see: Bernard Porter, *The Absent-minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

15 The most pertinent example of this phenomenon is Lester Hutchinson’s electoral victory in the 1945 elections. However, even before this, members of the Labour Party and Communist Party were represented in the House of Lords, and were very vocal critics of Imperial activities.



Bombay, India 1930s. By Unknown [3]

"TO DEPRIVE [HIS MAJESTY]"

AFTER THE RUSSIAN revolution of 1917, the specter of communism threatened Europe's existing power structures. Vladimir Lenin exacerbated the fear of a global communist revolution when he called for Communists of all countries to "rally around the revolutionary Third International."¹⁶ The establishment of the Communist International (Comintern) created an apparatus through which the radical ideology could proliferate, creating an existential threat that endangered the other European powers. The British government's anti-communist policy during the period is often overshadowed by the overt political repression of the United States. But the idea that "traditions of political toleration in the UK forestalled the extremities of political repression that culminated in the McCarthy era in the U.S." has been thoroughly debunked.¹⁷ In "Covert and Overt Operations: Interwar Political Policing in the

United States and the United Kingdom," Jennifer Luff points out that between 1927 and 1946, authorities in the United Kingdom carried out secret investigations of "thousands of unwitting industrial workers suspected of Communist sympathies...many [of whom] were fired or blacklisted from government employment."¹⁸ A key characteristic of these operations was that they were "distinguished by their invisibility and their lack of accountability," which allowed the British apparatus to avoid the public spotlight that hindered their counterpart in Washington.¹⁹

These British interwar anti-communist operations coincided with the arrests of the Meerut conspirators in 1929, but the Meerut Case was not successfully silenced by authorities. While the British Intelligence Services were never directly implicated in Meerut, news of the arrests magnified the government's persecution of ideological dissidents. Yet, initially this spotlight was largely celebratory. In fact, when news of the arrests first came to light, the British press and public—barring the most radical circles—enthusiastically celebrated the capture of the communist plotters.

Drawing upon geographically and ideologically different newspapers assists in revealing the initial and evolving public stances towards the Meerut Conspiracy. *The Manchester Guardian*, a left-leaning publication born out of the industrial hub of Manchester, was one of the

¹⁶ John Riddell, "Founding the Communist International: Proceedings and Documents of the First Congress," March 1919 (New York: Pathfinder, 1987), 8.

¹⁷ "Contrary to popular and historical accounts, the interwar British security regime was considerably more stringent than the American one." See Jennifer Luff, "Covert and Overt Operations: Interwar Political Policing in the United States and the United Kingdom," *The American Historical Review*, Volume 122, Issue 3 (June 2017): 727-757.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

largest papers of the time.²⁰ In contrast, *The Telegraph* was a staunchly conservative publication based in London, boasting around 90,000 readers—almost double that of *The Manchester Guardian*.²¹ The *Times of India*, a Bombay-based English paper was—and remains—the largest English language paper on the subcontinent, and its articles provide a much more comprehensive account of the Conspiracy Case. Combined, these publications offer a glimpse into the public perception of the trial in mainland Britain, tracking shifts in public attitudes.

News of the Meerut arrests was first published in the *Guardian* on March 21, 1929 under the headline: “Alleged Plot in India. Official Blow at Communists.”²² The article listed standard details of the event such as the charges pressed, the locations of the arrested, notable figures among the accused, and also mentioned that a “considerable stir has been caused all over India by the action of the authorities.”²³ Meanwhile, *The Telegraph’s* coverage of the initial arrests on March 21, 1929 remained muted. A small segment of the paper—half of which was occupied by the title—read: “Indian Police and ‘Red’ Agitators. Raids in several cities. Many Arrests. ‘Waging War on the King.’ Treason Charge.”²⁴ In stark contrast, the *Times of India’s* coverage of the arrests was far more comprehensive than both *The Telegraph’s* and *The Manchester Guardian’s*, touching on both the Communist affiliations of the arrested and the public disturbances caused by the police activities. On March 21, 1929 the *Times of India* led with a straightforward headline: “A Round-Up of Communists. Labour Leaders Arrested.”

The phrasing used to describe the arrests in each publication indicates their political sympathies. For example, the *Guardian* introduced doubt into the legitimacy of the arrests by describing them as a reaction to an “alleged” plot, not so subtly implying that the entire operation was based on shaky ground. The *Guardian* also called attention to the public disturbances caused by the arrests. By shifting the conversation from Communism to civic disruption, the *Guardian* exposed its leftist sympathies. The *Times of India* contradicted the *Guardian’s* claims, remarking that “although nine persons were arrested and about forty premises searched in the space of a few hours, the raid was carried

out with the greatest secrecy—so much so that not a soul in the sleeping city even suspected what was afoot.”²⁵ Unsurprisingly, *The Telegraph* made no mention of the public disturbances caused by the mass arrests; instead, they dedicated a majority of the article to highlighting the communist affiliations of the accused, such as “Philip Spratt, a British Communist, who has figured in Indian labour troubles for some time past.”²⁶ *The Telegraph’s* coverage of the arrests projected an atmosphere of nonchalance, especially when compared to accounts in other papers, and a factor behind this dismissive tone could be related to the aforementioned activities of the British intelligence apparatus. The *Times of India* provided a far more nuanced account of the arrested. Regarding Phillip Spratt, they wrote that “[he was] connected to the labour movement in Bengal.”²⁷

On March 21, the House of Commons spoke briefly of the “wholesale arrests reported to have taken place in Bombay, Calcutta, Poona, and other Indian cities.”²⁸ The first query regarding the arrests was raised by Labour MP Ernest Thurtle over whether “this action [was] taken at the instigation of the home Government or not,” a question that the Under-Secretary of State of India refused to answer and deemed “wholly improper in the circumstances.”²⁹ Several other MPs barraged the Under-Secretary with questions regarding the validity of the arrests, raising questions over whether the “trial [will] be public and open and according to ordinary procedure.”³⁰ Communist MP Saklatvala even accused the authorities of misrepresenting the facts.

[M]P Saklatvala: The Noble Lord said that these men were all alleged to be Communists. What is the significance of that? Does it mean that they were members of the Communist party, or not, and, if so, how many were members? Also, were they arrested simply because they were members of the Communist party?

Under-Secretary [of India]: No; I said in my answer that they are arrested because they are charged by the appropriate authorities with conspiracy to deprive the King of the sovereignty of British India. The meaning of the

20 James Curran, *Impacts and Influences: Essays on Media Power in the 20th Century* (London: Methuen, 1987), 29.

21 Ibid.

22 "ALLEGED PLOT IN INDIA." *The Manchester Guardian*, Mar. 21, 1929, p. 11.

23 Ibid.

24 "Indian Police and 'Red' Agitators." *Daily Telegraph*, Mar. 21, 1929, p. 13. *The Telegraph Historical Archive*.

25 "Bombay Leaders Sent to Meerut." *The Times of India*, Mar 21, 1929, p. 11.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 "Commons Sitting of Thursday, 21st March, 1929." House of Commons Hansard Sessional Papers. Fifth Series, Volume 226.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

term "alleged to be Communists" is that they are believed to be members of the Communist party.

MP: If certain persons are arrested for having committed, or being alleged to have committed, a certain act, what was the relevance in the Noble Lord stating that they are alleged to be members of the Conservative or the Communist party? What is the motive of mentioning it?

Under-Secretary: I wished to give the fullest information in my power. I gave the information that reached my Noble Friend from the Government of India. If the hon. [honorable] Member asks for information, it is my duty to give it as fully as I can.

MP: That is exactly my complaint, that the information is not full, and it is only a mischievous insinuation. How many are members of the Communist party, and why is that necessary to be mentioned as having any relevancy to the subject?

Under-Secretary: I do not wish to say anything the hon. Member regards as offensive to his party. If he will put down a question for Monday, I will ascertain, if it is possible, how many of these 31 alleged Communists are enrolled members of the Communist party.³¹

Saklatvala's assertion that there was no actual conspiracy and the British government targeted these men because of their ideology was a tendency which dominated public discourse. Furthermore, the Under-Secretary's reluctance to answer Saklatvala's queries embodied the reluctant attitude of the British authorities toward Parliament. Over time, this dismissiveness exacerbated Parliament's frustrations with the prosecution and bolstered MP support for the prisoners. However, in the immediate aftermath, parliamentary attitude towards the trial was mostly apathetic, if not supportive, outside of some minor queries.³²

Throughout the following weeks, public perception continued to favor the prosecution. Communism and treason were two heavily stigmatized labels. At face value there was no reason for a British citizen to lament the arrests of treasonous Communists. Newspaper headlines primarily described government justification of the arrests, condemning the men as guilty in the court of public opinion. Even *The Manchester Guardian* did not question the legitimacy of the arrests, only complaining about the civic disturbances caused by the police. The most vocal critique

of the arrests came from Parliament, when MP Saklatvala voiced concerns over the validity of the case and questioned whether there even was a conspiracy.

"TO CIRCUMVENT CERTAIN PROVISIONS OF THE LAW"

THE FIRST PUBLIC CONTROVERSY surrounding the Meerut Conspiracy Case occurred at the location of the trial itself. Despite the fact that a majority of the March arrests were made in the city of Bombay, the authorities transported the convicts to Meerut—where the arrest warrants were issued—to stand trial. The decision was deliberate and significant. The British Raj followed a uniform criminal code, the Indian Penal Code (IPC) of 1860; however, princely states and certain districts, such as Meerut, were exempted from several provisions in the IPC. Critically, one of these exemptions maintained that, for specific cases in Meerut, the defendants forfeited the right to a jury trial. One of the first petitions by the accused was to protest Meerut's jurisdiction over the proceedings and demand that the case be transferred to Allahabad. The Meerut Court rejected the appeal, which provided fodder for supporters of the prisoners. However, these grievances did not immediately gain traction.

On June 14, the day of the Court's decision, the *Times of India* reported that "so far as 21 of the accused were concerned, the decision of the government to hold the inquiry at Meerut was to circumvent certain provisions of the law." However, they noted that the ruling was justified because the law declared that any right to a trial by jury was nullified "in every trial the King-Emperor was the complainant."³³ The *Times of India* also sported a sensationalist headline—"Widespread Soviet Conspiracy"—suggesting that at this stage the *Times of India* did

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid. Only three MPs voiced any critique of Meerut and the discussions on "Indian Arrests" made up an almost insignificant portion of the session (roughly equivalent in importance to a Methodist Church Union Bill discussed shortly thereafter).

³³ "WIDESPREAD SOVIET CONSPIRACY." *The Times of India*, Jun. 14, 1929, p. 9.

not contest the curtailment of the right to trial by jury, and instead evinced an unsympathetic view of the prisoners. *The Telegraph* lent further credibility to the idea that at this stage the decision to void a jury trial was not considered unjust. Writing three days later, they explained the defense's request to transfer the trial. They claimed that "the grounds of the application [to transfer] were that there was not sufficient suitable accommodation for the council for the defense."³⁴ In addition to ignoring the issue of a right to jury trial, the article portrayed the transfer request as a feeble attempt by the defense to delay prosecution.

The Manchester Guardian refrained from supporting or criticizing the court's decision. They neither covered the incident nor gave credence to the arrest of "four prominent Indian political leaders and seven of their followers...for taking part in an illegal procession in connection with the Meerut Conspiracy Case."³⁵ In time, the court's verdict became a rallying cry for the anti-prosecution camp. This absence can be attributed to a variety of factors, the most likely of which is that the particular issue covering the decision was absent from the archives. Another possibility would be that because this incident occurred very early in the trial, the *Guardian* had little reason to believe the accused were not legitimate Communist plotters and did not want to jeopardize their credibility with any direct criticism of the Court's decision.

The Manchester Guardian article the following month lends more credibility to this hypothesis. In "British Labour Leader's Speeches Quoted," the *Guardian* used the defendant's own statements to protest the trial.³⁶ The *Guardian* used this indirect protest to highlight the hypocrisy present in the prosecution's case, arguing that they "relied on speeches and resolutions passed at Meerut urging the nationalization of land and the abolition of landlordism" as evidence for the prisoners' treasonous intentions, but that this was also "the objective policy of the British Labour party since its formation... if [the Labour party] now bask in the sunshine of official glory why should the accused stand in the dock indicted as the enemies of the King for treading the same course?"³⁷ The decision to emphasize the similarities between the Labour Party and the accused certainly would arouse public sympathies. This article, characteristic of the *Guardian's* coverage of the trial, critiqued the authorities without any direct statements.

During the Parliamentary discussion on July 15, multiple MPs raised concerns over the refusal to transfer the trial. The questions asked by the Labour MPs demon-

strated the increasing friction between the prosecution and Parliament.

[MP] Brockaway: asked the Secretary of State for India whether he proposes to take any steps to secure that the 31 Labour and Youth Movement officials now on trial at Meerut shall be transferred to a court where they can be tried by jury?

Secretary of State [of India]: No, Sir. The case has passed into the hands of the courts, and I am not prepared to interfere.

Brockaway: Was it not an executive decision to hold the trial at Meerut, and is it not possible for the right hon. [honorable] Gentleman to reverse a decision made before his accession to office?

Secretary of State: I have nothing to add to the answer, because, as the case has passed into the hands of the courts, I am not prepared to interfere.

[MP] Maxton: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that this case is causing considerable ill-will in India against this country, and is he not prepared to do anything in the matter to relieve the state of strain?

Secretary of State: I can add nothing to the answer which I have given to my hon. Friend. The case is before the court, and I cannot interfere.

[MP] Pole: I asked the Secretary of State for India what special arrangements have been made for the reporting of the proceedings of the Meerut trial for the Press; and why the Government of India has deputed the director of public information to Meerut for this purpose.

Secretary of State: I have no information beyond what has appeared in the Press in India. I assume that the director of public information will arrange for the grant of all possible facilities to the usual agencies and I have telegraphed to make sure that this is done.

Pole: Will the right hon. Gentleman also make sure that the reports of this trial are not circulated through India and over here at the expense of the Government of India, instead of in the usual way?

Secretary of State: Inasmuch as the ordinary agencies will have the opportunity of making their own reports, I think that probably the case is met.³⁸

³⁴ "INDIAN PLOT TRIAL." *Daily Telegraph*, July 17, 1929, p. 9. *The Telegraph Historical Archive*, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/8Hkhz4>. Accessed November 7, 2018.

³⁵ "ELEVEN ARRESTS IN LAHORE." *The Manchester Guardian*, Jul. 22, 1929, p. 9.

³⁶ "THE MEERUT TRIAL." *The Manchester Guardian*, Aug. 26, 1929, p. 13.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ "Commons Sitting of Thursday, 9th July, 1929." House of Commons Hansard Sessional Papers. Fifth Series,

The Secretary of State backed into a corner, neither able nor willing to answer the MPs' questions: first, when MP Brockaway questioned the decision to hold the trial in Meerut, and again when MP Pole raised the question of state censorship. The Secretary of State did little to assuage the MPs' concerns. Even when assuring MP Pole that news agencies had freedom to make their own reports, the State-Secretary did not acquiesce to Pole's insistence that "the reports of this trial are not circulated...at the expense of the Government of India"—a polite way to demand a stop to indirect censorship practices.³⁹ The exchange demonstrated Parliament's increasing worry over the Courts' decision and motivations behind the prosecution.

We have seen that most major publications stood in favor of the prosecution, and even the most sympathetic of the papers, *The Manchester Guardian*, only subtly employed ideology to back the defendants. From this we can extrapolate that the majority of the British public—at least those informed by the press—received a negative account of the conspiracy.

However, behind Parliament's closed doors a different picture emerges. Several Members of Parliament adopted a more vocal stance against the prosecution. Beginning with the day of the arrests, MPs questioned everything from the motivations of the prosecution to the legal jurisdiction of the Court. This discrepancy is attributed to the MPs' positions of power and access to information, which put them several months ahead of the press with regards to forming a critical opinion on the matter. Unfortunately for the prosecution, their advantage in public opinion would only deteriorate with time.

"THE ELEMENTARY RIGHTS OF BRITISH CITIZENS"

AS THE MONTHS PROGRESSED, the British people's anti-communist fervor began to wane. By the end of 1929, it had become

clear to Parliament that the Conspiracy Case was going poorly for the government.

On December 18, MP Brockaway cautioned "that there is a danger, by the very prominence of these trials, that more propaganda will be done on their [prisoners'] behalf than they would be able effectively to do themselves."⁴⁰ Unexpected delays, forced suspensions, and constant heckling by the people of India plagued the trial and became a weekly occurrence. Alongside, and perhaps as a result of, the public's increased investment in the trial was an increase in Parliamentary scrutiny. The Parliamentary proceedings featured a sharp rise in the discussion of "the Political Situation in India," which consumed approximately one-fifth of the session's transcript.⁴¹ This prolonged back-and-forth broke out a mere two days after *The Manchester Guardian* published one of the seminal critiques of the Conspiracy.

On December 10, 1929, the Editors of *The Manchester Guardian* received a letter titled "The Elementary Rights of British Citizens."⁴² Among the signatories of the letter was author H.G. Wells, political theorist Harold Laski, and economic historian R.H. Tawney. The authors wished to "call attention to certain disquieting features of the prosecution."⁴³ They prefaced the letter by discounting the most common critique of the trial, "that [it] is merely a strike-breaking [anti-union] prosecution."⁴⁴ Instead, the authors pointed to three verdicts from the government that they found deeply unsettling.

- (1) That the accused were arrested in March 1929, and the preliminary inquiry by the magistrate has not yet been completed, but bail has been refused, with the result that the prisoners have been in jail already for eight months.
- (2) That trial by jury has been refused.
- (3) That for some obscure reason this trial is taking place at Meerut—80 miles from Calcutta and Bombay.

It is difficult to understand why these men, at present presumed to be innocent, have been refused bail. It is still more difficult to understand why they are to be denied trial by jury... the ordinary principles of fair play and traditional justice demand that these people shall be allowed the elementary rights of British citizens on trial.⁴⁵

Volume 229.

39 Ibid.

40 "Commons Sitting of Thursday, 18th December, 1929." House of Commons Hansard Sessional Papers. Fifth Series, Volume 233.

41 Ibid.

42 "LETTERS TO THE EDITOR." *The Manchester Guardian*, Dec. 10, 1929, p. 24.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.



Portrait of 25 of the Meerut prisoners taken outside the jail. Back row (left to right): K. N. Sehgal, S.-S. Josh, H. L. Hutchinson, Shankat Usmani, B. F. Bradley, U. Prasad, P. Spratt, G. Adhikari. Middle Row: R. R. Mitra, Gopen Chakravarti, Kishorji Lal Ghosh, L. R. Kadam, D. R. Thengdi, Goura Shanker, S. Bannerjee, K. N. Jogekar, P. C. Joshi, Muzaffar Ahmad. Front Row: M. G. Desai, D. Goswami, R. S. Nimbkar, S. S. Mirajkar, S. A. Dange, S. V. Ghatge, Gopal Basak.

Portrait of the 25 Meerut prisoners taken outside jail, early 1930s. [4]

The letter became a sensation, and these critiques formed the nucleus of the British anti-prosecution movement. H.G. Wells and his colleagues were already minor celebrities, and their condemnation of the Conspiracy Case gave the anti-prosecution movement a newfound legitimacy in the eyes of marginally sympathetic audiences. The letter shifted discussion of Meerut from the issue of communism and treason to due process and civil liberty. Liberalism was a sacred tenet of British society, and by framing the prosecution as an affront to individual liberty, the authors' argument resonated with a far larger audience. The masterfully crafted argument had an immediate impact on the public, Parliament, and conservative newspapers.⁴⁶

Chief among these was *The Telegraph*, which on December 11, 1929 covered "the speech for the defense."⁴⁷ When contrasted with their account of the defense's transference appeal, the account was uncharac-

teristically sympathetic. *The Telegraph* proclaimed that "the prosecution had been at pains to show that this was not a prosecution for the holding of opinions" and even went as far as to state that "this was the first systematic prosecution launched by the Government of a group of men for cherishing certain beliefs, even though their actions were not contrary to the law."⁴⁸ This account was a stark departure from *The Telegraph's* prior coverage and a clear indication of a shift in public opinion. Another sign of this change is that between 1930 and 1932, *The Telegraph* published a mere two articles on the Case, since the conservative audience would not be interested in what was transforming into an anti-imperialist crusade.⁴⁹ The whims of the news cycle experienced by both the *Times of India* and *The Manchester Guardian* could also explain this decrease; but the lull in the papers was compensated for by an eruption in activism.

46 The Editors received another letter from a member of the Legislative Assembly of India on December 4, thanking the authors of the letter and also praising the publication for highlighting the judicial abuses: "you have above all, in my humble judgement, rendered a great service to your own people by drawing attention to practices that tend to discredit what is often proclaimed as 'British Justice.'" "THE MEERUT TRIAL." *The Manchester Guardian*, Dec. 24, 1929, p. 5.

47 Our Own Correspondent, "Meerut Plot Trial," *Daily Telegraph*, Dec. 11, 1929, p. 11. *The Telegraph Historical Archive*, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/8Hm981>. Accessed November 7, 2018.

48 Ibid.

49 According to *The Telegraph Historical Archive*, only two articles were published between 1930 and 1932. The first was in February 1930 titled "Legal Aid Rejected" and the second was in August 1932 when Spratt and Bradley were found guilty: Our Own Correspondent, "Meerut Trial," *Daily Telegraph*, Feb. 10, 1930, p. 9. *The Telegraph Historical Archive*, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/8HmCJ4>. Accessed November 7, 2018; B.U.P. "Meerut Plotters," *Daily Telegraph*, Aug. 17, 1932, p. 7. *The Telegraph Historical Archive*, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/8HmEe9>. Accessed November 7, 2018.

The nucleus of anti-imperialist demonstrations emerged in the city of Manchester. Manchester was a natural base for the movement since it had a large working-class population and one of the prisoners, Lester Hutchinson, was a Manchester native. The National Meerut Prisoners Defense Committee (NMPC) was founded to increase awareness of the injustices faced by the accused and pressure parliament to end the trial. The committee invited speakers, held fundraising events, and proliferated pamphlets and posters in support of the prisoners.⁵⁰ The NMPC published an uncensored scathing attack on British labor abuse in India in "Meerut Special."⁵¹ They provided a history of British labor abuses in India, and cited an official government investigation that admitted "its undeniable that the Indian workers are half-starved and badly clothed as well as horribly housed. We [the Commission] assert that there is no justification whatsoever for these states of affairs."⁵² Inflammatory publications proliferated between 1931 and 1933. Critiques of the case were not restricted to the NMPC, as the National Joint Council, Trade Union Congress, and even certain wings of the Labour Party, protested the proceedings.⁵³

One of the most creative displays of protest was in the theater. Edmund Frow, founder of the Working Class Movement Library, recalled one of his experiences at a meeting called by the League Against Imperialism in January 1932 during which "the whole question of the British and British Imperialism was raised by the secretary Reginald Bridgeman...so this sketch, Meerut, was performed at this meeting."⁵⁴ The sketch was written and performed by The Red Megaphones, a Manchester based street theater group. The play hoped to "convey the message of it [the Conspiracy] in a way that will strike home to class-consciousness that is latent in even the most reactionary member of your worker audience."⁵⁵ The provocative nature of the play raised the eyebrows of various British authorities.

Tensions came to a head on June 12, 1932, when anti-war actors performing near London "were received by a strong force of police. When the [prison bar] poles for the

'meerut prisoners' sketch were produced the inspector immediately refused to allow the sketch to be performed and threatened to 'clean the whole street up' if the order were defied."⁵⁶ This scene was a blatant reminder of the ever-present threat of state censorship and demonstrates that the protests against the Conspiracy Case were a threat that warranted state suppression. Over the next year, pressure continued to mount. The public was becoming increasingly frustrated with the governments' brazen attitude towards the rights of the accused and Parliament was concerned with the staggering financial burden brought by the ordeal. By the end of the year, the Meerut Conspiracy Case had become the most expensive prosecution in the history of the British Empire.⁵⁷

**"THE SORT OF
THING ONE
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AFTER FOUR YEARS, the jury—or lack thereof—was finally out. The British public eagerly anticipated the verdict, as did the press, the NMPC, Parliament, and various activist groups. Opinions on the guilt of the accused still varied across the political spectrum, but the concentration of opinions had shifted since the initial arrests. The Conspiracy Case had become "something of a judicial scandal," and in-

50 See images 1 and 3: Meerut - International Support. *Working Class Movement Library*. Accessed November 26, 2018. <https://www.wcml.org.uk/our-collections/international/india/meerut-international-support/>.

51 "Miscellaneous Pamphlets and other Material," British Online Archives. Accessed November 26, 2018. Image 408.

52 "Miscellaneous Pamphlets and other Material," Image 408.

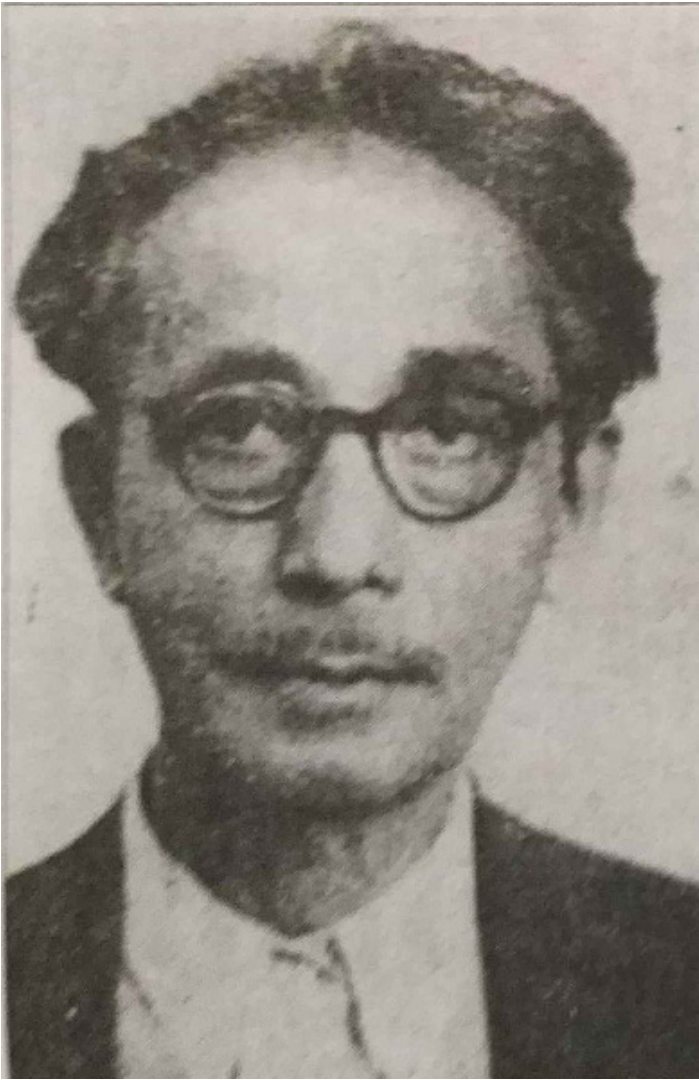
53 There was also an instance in which the aforementioned organizations published a collaborative statement: "Release the Prisoners!" "Miscellaneous Pamphlets and other Material," Image 121.

54 "Referring to a Performance by the Manchester Street Theatre Group the Red Megaphones," Meerut - International Support, *Working Class Movement Library*, Accessed November 26, 2018. <https://www.wcml.org.uk/our-collections/international/india/meerut-international-support/>.

55 Charlie Mann, "Meerut: Workers Theatre Movement Play," *Working Class Movement Library*. Accessed November 26, 2018. <https://www.wcml.org.uk/wcm/en/our-collections/international/india/meerut-workers-theatre-movement-play/>.

56 "Referring to a Performance by the Manchester Street Theatre Group the Red Megaphones."

57 Reuter, "Famous Indian Trial Ends," *Daily Telegraph*, Jan. 17, 1933, p. 9. *The Telegraph Historical Archive*, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/8HmGB3>. Accessed November 17, 2018.



Muzafiar Ahmad, 1925. By Unknown [5]

separable from notions of authoritarianism and tyranny.⁵⁸ The day before the verdict, on April 12, 1933, *The Telegraph* described the trial as “one of the most famous in working class history.”⁵⁹ When the verdict arrived, it was received by bewilderment and outrage. The official judgement, comprised of six hundred and seventy-six pages in a printed document, determined that “the fact that the revolution was not expected actually to come to pass for some years seems to be no defense whatever...I [the Judge] have endeavored to assess the relative guilt of the defendants in this case and to make the punishment fit the crime.”⁶⁰ The guilty verdict upset many, but was hardly unexpected. What sparked the real outrage was the sentencing.

[C]onvicting these twenty-seven accused as stated in each of the individual chapters I sentence them as follows:

Muzafiar Ahmad, accused, transportation *for life*.

Dange, Spratt, Ghate, Joglekar and Nimbkar accused, each to transportation for a period of **12** years.

Bradley, Mirajkar and Usrnani accused, each to transportation for a period of **10** years.

Soban Singh Josh, Majid and Goswami accused, each to transportation for a period of **7** years.

Ajodhya Prasad, Adhikari, P.C. Joshi and Desai accused, each to transportation for a period of **5** years.

Chakravarty, Basak, Hutchinson, Mitra, Jhabwala, and Sehgal accused, each to **4** years Rigorous Imprisonment.

Shamsul Huda, Alve, Kastle, Gauri, Shankar and Kadam accused, each to **3** years Rigorous Imprisonment.⁶¹

Barring death, these sentences were the harshest in the penal code and normally reserved for high crimes such as treason—even the judge admitted that there was no actual conspiracy in motion. The sentencing galvanized anti-imperial activists and ushered a renewed wave of public solidarity with the prisoners.

A flurry of petitions and letters immediately followed the verdict. People protested the verdict for three reasons. The first was that the accused had been denied bail and practically held as prisoners for the entire duration of the trial, and had thus served a significant portion of their sentence already. The second reason was that the judge's basis for the sentences claimed that there was no immediate conspiracy, reaffirming the public's belief that the trial was an ideological witch-hunt. The third and final cause was the implication the trial had for labor movements across the Empire.

A University of Liverpool professor described the trial as “the sort of thing one imagined had disappeared from civilized countries since, shall we say the fall of the Bastille.”⁶² The professor was among the many protestors (part of a university fundraiser to appeal the verdict) not previously affiliated with any Meerut protest but spurred to action over the sentencing. Her qualm was specifically

58 "THE MEERUT TRIAL." *The Manchester Guardian*, Jan. 24, 1933, p. 18.

59 "Meerut Case," *Daily Telegraph*, Apr. 12, 1933, p. [11]. *The Telegraph Historical Archive*. Accessed November 26, 2018.

60 "Miscellaneous Pamphlets and other Material," Image 101.

61 "Miscellaneous Pamphlets and other Material," Image 101.

62 Support for, an Appeal. "LETTERS TO THE EDITOR." *The Manchester Guardian*, Feb. 11, 1933, p. 6.

over Hutchinson's sentence, who she described as "a young Englishman of education savagely compelled to spend the best eight years of his life in prison for helping improve the conditions of some of the worst paid cotton workers in the world."⁶³ Hutchinson's public support throughout the trial was limited to martyrization and the occasional petition, but after the verdict this scope expanded significantly.

The Manchester Guardian's sympathetic coverage of the trial cemented it as one of the few respectable outlets for anti-imperialist critiques. The message in the letters that it received followed a similar theme. One reader was outraged that "after four years' incarceration while awaiting their trial and judgement, I [he] fully expected that the prisoners in the Meerut conspiracy case would receive purely nominal sentences."⁶⁴ Another common protest was that readers were "appalled at the severe sentences...for purely political offenses passed on young men whose idealism may have run away from them."⁶⁵ The general consensus among the outraged was that the verdict "cannot possibly be allowed to stand."⁶⁶ This public sentiment was mirrored—if not intensified—in Parliament. In the session directly preceding the trial on February 7, Labour MP Kirkwood asked if "the Secretary of State for India [was] satisfied with the justice or injustice that is being meted out to the Meerut prisoners." The question prompted a brief exchange in which Kirkwood enquired about the possibility of overturning the verdicts.

Secretary of State: I could not possibly question the sentence of a Judge.

Kirkwood: Does that mean that, no matter what injustice is done to British subjects in India, the Secretary of State for India in this House has no power to interfere?

Secretary of State: I could not possibly give a general answer to a question of that kind.⁶⁷

Kirkwood maintained his assault despite the non-answers from the Secretary of State, and on July 17 demanded to "put it before the Secretary of State that the

time has now arrived when it would be a generous act on his part to use his influence to have the prisoners who were tried at Meerut released."⁶⁸ While the Secretary of State did not budge, the various fundraising efforts for the prisoners bore fruit. The Meerut prisoners appealed their case to the High Court in Allahabad, the same court they had petitioned to be transferred to four years earlier. On August 4, 1933, the Allahabad High Court accepted their appeal and either reduced or completely expunged the sentences. The decision sparked jubilations in both India and Britain. After four long years, the Meerut Conspiracy Case finally settled.

THE LEGACY OF MEERUT

THE MEERUT CONSPIRACY CASE demonstrated the dynamic and shifting nature of popular support in the British Empire. The legacy of the Conspiracy Case towards interwar imperialism is generally overlooked in existing historiography, but through an analysis of parliamentary discussions, newspaper reports, letters, pamphlets, and theater, this essay uncovers this transformation. The press greeted the initial arrests with enthusiastic support, while leftist organizations retained minor qualms. However, a series of government blunders, beginning with jurisdictional conflict and culminating in tyrannical sentencing, transformed the Case from an anti-communist moment to a sustaining cause for anti-imperialism. The Conspiracy Case publicly humiliated the British Imperial state. The British granted the colony independence less than fifteen years after the trial concluded. Meerut was a footnote in the grand scheme of the Indian independence movement. However, this case presents a microcosm of shifting British attitudes towards imperialism. While this shift was not instant, nor caused entirely by events in Meerut, it proved fatal to British imperial ambitions in India.⁶⁹ ♦

63 Ibid.

64 "THE MEERUT TRIAL," *The Manchester Guardian*. Jan. 24, 1933, p. 18.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 "Commons Sitting of Thursday, 7th February, 1933," House of Commons Hansard Sessional Papers. Fifth Series, Volume 274.

68 "Commons Sitting of Thursday, 17th July, 1933." House of Commons Hansard Sessional Papers. Fifth Series, Volume 280.

69 Ill-will among British authorities and Indian subjects had existed since the Battle of Plassey and subsequent conquest of Bengal in 1757; however, popular support for the Imperial project remained steady until the rise of Gandhi following the Great War. Gandhi's Satyagraha campaign reached its height with the Salt March in 1930 and drew significant sympathy from domestic and international spheres.

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