

Bandung Spirits



International Conference

Friday, May 23 – Saturday, May 24, 2025

EINSTEIN
FORUM

In April 1955, representatives of twenty-nine Asian and African countries met in Bandung, Indonesia, for a conference that was, among other things, the first major diplomatic gathering to which the People's Republic of China was invited. When it is remembered at all, memories of the Bandung Conference have overpowered its history: Its afterlife is recalled mostly in terms of nostalgia for Afro-Asian solidarity, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Cold War. This conference seeks, seventy years on, to revisit Bandung's hauntings or hangovers in history, memory, and other narrative forms and retellings.

Conception:

Jolita Zabarskaitė (Bonn), Benjamin Zachariah (Potsdam)

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Andrea Benvenuti (Sydney)
Nehru's Bandung

This paper will explore Nehru's role in organizing the 1955 Bandung Conference and explain the nature, rationale, and development of his policy. In doing so, it also examines the concerns and calculations that drove a skeptical Nehru to support Indonesia's diplomatic push for such an Afro-Asian conference. In this context, I argue that Nehru's support for an Asian-African conference did not stem from an emotional commitment to Afro-Asian internationalism; rather, it arose from a desire to address some significant Indian Cold War concerns.

Andrea Benvenuti is an associate professor in International Relations at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. Educated at Florence University, Monash University, and Oxford University, Andrea Benvenuti teaches twentieth-century international history and diplomacy. His research interests lie in post-1945 international history, with a strong focus on the Cold War in Asia and Europe. His recent publications include *Nehru's Bandung: Non-Alignment and Regional Order in Indian Cold War Strategy* (2024). He is currently working on a new book project titled *Nehru and Sukarno and the Struggle for the Leadership of Postcolonial Asia, 1949–1965*.

Kingshuk Chatterjee (Calcutta)

*Where the Spirit Was Willing, but the Flesh Was Weak:
How Bandung Was Lost to Geopolitics*

The Afro-Asian Conference of 1955 held in Bandung, Indonesia, came to signify a desire (if not a determination) on the part of Asian and African countries to overcome the historical baggage of colonization, as also to steer clear of the new trajectories of extra-territorial domination generated by the emergent dynamics of the Cold War. Driven by the aspirations of charting an independent course towards economic modernization and state-sovereignty, India, Indonesia, Egypt, and other powerful post-colonial actors sought to create a platform that would lend the newly independent states diplomatic leverage. In the decades that followed, Bandung delivered remarkably little apart from creating a powerful discourse in favor of decolonizing the remaining colonies of some of the rump European empires and feeding into what would become the Third World movement. My paper examines the manner in which the “spirit of Bandung” was progressively weakened by the geopolitics of the Cold War world—mostly because of failing to chart an independent course, but sometimes because of doing so quite successfully (viz. China) and sometimes because of failing on some occasions and succeeding on others (viz. India). The presentation explores the extent to which the Bandung spirit actually permeated its principal actors. It asks whether the spirit of Bandung animated actors when they were relatively weak in the arena of global politics and lost its charm when actors were strong enough to dominate their weaker fellow-travelers from the Third World.

Kingshuk Chatterjee is a professor in the Department of History, Calcutta University, and is associated with the Institute of Foreign Policy Studies, Kolkata. He has previously served as a Founding Professor in the Department of History, School of Humanities, and Social Sciences at Shiv Nadar University and as a Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Chatterjee’s area of expertise is in Middle Eastern politics. He is the author of *Ali Shari’ati and the Shaping of Political Islam in Iran* (2011), and *A Split in the Middle: The Making of the Political Centre in Iran, 1987–2004* (2012), and is editor of several volumes on Middle Eastern politics and India’s relations with the Middle East. He is a regular contributor on Indian foreign policy and global politics.

Carlos Fraenkel (Montreal)

Beyond a Binary: Victims of Victims and the Limits of the Colonizer–Colonized Paradigm

In various registers, Bandung and its legacies raise questions about the political and moral afterlives of colonialism. My contribution reflects on several of these issues—though without direct reference to Bandung—through a series of personal encounters: with Indigenous activists in Canada, nationalist movements in Quebec, anti-imperialist discourse in Brazil, and campus debates over Zionism—that challenged the moral maps I was used to. In each case, the familiar binaries of colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed, began to unravel. What happens when the descendants of Holocaust survivors are cast as colonial oppressors? When Quebecers invoke Frantz Fanon to frame themselves as colonized, while Mohawks denounce them as colonizers? When a left-wing critique of Brazilian politics is read not as solidarity but as imperialism? These experiences raise deeper questions: Who has the right to speak in the name of justice? Can we think beyond binary frameworks without abandoning moral clarity? And how do we acknowledge complexity without falling into paralysis?

Carlos Fraenkel is James McGill Professor of Philosophy and Jewish Studies at McGill University in Montreal. He also was Professor of Comparative Religion and Philosophy at Oxford University. His publications include *From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon: The Transformation of the Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn into the Moreh ha-Nevukhim* (2007), *Philosophical Religions from Plato to Spinoza* (2012), and *Teaching Plato in Palestine: Philosophy in a Divided World* (2015). He is currently completing a book titled *Radical Ancients: Philosophy as Experiments in Living*. His public work appears in forums such as the *London Review of Books*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The New York Times*, *Liberties*, and *Boston Review*.

Bernd Greiner (Hamburg)

in conversation with Benjamin Zachariah (Potsdam)

Roads Not Taken

“We must not overestimate our own importance,” Jawaharlal Nehru said at Belgrade in 1961, the year in which he was being hailed as the founder of the Non-Aligned Movement. This is a good epigram for the fate of Bandung as a set of ideas, and says much about the issues discussed at Bandung that have disappeared from subsequent discussions of the conference. Here, we discuss a number of such issues surrounding the Cold War, Bandung, and the legacy of non-alignment.

Bernd Greiner is a historian and political scientist, and a professor at Hamburg University. He was a long-term member of the Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, and the director of the Berlin Center for Cold War Studies. His work focuses on 20th-century U.S. history with a particular emphasis on the Cold War, relations between the military and civil society since 1900, German-American relations, German images of America, and the theory of violence and international relations in the 20th century. Among his many books is an acclaimed history of the Vietnam War, *Krieg ohne Fronten: Die USA in Vietnam* (2007), which was translated into several languages. In 2020, he published a biography of Henry Kissinger.

Vera Mey (London), **Philippe Pirotte** (Brussels)
Who's Afraid of the Bandung Spirit?

The 1955 Asia Africa Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, is often discussed as a political failure and romanticized as a passing instance of decolonization. However, the “Bandung Spirit” has since been enthusiastically celebrated in artistic and cultural contexts for harnessing a political imagination that in the face of empire goes beyond nation-building. Yet despite continued enthusiasm for the Bandung Spirit as a framework of liberation, its audacity has been constantly subject to doubt and systematic dismissal. In our talk, we discuss how the Bandung Spirit has amplified ways of looking that break from a profoundly modernist and universalist trajectory of thought and enter daring alternatives that facilitate participatory looking, or what has been called the “right to look.” Through understanding the direction of gazes reshuffled by and the nature of visibility activated by the Bandung Spirit, we can better determine the “threat” that this defiant way of seeing the world represents and the possibilities for equality it might enable.

Vera Mey is an art historian and curator in the History of Art Department faculty at the University of York. Her doctoral research at SOAS, University of London, analyzed how the 1955 Asia Africa Conference impacted and intersected with artistic notions of critical regionalism in Southeast Asia’s Cold War era.

Philippe Pirotte is Professor of Art History and Curatorial Studies at Hochschule für Bildende Künste–Städelschule. His recent research includes investigating the photographs of the writer, civil rights activist, and journalist Richard Wright, many of which were taken during the Bandung Conference.

Together, Mey and Pirotte established the research colloquium “The Color Curtain and the Promise of Bandung’ (2021–2022) and have worked on “Spectres of Bandung: A Political Imagination of Asia Africa,” an exhibition commissioned by the Gropius-Bau Berlin but whose future is now uncertain. Aspects of the exhibition emerged during their Co-Artistic Directorship of the 2024 Busan Biennale.

Indah Wahyu Puji Utami (Malang)

Remembering Bandung:

How the 1955 Asian-African Conference Is Taught, Understood, and Misremembered in Indonesia

The 1955 Asian-African Conference in Bandung is widely remembered as a milestone in Indonesia's postcolonial diplomacy and a symbol of Global South solidarity. But how is this legacy taught and understood by young Indonesians today? This paper draws on student surveys, textbook analysis, and observations at the Museum of the Asian-African Conference to explore contemporary perceptions of the event. Findings suggest that while most students have heard of the Bandung Conference, their understanding is often superficial—rooted in textbook summaries and museum exhibitions that emphasize national pride over transnational cooperation. The internationalist vision that shaped Bandung 1955 is largely neglected, and the nationalism that tends to dominate the narrative reduces the conference to a symbol of Indonesia's diplomatic greatness rather than a shared Afro-Asian struggle. By critically engaging with existing scholarship and memory practices, this study highlights how state-driven narratives, curricular choices, and museum exhibition shape historical consciousness. It argues for the need to revisit and reimagine Bandung's legacy, not merely as an achievement of the past, but as a political moment that continues to inspire decolonial futures.

Indah Wahyu Puji Utami is Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of History at Universitas Negeri Malang, Indonesia. She holds a PhD from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Her research focuses on historical narratives in and about Indonesia. She has published widely on history education and has been involved in curriculum design for history teaching in Indonesian schools.

Robert Vitalis (Philadelphia)
World-Myth-Making After Empire

I propose to read and report provisionally on the past decade of scholarship in the social sciences and international history on the 1955 Asian-African Conference, and on work in the critical humanities, political theory, and area and ethnic studies on the world-making ambitions that Bandung purportedly gave rise to before its visionaries were defeated by “neoliberalism.” My tentative hypothesis is that the presentism that affected an earlier generation of Third Worldist studies is at play today in influential new works. Alternately, the problem, if it exists, may simply reflect what political scientist Gabriel Almond said was a normal tendency to caricature and simplify past scholarship “in order to establish independent intellectual ground on which to stand.” If so, we are also likely to find that the work repeats past mistakes and discovers that which was commonly known. I also want to suggest a direction for work going forward, which follows from my own research on the erasure of radical conservatives from our histories of the Global South. I am mostly focused on U.S. defense intellectuals during the early Cold War era who have long since been erased from histories of the relevant disciplines. What I have discovered is that there is a connection to Bandung in the founding of what would become the World Anticommunist League (WACL). WACL belongs to the same moment as the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the New International Economic Order (NIEO)—and yet there is virtually no serious scholarship on it and its allies.

Robert Vitalis is Professor of Political Science Emeritus, University of Pennsylvania. He has written and published widely on the history of international relations, the Cold War, and the emergent Third World. He is the author of four books: *When Capitalists Collide: Business Conflict and the End of Empire in Egypt* (1995, reissued on its 25th anniversary); *America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (2006), named a book of the year in the *Guardian*; *White World Order, Black Power Politics* (2016), which moved away from the Middle East to explore the unwritten history of international relations scholarship in the United States, including those African-American thinkers who challenged the discipline’s racist and imperialist commitments; and *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security that Haunt U.S. Energy Policy* (2020). His 2013 article on Bandung, “The Midnight Ride of Kwame Nkrumah and Other Fables of Bandung (ban-doong),” in *Humanity*, was an attempt to stop the juggernaut of the myth-making machinery surrounding the Conference. His current research focuses on the rise of the militant right in strategic studies in the United States.

Jolita Zabarskaitė (Bonn)

*Bandung, Greater India, Indonesia:
Incompatible Visions of (Afro-)Asia?*

When the Bandung Conference was held, in 1955, ideas of Afro-Asian solidarity were placed in direct competition with a long-standing Indian nationalist fantasy that had shaped the history of South-East Asia for over several hundred years: the idea of Greater India. Indian nationalist ideologues explicitly compared this civilizing process to a Roman idea of empire, which had colonized its possessions by virtue of possessing a superior civilization. This Indocentric and expansionist imaginary was not conducive to an idea of a collaboration of Afro-Asian equals, and consequently had to be muted in the interests of solidarity. Indonesian public interventions at the time were uncomfortable with the inferior status of South-East Asia generated by the Greater India lens, as the new republic was building its own conceptions of state and nation. Competing ideas of Asian solidarity attempting to incorporate African and other ex-colonial or soon-to-be-independent countries were thus placed in conflict and conversation.

Jolita Zabarskaitė studied Indology with a focus on Sanskrit and modern Indian languages at Vilnius University and the University of Halle-Wittenberg, holds an MA in South and South-East Asian History from Humboldt University, Berlin, and was awarded her PhD from Heidelberg University. She also has a background in art history and museum studies, and was awarded a one-year fellowship by the Indonesian government to further her study of Bahasa Indonesia at Gadjah Mada University in Indonesia. She is the author of *'Greater India' and the Indian Expansionist Imagination, c. 1885–1965: The Rise and Decline of the Idea of a Lost Hindu Empire* (2022), which is the first monograph on the subject. She was a Residency Fellow at the Alice Boner Institute in Varanasi, India, a Tandem Scholar of the German Historical Institute London and the Max Weber Forum Delhi's fellowship programme, and is affiliated with the South-East Asian Studies department of the University of Bonn.

Benjamin Zachariah (Potsdam)

Anniversaries and Travelling Conferences: Brussels, Delhi, Bandung, Belgrade, and the Road from the Third World to the Global South

The Third World has grown up to become the Global South; the Bandung Conference is now seventy years old and has acquired an indelible place in the histories and mythologies of postcolonial and decolonial thinking. If we read some of the wishful thinking that Third-Worlders-turned-Global-Southists tell themselves, something very important happened at Bandung; only they don't know what it is. A crooked line connects the Brussels Congress of Oppressed Peoples and Nations in 1927, the brainchild of the German communist millionaire Willi Münzenberg, with the Bandung Conference of 1955, via the Asian Relations Conference in Delhi in 1947. Bandung, in turn, is a predecessor of Belgrade in 1961, which was the founding conference of the Non-Aligned Movement. Erased from this triumphalist progression are, for instance, Colombo or Bogor in 1954; but if conferences beget conferences, and principles give rise to principles, what was the Bandung Spirit doing in Brussels or Belgrade, and where was it in Bogor, which should have been so close to home? The *telos* of Bandung—in the end is the beginning—lives on with or without history. Can we negotiate the demands of history with the need for a past conference to legitimate a future mythology? My paper therefore seeks to juxtapose the banalities of the event's history against the grandeur of its collective memory.

Benjamin Zachariah is a member of the Einstein Forum research staff. He completed his undergraduate degree in history, philosophy, and literature at Presidency College, Calcutta, and his PhD in history from Trinity College, Cambridge. His research interests include the politics of historical knowledge, historical theory and historiography, global fascism, transnational revolutionary networks, nationalisms, and memory. Zachariah is the author of *Nehru* (2004), *Developing India: An Intellectual and Social History, c. 1930–1950* (2005, 2012), *Playing the Nation Game: The Ambiguities of Nationalism in India* (2011, 2016; revised edition *Nation Games* 2020), and *After the Last Post: The Lives of Indian Historiography in India* (2019; 2023). He is co-editor of *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds, and World Views 1917–1939* (2015), and of *What's Left of Marxism: Historiography and the Possibility of Thinking with Marxian Themes and Concepts* (2020; 2022).

Program

Friday, May 23

11:00

Susan Neiman (Potsdam)
Welcome Address

Jolita Zabarskaitė (Bonn),
Benjamin Zachariah (Potsdam)
*Introductory Remarks: Bandung's
Reproductivity and the Road from
the Third World to the Global South*

11:45

Vera Mey (London),
Philippe Pirotte (Brussels)
*Who's Afraid of
the Bandung Spirit?*

14:30

Kingshuk Chatterjee (Calcutta)
*Where the Spirit Was Willing but
the Flesh Was Weak: How Bandung
Was Lost to Geopolitics*

16:00

Robert Vitalis (Philadelphia)
*World-Myth-Making
After Bandung*

17:15

Carlos Fraenkel (Montreal)
*Beyond a Binary: Victims of
Victims and the Limits of the
Colonizer-Colonized Paradigm*

Saturday, May 24

11:00

Andrea Benvenuti (Sydney)
Nehru's Bandung

12:15

Jolita Zabarskaitė (Bonn)
*Bandung, Greater India, Indonesia:
Incompatible Visions of
(Afro-)Asia?*

15:00

Benjamin Zachariah (Potsdam)
*Anniversaries and Travelling Con-
ferences: Brussels, Delhi, Bandung,
Belgrade, and the Road from the
Third World to the Global South*

16:30

Indah Wahyu Puji Utame (Malang)
*Remembering Bandung: How the
1955 Asian-African Conference Is
Taught, Understood, and Misre-
membered in Indonesia*

17:45

Bernd Greiner (Hamburg)
in conversation with
Benjamin Zachariah (Potsdam)
Roads Not Taken