

Primary Source:

*Richard Wright, The Colour Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference (1956)**

Introduction

By 1955, independence struggles were in full swing. Enough had been successful that formerly colonized states felt empowered to meet to discuss how they could oppose colonialism. Delegates from 29 countries met in Bandung, Indonesia, calling their meeting the Afro-Asian Conference, which met April 18-24, 1955. One of their motives was also to find ways to sidestep the great power confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States.

One of its organizers, President Sukarno of Indonesia, hoped that the independent states could band together to support each other. Sukarno had been the leader of an anti-colonialist nationalist political party under Dutch colonial rule of Indonesia. During World War II, Japan occupied Indonesia. Upon Japan's surrender, Sukarno anticolonial nationalist declared independence, which the Dutch government recognized only in 1949. Another organizer of the conference was Zhou Enlai, premier in China, who while ally of the Soviet Union, also hoped to strengthen anti-colonial movements globally.

Meanwhile, the observer reporting on Sukarno's opening speech was Richard Wright (1908-1960), the famed African American writer and anti-racism activist. He covered the conference as an independent observer. Wright was sympathetic to Sukarno's position. He felt that both the United States and the US Communist Party had failed to address racism seriously. In this piece, he discusses Sukarno's opening speech to the conference.

* Richard Wright, *The Colour Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1956), available online at https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.84407/2015.84407.The-Colour-Curtain_djvu.txt. Edited and annotated by members of the H/21 project.



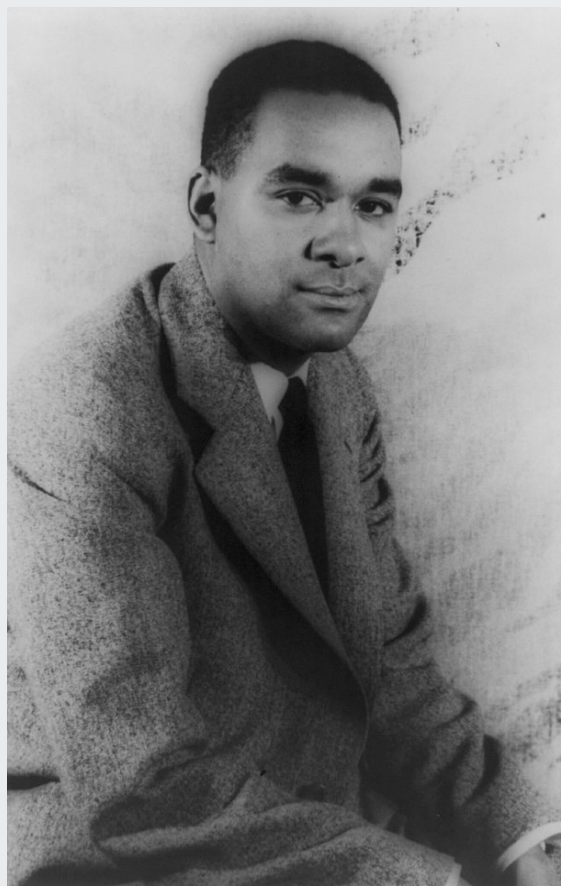
PRIMARY SOURCE

INTRODUCTION

THE COLOUR CURTAIN

29 participating
countries in the
Bandung Conference

Richard Wright, *The Colour Curtain: A Report on the Bandung Conference (1956)*



Richard Wright, 1939

*Press pin issued for
the Bandung
Conference, 1955*



At last Sukarno, President of the Republic of Indonesia, mounted the rostrum to deliver the opening address . . .

He was a small man, tan of face, and with a pair of dark, deep-set eyes; he moved slowly, deliberately. He spoke in English with a slight accent; he knew words and how to use them, and you realized at once that this man had done nothing all his life but utilize words to capture the attention and loyalties of others. From the very outset, he sounded the notes of race and religion, strong, defiant; before he had uttered more than a hundred syllables, he declared:

"This is the first international conference of colored peoples in the history of mankind!"[†]

He then placed his finger upon the geographical gateway through which the white men of the West had come into Asia:

"Sisters and Brothers, how terrifically dynamic is our time! I recall that, several years ago, I had occasion to make a public analysis of colonialism, and I drew attention to what I called the "life line of imperialism". This line runs from the Straits of Gibraltar, through the Mediterranean, the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, and the Sea of Japan. For most of that enormous distance, the territories on both sides of this life line were colonies, the people were unfree, their futures mortgaged to an alien system. Along that life line, that main artery of imperialism, there was pumped the lifeblood of colonialism."

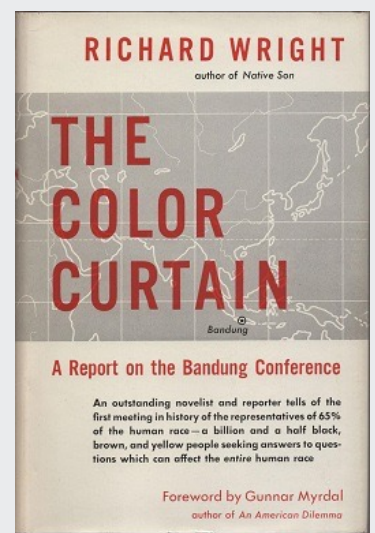
[†] This statement is an exaggeration. The first Pan-African Conference took place in 1900.

In the third paragraph of his address, Sukarno evoked in a solemn manner a reality that Western statesmen refer to only in times of war or dire stress; he paid tribute to the many sacrifices which had made the conference possible. Implied in his recognition of sacrifice was an acknowledgment that it had been only through men willingly surrendering their lives in the past that a bridge had been made to this present moment. He said:

Did you know?

Richard Wright was a best-selling author and social critic.

[Learn more about his life and work.](#)



"I recognize that we are gathered here today as a result of sacrifices. Sacrifices made by our forefathers and by the people of our own and younger generations . . . Their struggle and sacrifice paved the way for this meeting of the highest representatives of independent and sovereign nations from two of the biggest continents of the globe."

For Sukarno and national revolutionaries of his stamp, the present meeting was not merely a lucky stroke of politics, but a gathering whose foundations had been laid long before. He put his finger on the date in modern history when the real struggle against colonialism had begun in earnest:

"I recall in this connection the conference of the "League Against Imperialism and Colonialism" which was held in Brussels almost thirty years ago.[‡] At that conference many distinguished delegates who are present here today met each other and found new strength in their fight for independence."

[‡] Commonly referred to as the World Anti-Imperialist League, this anti-colonial organization was founded in Belgium in 1927 by critics of the persistence of colonialism from across Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Europe, including Sukarno himself.

Meeting of the Bandung Conference, April 1955





Sukarno, c
1949

Explore More

[Watch Indonesia President Sukarno speak at the United Nations, 1960.](#)

It is hard for the Western world to realize how tenaciously these outsiders cling to and remember each link, each step in their life's struggles; to most of the delegates to whom Sukarno spoke, this meeting was the logical outcome of past sacrificial efforts. And why had they now come together? Sukarno said:

"...we are living in a world of fear. The life of man today is corroded and made bitter by fear. Fear of the future, fear of the hydrogen bomb,[‡] fear of ideologies. Perhaps this fear is a greater danger than the danger itself, because it is fear which drives men to act foolishly, to act thoughtlessly, to act dangerously . . . And do not think that the oceans and the seas will protect us. The food we eat, the water that we drink, yes, even the very air that we breathe can be contaminated by poisons originating from thousands of miles away. And it could be that, even if we ourselves escaped lightly, the unborn generations of our children would bear on their distorted bodies the marks of our failure to control the forces which have been released on the world."

What strength had Sukarno and Asian and African leaders like him? He was frank about it. He said:

"For many generations our peoples have been the voiceless ones in the world. We have been the unregarded, the peoples for whom decisions were made by others whose interests were paramount, the peoples who lived in poverty and humiliation . . . What can we do? The peoples of Asia and Africa wield little physical power. Even our economic strength is dispersed and slight. We cannot indulge in power politics . . . Our statesmen, by and large, are not backed up with serried[¶] ranks of jet bombers."

He then defined the strength of this gathering of the leaders of the poor and backward nations as:

"We, the peoples of Asia and Africa, 1,400,000,000 strong, far more than half of the population of the world, we can mobilize what I have called the *Moral Violence of Nations* in favor of peace ..."

[‡]The United States government first tested a thermonuclear weapon, also called a hydrogen bomb, in 1952 on the former island of Elugelab in the American-occupied Marshall Islands. The explosion, more than 450 larger than the nuclear boom American forced dropped on Nagasaki in 1945, increased fears of the global dangers of a nuclear war.

[¶]A word meaning crowded or pressed together.

Image Citations:

Page 1:

Portrait of Richard Wright, 1943, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017855740/>

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Asian-African Conference Participants, CC: BY SA, Ichwan Palongengi, Bugoslav,

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Delegations held a Plenary Meeting of the Economic Section during the African-Asian Conference in Merdeka Building, Bandung, on April 20th 1955, UNESCO, Public Domain,

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