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## "Youth of the World, Unite So That You May Live": The World Youth Congress Movement, 1936-1939

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## “Youth of the World, Unite So That You May Live”: The World Youth Congress Movement, 1936-1939

### Abstract

Although the World Youth Congress Movement (1936-1939) was established by liberal internationalists as an umbrella movement for youth organizations interested in advancing peace and international cooperation, it drew suspicion from conservatives, Catholics, and fascists over its inclusion of avowed communists and because of allegations—later verified—of covert communist influence among the movement’s youth leadership. Despite this, treating the WYCM exclusively as a communist front organization ignores the significance of the ideological accommodation that took place within the WYCM as both liberals and communists sought new allies and opportunities to bolster their causes at a turbulent time. Mutual accommodation was above all possible because liberal and communist stakeholders shared a vision of young people as a constituency that could be mobilized to advance the causes of peace and cooperation. As the following decades would show, however, the WYCM papered over these divisions rather than transcending them.

### Keywords

World Youth Congress Movement, 1936-1939, International Youth Movement

### Disciplines

History | Political History

### Comments

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“Youth of the World,  
Unite So That You May Live”



**The World Youth Congress Movement, 1936-1939**

Kevin P. Lavery

# Key Questions

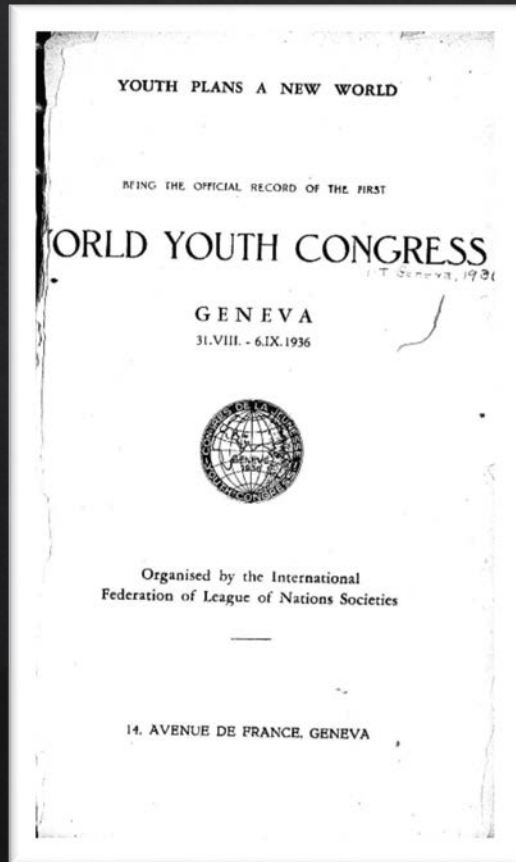
- ◆ What does it mean to be a “communist-front organization” and how useful is that label for understanding the World Youth Congress Movement (WYCM)?
  - ◆ Did communists exert total dominance or were there limitations to their control?
  - ◆ Were the liberal and socialist supporters of the WYCM naïve “innocents” who had allowed their voices to be appropriated or were their motives more complex?
- ◆ What can be made of the entangled interests and competing ideologies at the heart of the WYCM?

It is more useful to view the **World Youth Congress Movement** as an arena of ideological accommodation between liberal internationalists and communists.

# “Youth Plans a New World”

## The First World Youth Congress

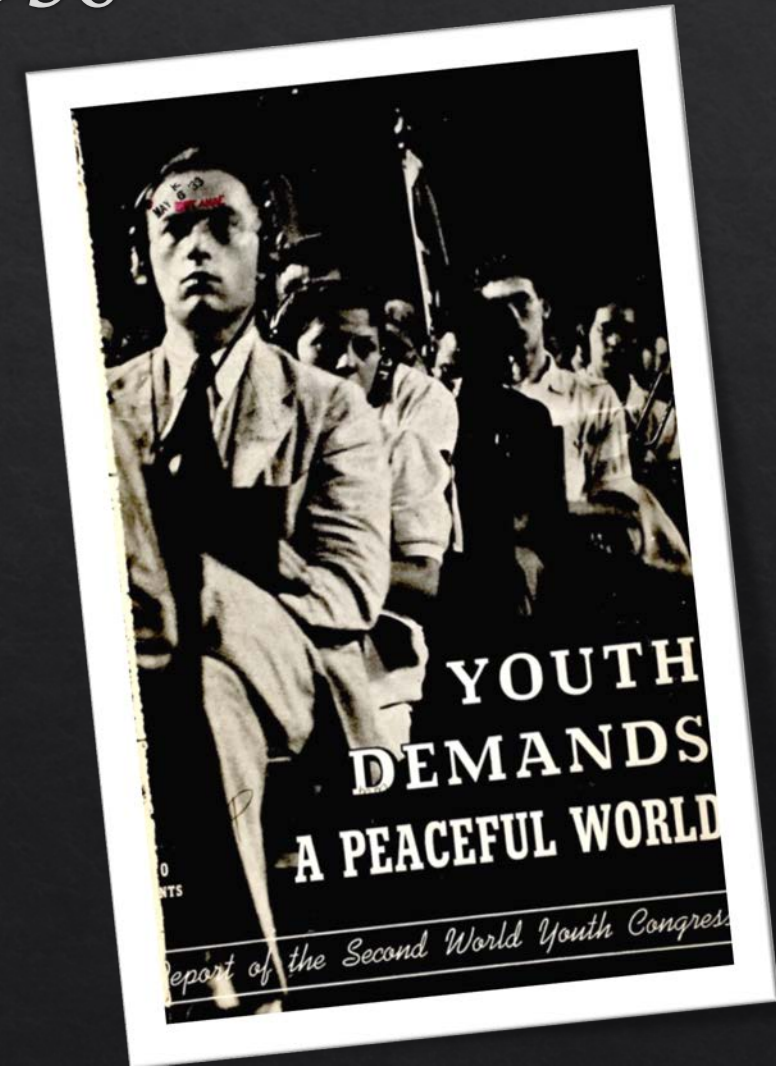
August 31–September 6, 1936



- ◇ Organized under the auspices of the **International Federation of League of Nations Societies**.
  - ◇ Its **Organizing Committee** was composed of older internationalists and youth delegates, with a growing communist presence.
- ◇ Held in Geneva, Switzerland, and emphasized peace and cooperation.
- ◇ Faced backlash over communist involvement and ties to **World Youth Community**, prompting German, Italian, and Catholic groups to withdraw.
- ◇ Concluded with the founding of the **World Youth Congress Movement** under International Secretary **Elizabeth Shields-Collins** (a British crypto-communist).

# “Youth Demands a Peaceful World” The Second World Youth Congress August 31–September 6, 1936

- ◆ Focused on broadening representation to assert claim as the universal voice of youth.
  - ◆ Reached new audiences in the colonial world, but the Right remains skeptical.
- ◆ Again accused of subversion but defended by liberal supporters, who conservatives considered “dupes.”
  - ◆ Prominent advocates included **Eleanor Roosevelt**, **Henry Noble MacCracken**, and **James Shotwell**.
- ◆ Recognized by the communist-organized **World Youth Community** as the embodiment of its aims.
- ◆ Adopted an agenda that saw “peace and cooperation” manifest more overtly as anti-fascism.
- ◆ Resulted in the extension of national committees into 26 different countries.



# Archival Research

- ◆ Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New York, NY
  - ◆ Carnegie Council on Ethics & International Affairs Records
  - ◆ James Thomson Shotwell Papers
- ◆ Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, Hyde Park, NY
  - ◆ Papers of Anna Eleanor Roosevelt
  - ◆ Papers of Charles W. Taussig
  - ◆ Personal Papers of Franklin Delano Roosevelt
- ◆ International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, Netherlands
  - ◆ Global Social and Political Developments Collection
  - ◆ World Youth Congress Collection
- ◆ Labour History Archive & Study Centre, Manchester, UK
  - ◆ Labour Party Archive
  - ◆ Papers of the Communist Party of Great Britain
- ◆ London School of Economics, London, UK
  - ◆ League of Nations Union. Minutes, files, accounts, publications and other records including branch papers.
- ◆ Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, PA
  - ◆ Netherlands Collective Box
  - ◆ Youth and Students Collection
- ◆ Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York, NY
  - ◆ American Youth Congress Collection
  - ◆ Communist Party of the United States of America
- ◆ Vassar College Archives and Special Collections, Poughkeepsie, NY
  - ◆ Papers of President Henry Noble MacCracken