

We came together at a time of mourning and rage — after nearly a year of witnessing, in horror, the live-streamed genocide in Gaza — to visit the archives of the International Institute of Social History (IISH). Located in the Indische Buurt in Amsterdam — a neighborhood of streets named for the Moluccas, Java, and other islands in the Indonesian Archipelago — the archive sits in a landscape still saturated with Dutch colonial history.

Our presence at the IISH responded to a commission by The Institute for Technology in the Public Interest that asked us to consider a set of questions that felt both urgent and significant: What does infrastructural resistance look like? How are infrastructural struggles preserved visually as part of historical legacies of resistance and liberation? What visual lexicon and quotidian political aesthetics might transform affective relations to infrastructures?

Throughout the autumn and winter of 2024, our visits offered a form of solace — not by easing grief and rage, but by placing them in context — among the stubborn traces of liberation and the animating threads of internationalist solidarities preserved in images, charts, posters, clippings, and communiqués. We encountered abolitionist work not as abstraction but as decolonial artifacts, fragments from lived experiences and material struggles.

Indeed, to work in the archive is to confront its paradoxes. The IISH — a leading research institution for social and economic history, holding vast collections on the labor movement, emancipatory groups, and social inequality — inhabits a building that once served as a colonial warehouse. It was part of Amsterdam’s Municipal Trade Depot, where cocoa, coffee, tea, and other commodities of empire were stored, circulated, and taxed. Its thick concrete floors, built to bear the weight of global plunder, now carry shelves of paper, photographs, film reels, and ephemeral records documenting resistance to the very system it once serviced.

The fact that these stubborn materials now support our research on liberation is no coincidence — it reminds us that archives are also infrastructures, material forms with colonial genealogies.

Engaging with the visual record of liberation means confronting the technical disposition of the archive itself. Our archival work did not start with manifestos or banners, but with a cold, glowing query box on a screen — a digitized archive mediated by servers, hard drives, and cloud infrastructures scattered across the Netherlands.

While hard copies of posters, films, and other visual material are available on site, copyright restrictions carve online images into fragments; posters are sliced and watermarked, and permission to download certain material is often withheld. In this sense, the archive is also an enclosure — a technology that filters what enters and what is excluded, determining how social histories can be accessed, copied, or circulated, and in what languages information is displayed, searched, and retrieved.

With no specific time period or geography prescribed, our inquiry gradually turned toward traces of liberation rooted in the places we

come from and the constellations of solidarity of which they are part. Materials on South Africa appeared in great abundance, while the archive offered comparatively little on Palestine or Lebanon. Nevertheless, despite this unevenness, we encountered a wealth of materials.

The Komitee Zuidelijk Afrika / Mondlane Stichting Photograph Collection offers a vivid record of Dutch and international solidarity with southern African liberation struggles: photographs of mass meetings, cultural festivals, picket lines at corporate headquarters, and posters pasted across European cities demanding an end to apartheid.

The Anti-Apartheids Beweging Nederland Photo Collection complements this with striking visual traces of demonstrations, student occupations, and everyday practices of boycott and divestment, alongside portraits of exiled leaders and grassroots activists who carried the struggle into Dutch streets.

The Shipping Research Bureau Archive adds yet another layer: meticulous investigative reports, tanker charts, embargo-busting exposés, and correspondence with the ANC, documenting how oil multinationals and European governments colluded to keep apartheid’s energy lifelines flowing in defiance of international sanctions. Alongside these, the No Fuel for Apartheid posters cut through with sharp visual clarity — graphic calls to boycott Shell (the British-Dutch petrochemical giant born in the Dutch East Indies) and other petrochemical giants, exposing how Dutch capital profited directly from apartheid’s machinery of racial capitalism.

Amid this rich material, we also uncovered the Joost Hilberman Collection — a rare and invaluable corpus of Palestinian labor pamphlets, student newsletters, and women’s movement publications produced in the years after the 1967 occupation and during the First Intifada. These materials testify to a silenced history of working-class and feminist resistance: leaflets printed in cramped type, manifestos outlining strategies for organizing under military rule, and reports on strikes and cooperatives that reimagined social reproduction as a terrain of struggle.

Lebanon, too, surfaced in fragments: documents from grassroots organizations detailing improvised health infrastructures forged under siege — from field hospitals in the south to networks of medical supply distribution that enabled survival through decades of Israeli invasion and bombardment.

The postcards in this package are drawn from those fragments. Each card holds an insurgent record: photographs by local and international collectives documenting

rail wagons filled with Black African workers repurposing infrastructures of subjugation as sites of spiritual redemption; unmarked images of sabotage against rail lines by uMkhonto weSizwe, the armed wing of the ANC; clippings reporting attacks on the Sasolberg coal-to-oil plant; meticulous charts and letters from the Shipping Research Bureau, produced in collaboration with the ANC, mapping clandestine tanker routes circumventing sanctions; and posters from the Anti-Apartheid Movement calling for a boycott of Shell, whose oil kept apartheid alive despite embargoes.

Other postcards include a statement by the workers’ union of the Jerusalem Electricity Company, distributed by the Women’s Committee for Social Action to defend Palestinian energy sovereignty; booklets from Palestinian labor, student, and women’s movements that laid the groundwork for the First Intifada; and a poster by Secours Populaire Libanais (Popular Lebanese Aid), a health organization formed in 1972 in southern Lebanon to withstand Israeli bombardment, preserved in the collection of the Committee of Moroccan Workers in Holland.

Echoes of this abolitionist work continue into the present. As Israeli settler colonialism weaponizes land, fuel, water, electricity, and food, Palestinian-led initiatives such as the recent Global Energy Embargo for Palestine and Mask Off Maersk build on and sharpen the strategies of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. They trace the supply chains that sustain dispossession and intervene to disrupt them. Through port blockades, shipping slowdowns, and the exposure of corporate complicity, labor organizing and internationalist solidarity demonstrates that the circuits of empire are not fixed but vulnerable to interruption and redirection.

The screenshots of social media posts from these campaigns are included not only as contemporary records but also as evidence of abolitionist practice — the ongoing effort to dismantle imperial infrastructures while assembling new forms of solidarity. Placed alongside archival materials, they underscore the continuity between struggles, asserting that today’s digital traces are part of a living, contested archive of resistance. Scrolling through these feeds, one senses the same urgency that animated the leaflets and posters four decades ago.

To sit with these fragments is to be reminded that the labor of liberation and abolition is never complete. We inherit both the weight of history and its persistent echoes that insist on solidarity as a material force. This stack of postcard extends that inheritance, inviting you to literally unfold history — to remember the fabric of resistance and solidarity.

Each postcard carries part of a visual lexicon of the infrastructures of struggle: the chart, the poster, the photograph, the pamphlet, the clipping. Collectively, they show how empire survives through trains, pipes, grids, tankers, and clouds — but also that such circuits can be sabotaged, blockaded, repurposed, reimagined, and reconstituted. To unfold, detach, and share these images is to engage with a stubborn visual trail of liberation and abolitionist infrastructure, where the past walks beside us, whispering its unfinished tales. In these fragments, we recognize that solidarity is itself an infrastructure we must continue to build — across archives, across struggles, across the stubborn terrains of history.

Against empire’s warehouses and enclosures, against the heavy concrete that stores both cocoa and memory, the accordion proposes another form of storage — one that disperses, circulates, and multiplies, but also gathers, confronts, and aligns. It reminds us that liberation and the work of abolition are as much about dismantling oppressive infrastructures as they are about building the conditions for another life.

Colophon

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The materials from the IISH archives include the following collections: Palestinian Labour and Women’s Movements Collection; Komitee Zuidelijk Afrika/Mondlane Stichting Photo Collection; Anti-Apartheids Beweging Nederland Photo Collection (1-7, 15, 25, 75); Shipping Research Bureau Archief (174-179); No Fuel for Apartheid Posters; and Le Sud Liban sous les bombes.

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This collection of postcards is a gift. Please reuse in accordance with the Collective Commitment to Reuse (cc2r) <https://gitlab.constantvzw.org/cc2r/v1.0>. Original materials remain at IISH, and might be subject to copyright restrictions.

The past walks beside us, whispering its unfinished tales.