

The Communist International in Lenin's Time

John Riddell

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Introduction

By John Riddell

The first years of the 21st century have seen coordinated worldwide actions and international collaboration by progressive movements on a scale not seen for many decades.

Massive actions against capitalist globalisation in 1999-2001, the rise of the World Social Forum, coordinated protests by tens of millions against the US-led war in Iraq in 2003, and world days of action to protect the environment have all testified to awareness that the great problems before us can be resolved only on a world scale.

Meanwhile, the stubborn resistance to imperialist wars in the Middle East and the rise of popular struggles in Latin America have thrown the US empire onto the defensive. The government of Venezuela, together with Cuba, has built an international alliance for sovereignty and against neo-liberalism, called the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA). Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez has pointed to the need for progressive and anti-capitalist movements to unite in international association.

Such recent initiatives continue the tradition of the workers' movement since the mid-19th century. The Communist League (1847-52), whose leaders included Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, published a world program, the Manifesto of the Communist Party, which still serves as the foundation of revolutionary socialism and concludes with the words, "Working people of all countries, unite!"

Marx and Engels were among the central leaders of the International Working Men's Association (1864-76). Engels took part in the formation in 1889 of the Socialist (Second) International, which came to include mass socialist parties in most of the main developed capitalist states.

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A conservative wing developed within the Second International, which led to its collapse at the outbreak of World War I in 1914. The International's most authoritative parties abandoned the interests of working people in order to rally behind their respective imperialist rulers in prosecuting the war effort. The conflict in the Second International is described in the first article of this collection, "Socialism's Great Divide".

Amid the wreckage of the Second International, revolutionary opponents of the imperialist war organised in the Zimmerwald Movement, named for the town in Switzerland where they met in 1915 (see "From Zimmerwald to Moscow"). That current included the leaders of the revolution that brought Russian workers and peasants to power in October 1917.

The Communist International or "Comintern" was founded in March 1919 on the initiative of the Bolshevik Party of Russia. It united revolutionary opponents of capitalism from diverse origins and with a wide range of viewpoints: Marxists of different hues, revolutionary anarchists, pioneer fighters against colonial domination.

Lenin declared that the Comintern's foundation "heralds the international republic of soviets, the international victory of communism".

These hopes were not realised. The upsurge of workers' struggles following the First World War was defeated everywhere outside Russia. In Russia itself, the Bolshevik Party and Comintern soon fell into the grip of a bureaucratic faction headed by Joseph Stalin. The Comintern ceased to be a revolutionary force. Most of the Comintern's founding leaders in Soviet territory fell victim to Stalin's murderous purges. The International was dissolved in 1943.

However, during its first five years, while still led by Lenin and his closest collaborators, the Communist International elaborated a program and strategy that incorporate the lessons of the revolutionary era whose climax was the Russian revolution.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to introduce that program.

December 2007

1. Socialism's Great Divide

For socialists, 2007 marks a significant anniversary.

One hundred years ago, a congress of the Second — or Socialist — International took a bold stand in the struggle against capitalist war. The congress pointed the way toward the Russian revolution of 1917 and provided an enduring guide for socialists' anti-war activity.

Founded in 1889, the Second International united mass socialist and labour parties, mostly in Europe.

The 1907 congress, which met in Stuttgart, Germany, on August 18-24, revealed a divide in the International between those aiming for capitalism's overthrow and the "opportunists" — those who sought to adapt to the existing order.

The congress took place at the dawn of the epoch of modern imperialism. Europe was teetering on the edge of war between rival great-power alliances. A revolutionary upsurge in Russia in 1905 had inspired mass strikes and demonstrations across Europe. In such conditions, how was the International's longstanding opposition to militarism and colonialism to be applied?

As the 884 congress delegates from 25 countries began their work, the International's principles were challenged from within. A majority of the congress's Commission on Colonialism asked the congress not to "reject in principle every colonial policy" as colonisation "could be a force for civilisation".

Defenders of this resolution claimed that Europe needed colonial possessions for prosperity. When German Marxist Karl Kautsky proposed that "backward peoples" be approached in a "friendly manner", with an offer of tools and assistance, he was mocked by Netherlands delegate Hendrick Van Kol, speaking for the commission majority.

"They will kill us or even eat us", Van Kol said. "Therefore we must go there with weapons in hand, even if Kautsky calls that imperialism."

After heated debate, the congress rejected this racist position, resolving instead that "the civilising mission that capitalist society claims to serve is no more than a veil

for its lust for conquest and exploitation". But the close vote (127 to 108) showed that imperialism was, in Lenin's words, "infecting the proletariat with colonial chauvinism."

There was a similar debate on immigration. Some US delegates wanted the International to endorse bans against immigration of workers from China and Japan, who were, they said, acting as "unconscious strikebreakers." US delegate Morris Hillquit said that Chinese and other workers of the "yellow race" have "lagged too far behind to be organised [in unions]".

Kato Tokijiro of Japan commented acidly that US delegates were "clearly being influenced by the so-called Yellow Peril" — the racist fear of Asian domination.

US socialist Julius Hammer noted that Japanese and Chinese workers were learning fast how to fight capitalism and "could be very effectively organised". He argued, "All legal restrictions on immigration must be rejected."

The congress made no concessions to Hillquit's racism, but neither did it adopt Hammer's call for open borders.

Similar debates cropped up regarding women's oppression. In the women's suffrage commission, an influential current favoured giving priority to winning the right to vote for men. Rejecting this view, the congress insisted that the right-to-vote campaign must be "simultaneous" (for both genders) and "universal".

On the decisive question of the great powers' drive to war, a tense debate extended through six days.

All agreed to condemn war as "part of the very nature of capitalism", oppose "naval and land armaments", and, if war seems imminent, exert "every effort in order to prevent its outbreak".

But what did "every effort" mean, concretely? Delegates from France, led by Jean Jaurès, pressed the congress to commit to mass strikes and insurrections against a threatened war. German socialists, led by August Bebel, said such a stand would endanger their party's legal status, and, anyway, tactics could not be dictated in advance.

An acrimonious deadlock was broken thanks to an initiative of a small group of revolutionary socialists, led by Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin.

Luxemburg called on delegates to learn from the lesson of the 1905 Russian revolution. This upsurge "did not merely result from the Russo-Japanese war, it has also served to put an end to it". The anti-war resolution must project a struggle not merely to prevent war but to utilise the war crisis to promote revolution, she said.

Luxemburg's proposal projected radical action, pleasing Jaurès, while obeying Bebel's injunction not to decree tactics. And a wording was found that did not endanger the German party's legality.

"In case war should break out", the unanimously adopted resolution read, it is

socialists' duty "to intervene for its speedy termination and to strive with all their power to utilise the economic and political crisis created by the war to rouse the masses and thereby hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule."

Yet as the Bolsheviks later noted, the International's stand was "ambiguous and contradictory" on a key point. Both Bebel and Jaurès were pledged to loyalty to the homeland in "defensive" wars — a valid position in countries fighting for national liberation, but not for the imperialist powers like France and Germany. The resolution neither supported nor condemned this concept. The "defensive war" excuse was used by socialist leaderships, in 1914, to rally support behind the war efforts of their respective capitalist rulers — with disastrous results.

Lenin hailed the resolution for its "firm determination to fight to the end". But he also warned that the congress as a whole "brought into sharp contrast the opportunist and revolutionary wings within the International".

Over the following decade, war and revolution led to a decisive break between these the two wings, whose divergent courses still represent alternative roads for progressive struggles today.

The revolutionary wing led by Luxemburg, Lenin, and their co-thinkers held to the anti-war policy of Stuttgart until revolutions in Russia in 1917 and Germany in 1918 brought the First World War to an abrupt end.

A century after the 1907 congress, the socialist positions voiced there on war, colonialism, and oppression retain their importance, and provide a basis for building many fronts of resistance around the world.

2. From Zimmerwald to Moscow

During the upsurge of working class and liberation struggles that followed the 1917 Russian revolution, socialists from all continents joined in founding a world party, the Communist International, or “Comintern”.

The new International gave living expression to socialism’s guiding concept, “Working people of all countries, unite.”

After Lenin’s death, the International was effectively destroyed by the rise of Stalinism. But the International’s early congresses adopted the programmatic foundation on which revolutionary socialism stands today: on the united front, work in trade unions, liberation struggles of the oppressed, the nature of workers’ rule, and more.

The Comintern was born from the ashes of the previous, “Second” International, which collapsed at the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

Abandoning their pledges of anti-war resistance, leaders of socialist parties in most warring states rushed to support the war efforts of their respective ruling classes, promoting a slaughter that was to claim 20 million lives.

Only a small minority held to the Second International’s anti-war stance. But as the war progressed this minority drew strength from strikes, soldiers’ and sailors’ protests, and demonstrations in all warring countries.

In 1915, 42 antiwar socialists from 12 countries, meeting in Zimmerwald, Switzerland, adopted a historic statement that was to inspire anti-war protests in all the warring countries. The Zimmerwald Manifesto called for an international fight for peace, based on self-determination of nations and without annexations or indemnities.

A minority current at Zimmerwald, led by the Bolshevik Party of Russia, asked the conference to go further. Noting that the war was plunging European society into a deep crisis, it called for revolutionary struggle against the capitalist governments under the banner of socialism.

This current also favoured a “ruthless struggle” against opportunist forces in socialist parties whose pro-war stand had betrayed the workers’ movement. Known as the

Zimmerwald Left, it was the embryo of the future Communist International.

The Zimmerwald Left's strategy was soon vindicated. Worker-soldier revolutions in Russia in 1917 and Germany in 1918 overthrew their governments and forced an end to the war. In Russia, workers, soldiers, and peasants formed a revolutionary government based on their councils, or "soviets".

Across much of Europe, masses of workers turned away from their opportunist leaders and sought to follow the Russian example.

Lenin captured the spirit of the moment in his April 1919 assessment of the Comintern's foundation: "A new era in world history has begun. Mankind is throwing off ... capitalist, or wage, slavery ... Man is for the first time advancing to real freedom."

It was not easy for the revolutionary wing of world socialism to meet. A capitalist blockade barred travel to the young soviet republic. But after the German revolution, and formation of the German Communist Party under the leadership of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in December 1918, Bolshevik leaders felt it was urgent to convene an international congress, even if it was small.

Fifty-one delegates — only nine from outside Russia — met in Moscow March 2-6. They represented 22 countries. Two-thirds of the delegates were under 40 years old, and one-fifth of them represented Asian peoples. Against objections by the German delegate, who considered the move premature, the congress launched the Communist or Third International.

The central challenge before the congress was to clarify the example represented by the soviet government in Russia. At a moment when invading imperialist and counter-revolutionary armies placed the soviets' very survival in question, Lenin proposed to the congress some theses explaining the nature and potential of soviet power.

Its substance, he said, "is that the permanent and only foundation of state power, the entire machinery of state, is the mass-scale organisation of the classes oppressed by capitalism".

Soviet power "is so organised as to bring the working people close to the machinery of government". That is why the component councils are based on the workplace, not a territory. Working people's mass organisations are enlisted in "constant and unflinching participation in the administration of the state". Barriers to democracy such as the capitalist military, bureaucratic and judicial machinery are broken up.

Enemies of the soviet regime attacked it as dictatorial. It is indeed a dictatorship, Lenin affirmed, a temporary one against the forcible resistance of the exploiting class, which is "desperate", "furious", and "stops at nothing". To the masses oppressed by capitalism, however, it "provides an unparalleled extension of the actual enjoyment of

democracy”.

Capitalist “democracy”, by contrast, “is no more than a machine ... for the suppression of the working people by a handful of capitalists”.

Reality in the besieged soviet republic necessarily fell short of the soviets' potential, and the Bolsheviks recognised, as Lenin stated in July 1918, that victory over capitalism required “the joint effort of the workers of the world”.

The purpose of the new International was to “facilitate and hasten” that world victory, a task in which working people inside and outside soviet territory had an equal stake.

This victory required breaking from and exposing the “social-chauvinist current” — social-democrats who had supported the imperialist war and, after the war, helped repress workers in order to rebuild the capitalist state.

The International also criticised those who favoured reuniting chauvinists and revolutionaries in a single movement.

However, the congress proposed a bloc with revolutionary forces that previously stood outside the socialist movement but now had been won to the banner of soviet power.

The resolutions of the Communist International's founding congress were far from comprehensive. Very little was said on colonial liberation, for example, and only a few brief paragraphs on the oppression of women.

Its main achievement lay in hoisting the banner of the new movement. This action was swiftly vindicated. In the three months following the founding congress, mass workers' parties in Italy, Norway, Sweden, and Bulgaria joined the International, while parties in Germany, France, and Britain opened negotiations to join.

On the International's first anniversary, in March 1920, Lenin was able to say, “The Communist International has been successful beyond all expectation.”

3. Building Revolutionary Parties

In March 1919, the founding congress of the Communist International called on workers of the world to unite “under the banner of workers’ councils and the revolutionary struggle for power”.

The appeal succeeded beyond its founders’ expectations. During the year that followed, organisations representing millions of workers on several continents declared support for the new International.

Indeed, the International noted in August 1920 that the statements of support it was receiving had become “rather fashionable”. In conditions of capitalist collapse and near civil war across most of Europe, some working class leaders whose course was far from revolutionary felt compelled to pay lip service to the new International. Many figures who had betrayed the working class during the First World War were knocking at the International’s doors.

But little progress had been made in organising revolutionary-minded working people outside Russia to contest the power of the employing class.

Events in Germany where a workers’ and soldiers’ revolution had overthrown the monarchy in November 1918, were instructive. In the early months of 1919, Germany’s capitalist rulers, aided by the German Social Democratic Party, had been able to provoke workers into premature armed conflicts, one city at a time, with no concerted national response. Capitalist terror claimed the lives of hundreds of working class fighters, including the central leaders of the German Communist Party.

In Hungary, the unreadiness of local communists contributed to the overthrow of a revolutionary government in 1919 by invading armies, after four months’ rule.

The challenge before the International’s Second Congress, held in Moscow from July 19 to August 7, 1920, was to explain how revolutionary forces could unite worldwide in building organisations with a leadership capacity comparable to that of the Bolshevik Party, which had headed the struggle for soviet power in Russia.

Delegates came from 37 countries, representing not only small groupings but also several parties with tens of thousands of members and strong ties with the broad

working-class movement. Currents with many contrasting viewpoints attended, including representatives of left-wing social-democratic parties in France, Germany, and Italy that were wavering between a revolutionary and a pro-capitalist course.

In the free-wheeling congress debate, some of these figures tried to paint up their credentials by raising “leftist” criticisms of Bolshevik policy, chiding them for encouraging Russian peasants to divide up great estates, or for supporting national liberation movements in the British, French, and other colonies.

The congress began by explaining the need for all the revolutionary forces in each country to unite in a party. “Every class struggle is a political struggle” that “has as its goal the conquest of political power”, the congress theses stated. And power “cannot be seized, organised, and directed other than by some kind of political party” that serves as a “unifying and leading centre” for all aspects of working-class struggle.

Such a party represents the most revolutionary part of the working class, the theses stated. But the communist party “has no interests different from those of the working class as a whole” and is active in all broad organisations of working people, including in the rural villages.

The party must be governed by “democratic centralism”, exemplified by the Bolshevik Party of the time, which assured full internal democracy in reaching decisions, but demanded unity in applying them.

The Bolsheviks insisted that the revolutionary movement must be cleansed of the pro-capitalist current that had led the Socialist International to disaster in 1914. In line with this thinking, the congress took special measures to fend off opportunist leaders seeking to find a niche in the new International.

Delegates adopted 21 conditions for admission to the International. These theses restated principles of revolutionary functioning that had proven crucial in post-1914 experience, such as:

- Control by the party in each country over its publications and its parliamentary representatives.
- Commitment to revolutionary work among peasants and in the army.
- Active support for liberation movements in the colonies.
- Readiness to resist repression through underground activity.

The theses also insisted on a clear organisational break with forces “who reject on principle the [21] conditions”.

Revolutionary socialists held that the flouting of International congress decisions by national leaderships had been a key factor in the Socialist International’s collapse in 1914. The 1920 congress agreed that the new International must be centralised, and that the International’s decisions must be binding on its member parties.

But the congress also resolved not to infringe member parties' autonomy in the day-to-day struggle. Given "the diverse conditions under which each party has to struggle and work", the congress stated, "universally binding decisions" would be adopted "only on questions in which such decisions are possible".

International centralism was expressed through Comintern decisions on world issues of broad principle and strategy, backed up with prudent advice to and loyal collaboration with elected national leaderships.

The Comintern was not free from harmful interference in national party affairs by some of its international representatives. But Lenin and Trotsky, its most authoritative leaders, held to a policy of patient and non-intrusive education. Their approach won ground during the International's first four years.

In 1921, the Comintern adopted detailed instructions on the organisational structure of a communist party. Yet the following year, Lenin noted that this "excellently drafted" and accurate resolution "has remained a dead letter" because "everything in it is based on Russian conditions".

Communists abroad "must assimilate part of the Russian experience" through study and through traversing similar experiences on their own.

Following the Second Congress, the left social-democratic currents split: hundreds of thousands of members were won to the new International, while others retreated to pro-capitalist reformism.

This process helped open the doors of the International to a new generation attracted to the example of the Russian revolution, many of whom, initially at least, stood outside the socialist movement.

Two such non-socialist currents were of particular importance:

- Syndicalists — that is, revolutionaries influenced by anarchism, who rejected the need for a party and a workers' government.
- Revolutionary nationalists in countries oppressed by imperialism.

Each of these viewpoints has support today among many young activists around the world. Subsequent instalments of this series will consider how the new International undertook to win such non-socialist revolutionaries.

4. Colonised Peoples Take the Lead

The prominent role of revolutionists from Asia in the Communist International marked a breakthrough for the world socialist movement.

At the International's Second Congress in 1920, 11 countries from Asia were represented. A delegate from India, M.N. Roy, later wrote "for the first time, brown and yellow men met with white men who were no overbearing imperialists but friends and comrades."

The pre-1914 Socialist International had largely failed to embrace struggles of colonial peoples. The Comintern's founders, by contrast, had hailed the new leading role of oppressed peoples.

In his 1913 article, "Backward Europe and Advanced Asia" Lenin wrote that in Asia "hundreds of millions of people are awakening to life, light and freedom. What delight this world movement is arousing in the hearts of all class-conscious workers."

When the First World War ended, freedom struggles broke out across Asia, impelled by the victors' denial of colonial self-determination.

Addressing the Second Congress, Lenin noted that 70% of the world's population "are either in a state of direct colonial dependence or are semi-colonies". The "cardinal idea" underlying the Second Congress theses on the national and colonial questions, he said, was "the distinction between oppressed and oppressor nations".

According to these theses, the Comintern's goal lay in "uniting the proletarians and toiling masses of all nations" in a common struggle "to overthrow the landowners and the bourgeoisie". But to achieve that goal, the theses stated, "all communist parties must directly support the revolutionary movement among the nations that are dependent ... and in the colonies."

Introducing the theses, Lenin insisted on the need to distinguish reformist currents that accept the colonial framework and "national-revolutionary movements", even though the program of the latter remains "bourgeois-democratic" rather than socialist.

The theses called for support for peasant movements in dependent countries “against the landowners and all forms and vestiges of feudalism”, and the organising of the peasants into soviets (revolutionary councils).

Yet communist forces cannot dissolve into the national-revolutionary movement, the theses cautioned. They “absolutely must maintain the independent character of the proletarian movement, even in its embryonic stage”, in order to defend workers’ historic interests.

The Comintern’s defence of colonial peoples extended to Asian immigrants in the US, Canada and Australia who faced discrimination and exclusion not only by governments but also by some trade unions.

The Comintern called for “a vigorous campaign against restrictive immigration laws”, equal wages for non-white workers, and their organisation into the unions.

The Dutch communist Henk Sneevliet, representing what is now Indonesia, told delegates that “no question on the entire agenda has such great importance” as the national and colonial questions. Lenin delivered the main report on this question, and drafted the theses.

Some delegates did not share this view. Giacinto Serrati, leader of the Italian Socialist Party, deplored the 10 minutes that had been spent discussing black oppression in the US.

His compatriot Antonio Graziadei moved an amendment to weaken “support” of liberation movements down to merely taking “an active interest in” them.

Two years later, the Comintern’s Fourth Congress chastised the French party because its Algiers section advanced “a purely slaveholder’s point of view” with respect to the Algerian struggle for self-determination.

But most communist leaders in advanced countries rallied in support of colonial liberation struggles. Among them was US communist John Reed, who told Asian delegates assembled in 1920 in Baku in petroleum-rich Azerbaijan, “Do you know how ‘Baku’ is pronounced in American? It is pronounced ‘oil’! And American capitalism is striving to establish a world monopoly of oil ... The American bankers and the American capitalists attempt everywhere to conquer the places and enslave the peoples where oil is found ... The East will help us overthrow capitalism in Western Europe and America.”

The acid test of Comintern policy was, of course, the conduct of its Russian component, the Bolshevik party, toward the subject peoples that accounted for half the former Russian empire’s population. When workers and peasants took power in 1917, one of the soviet government’s first actions was to proclaim the right of all subject peoples within the former Russian empire to “free self-determination up to

and including the right to secede”.

Peoples who opted to remain in Soviet Russia were offered autonomy within the soviet federation, including authority over language, education, and culture. An early soviet appeal pledged to Muslim workers and farmers — a majority in vast reaches of Russia's Asian territories — that “henceforth your beliefs and customs, your national and cultural institutions are declared free and inviolable”. The appeal urged them to “build your national life freely and without hindrance”.

Substantial resources were allocated to enable peoples still at the dawn of national consciousness to develop their language, culture, and educational system. Their religious customs and traditions were recognised, as was their right to land recently seized by Russian colonists, while their nationals received preference in administrative appointments.

These policies inspired thousands of nationalist revolutionaries from the oppressed peoples to join the Bolshevik party and help shape and implement its nationalities policy. (See appendix.)

This process of revolutionary fusion was extended across much of Asia by the Congress of Peoples of the East organised by the Comintern in Baku in 1920.

The 1900 congress delegates called for “a holy war for the liberation of the peoples of the East ... To end the division of countries into advanced and backward, dependent and independent, metropolitan and colonial!” The magazine established by the congress was published under the title, endorsed by Lenin, “Workers of all countries and all oppressed peoples, unite!”

Communist Parties were formed that year in Turkey, Egypt, Iran, India (in exile), Korea, and Indonesia, and the following year in China. East Asian revolutionists met in a separate congress held in 1922. That same year, a massive rise of workers' struggles in China confirmed that the peoples of the East, as Lenin had declared nine years earlier, were taking their place in the vanguard of the world's freedom struggles.

5. Reaching Out to the Peasantry

The agrarian reform enacted by the Russian soviet government in 1917 challenged the thinking of the world Marxist movement.

Previously, socialist commentary on agricultural policy had mostly been limited to describing the inevitable decline of small-holding peasantry under capitalism and the merits of large-scale cooperative production. Poor peasants' struggle for land was often described as running counter to the movement for socialism.

Yet the Decree on Land proposed by Lenin and adopted by a November 1917 soviet congress in Russia, while nationalising the land and favouring maintenance of "high-level scientific farming" enterprises under state or local control, left the vast majority of rural land to be distributed "on an equality basis" by the peasants themselves through their local soviets.

The decree, which Lenin noted had been "copied word for word" from ordinances compiled by peasant soviets, launched a transformation of rural social relations in Russia, in which large-scale private land ownership disappeared and economic differentiation among peasants was reduced.

This land reform sealed an alliance between workers and peasants (*smychka*) that endured through all the strains of civil war, enabling soviet power to survive.

Of course, socialists worldwide could not simply copy the Russian land reform. Agrarian conditions varied enormously around the world. Farmers made up almost the entire working population in some countries and only a small minority in others.

When the Communist International was formed in 1919, many of its member parties remained hostile to poor peasants' struggle for land. During the months of soviet power in Hungary that year, communists in that country applied a land policy that they considered superior to that of the Bolsheviks — expropriated estates were operated without change.

Lenin commented that Hungarian "day labourers saw no changes and the small peasants got nothing" and thus had no reason to defend the revolutionary government.

Similar policies produced equally bad results during struggles for power in Finland,

Poland, Italy, and other countries.

Lenin's draft theses on the peasant question at the International's 1920 congress were criticised by some delegates for "left opportunism" and "concessions to the agricultural petty bourgeoisie". The theses, adopted only after much debate, stressed that industrial workers cannot defeat capitalism "if they confine themselves to ... their narrow, trade union interests". Victory depends on "carrying the class struggle into the countryside" and "rallying the rural toiling masses".

In the countryside, "the poor working peasants and the small tenants are the natural fighting allies of the agricultural and industrial proletariat", a 1922 Comintern resolution stated.

The Comintern focused its attention not on the long-term merits of cooperative production but on the immediate task of forming alliances with the peasantry. Its starting point was that rural producers are class-divided. Its 1920 theses identified six layers, of which two — rural wage-workers who are landless and those who own tiny plots — will gain "significant and immediately effective" benefits from soviet power.

A third layer, the poor or "small" peasants, who own or rent lands barely sufficient to cover their families' needs, will be freed by a working-class victory from many forms of capitalist exploitation, such as paying rent or sharecropping or mortgages on their land, the theses stated. In addition, the workers' state will provide them with material assistance (such as equipment or seeds) and "a portion of the lands of large capitalist enterprises".

Even though small peasants have been "corrupted by speculation and the habits of proprietorship" they will be drawn to the side of the working class by the revolution's "decisive settling of accounts" with large landowners, the theses stated.

At the other end of the scale, the theses viewed large estate owners and peasants relying on hired labour as enemies of the working class, although they argued that such rich peasants should be left in possession of the lands they work, at least initially.

In advanced countries, Lenin's theses said, large agricultural enterprises should be preserved under state ownership, but even there, in many situations, "distributing the large landowners' land will prove to be the surest method of winning the peasantry" even if it entails "a temporary decrease in production".

Communist parties "fight against all forms of capitalist exploitation against the poor and middle peasants" and strive to lead "every struggle waged by the rural working masses against the ruling class" the Comintern's 1922 resolution stated. Through such struggle, agricultural workers and poor peasants will learn "that a real and lasting improvement" in their position "is impossible under the capitalist system".

In colonial and semi-colonial countries, the Comintern viewed the peasantry as "a

key factor in the struggle against imperialism”. But for the peasants, this struggle embraced social goals. “Only an agrarian revolution can arouse the vast peasant masses.” It also cautioned that peasants’ liberation “will not be achieved merely by winning political independence”. They must “overthrow the rule of their landlords and bourgeoisie”.

The International applied a similar policy of alliances to middle layers in the cities — independent tradespeople, merchants and “the so-called middle class” including “technicians, white-collar workers, the middle and lower-ranking civil servants and the intelligentsia”.

In conditions of capitalist crisis, these layers face “deteriorating standards of living” and “insecurity” stated the Comintern’s Theses on Tactics, adopted in 1921.

They are driven “either into the camp of open counter-revolution or into the camp of revolution.” Communists need to win such forces and “draw [them] into the proletarian front”.

The International acknowledged the economic ties linking peasants and other independent producers to capitalism. Yet as Lenin noted in 1913, “Petty production keeps going under capitalism only by squeezing out of the [independent] worker a larger amount of work than is squeezed out of the worker in large-scale production.”

The peasant “must work (for capital) harder than the wage-worker”. And this burden falls heaviest on the peasant woman, who “must exert herself ever so much more ... to the detriment of her health and the health of her children”.

6. For Women's Emancipation

It was socialist women who made the first international appeal against the First World War, at a March 1915 conference organised by German revolutionist Clara Zetkin in Switzerland.

Two years later, a socialist women's celebration of International Women's Day in St Petersburg set in motion the mass movement that overthrew the Russian tsar.

Yet despite their key role, women were few in number and weak in influence in the socialist movement of the time. Even in the Bolshevik party, they made up only 8% of the membership in 1922.

Not only did women in 1917 lack the vote in all major countries, they were chained in servitude by a thick web of discriminatory laws and by sexist oppression.

The soviet government established in November 1917 took swift action to counter women's oppression, and its achievements defined the Communist International's program on this question.

Women in Soviet Russia achieved full legal and political rights, including the right to hold property, act as head of the household, leave the husband's home, and obtain a divorce on request.

Soviet law guaranteed women equal pay for equal work, while also providing protection for women on the job. Other laws aimed to protect and assist mothers, while assuring full rights for children born outside marriage. Abortion became legal and free in 1920.

Women's freedom of choice was also strengthened by the soviet law, adopted in 1922, legalising homosexual relations among consenting adults.

Europe's most backward country had achieved more in two years than the advanced capitalist countries accomplished in the previous century — or the half-century that was to follow. But for the Bolsheviks, these measures were but an initial step. New laws had to be translated into social reality, and that could be done only under leadership of women themselves.

In 1919, the Bolshevik party created the Zhenotdel (women's department), an

organisation that united women in struggle to affirm their new legal rights. Thousands of Zhenotdel workers went to workers' districts and rural villages. They organised "women's clubs" and the election of tens of thousands of women delegates who received several months' training, served as judges, and helped organise institutions serving women.

Large numbers of women enlisted in the soviet Red Army. Nearly 2000 were killed during the Civil War, and 55 were awarded the soviet Order of the Red Banner for valour in combat.

"Notwithstanding all the laws emancipating woman", Lenin wrote in 1919, "she continues to be a domestic slave, because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and she wastes her labour on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery."

The real emancipation of women, Lenin continued, begins with the "wholesale transformation [of housekeeping] into a large-scale socialist economy", beginning with "public catering establishments, nurseries, kindergartens". Communal kitchens became widespread during the first years of soviet rule.

The early congresses of the Communist International found little time to discuss women's emancipation. Still, a great deal was achieved, in terms of both program and activity.

"Theses for the Communist Women's Movement" written in 1920 by Clara Zetkin, acknowledged that the pre-1914 Second International had taken a clear stand for women's "full social liberation and full equal rights", but noted a flagrant "gulf between theory and practice".

The Second International, Zetkin said, had permitted member parties to ignore the resolution of its 1907 congress in Stuttgart requiring all parties to campaign for the right to vote for all women.

The Comintern sought to ensure action on issues affecting women by establishing in 1920 a women's secretariat, headed by Zetkin and based in Moscow. In order to lead member parties in recruiting and educating women and fighting for women's rights, the secretariat published a monthly magazine, *The Communist Women's International*, and collaborated with women's committees organised at various levels in the International's member parties.

The socialist movement of the time had a critical stance toward "bourgeois feminists" and sought to win women to the working-class movement.

A 1921 resolution of the International affirms that "there is no special women's question, nor should there be a special women's movement". Communism will be won "not by the united efforts of women of different classes, but by the united struggle

of all the exploited”.

However, the same resolution confirmed the need for commissions for work among women in all member parties, pointing to the example of Zhenotdel — a movement of worker and peasant women committed to women's emancipation.

With the rise of Stalinism, these moves were reversed. The international women's monthly magazine was closed in 1925, the women's secretariat in 1926, and the Zhenotdel in 1930.

The Comintern linked women's emancipation with working-class struggle because it believed women's oppression is rooted in private ownership of the productive economy and in class-divided society.

Zetkin's 1920 theses, written together with Zhenotdel leaders, stressed that male supremacy had originated with the arrival of private property, through which the wife, like the slave, had “become the property of the man” with “pariah status in the family and in public life”. To achieve women's full social equality, “private property must be uprooted”, and “women must be integrated into the social production of a new order free of exploitation and subjugation”.

Achieving women's equal rights in law, while significant, will leave working women — the vast majority — “still unfree and exploited ... their humanity stunted, and their rights and interests neglected”.

For women, “full political equality” is a means to struggle for “a social order cleansed of the domination of private property over human beings”.

“Communism”, the 1921 resolution added, “creates conditions whereby the conflict between the natural function of woman — maternity — and her social obligations, which hinder her creative work for the collective, will disappear.”

Women “will become co-owners of the means of production and distribution and will take part in administering them ... on an equal footing.”

7. For Class-Struggle Trade Unions

The revolutionary upsurge in Europe during and after the First World War threw the trade union movement across the continent into a profound upheaval.

Communist workers were challenged to unite revolutionary unionists with diverse ideological backgrounds, while deepening their roots in unions with right-wing leaderships.

When war broke out in 1914, pro-capitalist labour officials had harnessed the unions to the bourgeoisie's war machine. Workers' protest had found expression in new channels, such as organisations of left-wing shop stewards and newly formed factory committees. As Communist International leader Karl Radek commented in 1920, "Many of us thought that the trade union movement was finished".

During the Russian revolution, revolutionaries won the leadership of Russia's unions, which became a pillar of the new workers' and peasants' republic.

But when the German revolution broke out in November 1918, pro-capitalist labour officials moved quickly to negotiate economic gains for workers. Frightened bosses conceded the eight-hour day. Workers poured into the revived unions, whose membership tripled in a single year. The union officialdom provided a pro-capitalist buttress against revolution.

Meanwhile, most German communists were calling on workers to "get out of the trade unions". Many favoured building new "unitary organisations" that would combine the functions of a trade union and a political party.

Such views were widespread in the Communist International. US communists proclaimed their task to be "the destruction of the existing trades union organisations". And Italian leader Nicola Bombacci told the International's Second Congress that "I absolutely deny that trade unions have any revolutionary function whatever."

In Lenin's view, such a stand was "the greatest service communists could render the bourgeoisie". In his pamphlet *Left-Wing Communism: an Infantile Disorder*, written

in 1920, he stated that quitting the unions would leave workers under the influence of the “labour lieutenants of the capitalist class”.

Instead, communists “must absolutely work wherever the masses are to be found” even if repressive conditions required a “resort to various stratagems, artifices, and illegal methods”.

The trade union theses adopted by the International’s Second Congress, in 1920, called for communists to join unions “in order to turn them into instruments of conscious struggle for the overthrow of capitalism” and to “take the initiative in forming trade unions where none exist”.

Only by becoming “the most resolute leaders” of the struggle for decent living conditions, the theses stated, can communists prepare “to remove the opportunist leaders from the unions”.

The International advanced an “action program” of demands for unions’ daily struggle. In 1921, a time of sharp attacks from the bosses, these included:

- Fight factory closures and demand the right to investigate the causes; open the employers’ books.
- Organise the unemployed; force bosses to pay full wages to laid-off workers.
- When bosses demand wage cuts, unite workers across each industry to defend threatened workers.
- Against profit-sharing schemes, for workers’ control of production.

The International cautioned that “in the epoch of capitalism’s decline, the proletariat’s economic struggle turns into political struggle much more rapidly”. Communists must explain that labour’s economic struggle can be won only through workers’ rule and the construction of socialism.

While building class-struggle currents in the reformist-led unions, the Communist International was also seeking to merge with a union current that came from outside the socialist movement — revolutionary syndicalism.

Historically, the syndicalists shared communists’ commitment to class-struggle unionism and to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. But influenced by anarchist conceptions, they opposed building a revolutionary political party and struggling to establish a workers’ state.

Syndicalist labour federations comprised the majority of the union movement in France and Spain, and the US-based Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) had won respect. A wide range of syndicalist forces resisted the First World War and hailed the 1917 soviet revolution in Russia.

Despite major differences in ideology and program, the new International’s founders invited syndicalist currents to join its ranks. Since many syndicalist currents

rejected links with political parties, a separate organisation was launched — the Red International of Labour Unions or Profintern — to unite both Marxist and syndicalist unionists.

At the Second Congress, the proposal to work in reformist-led unions provoked what Comintern President Gregory Zinoviev later called “a most vexatious resistance” from delegates influenced by syndicalism. Debate lasted 40 hours. But congress these pledged communists to “support [syndicalist] revolutionary unions,” and Lenin proposed concessions to syndicalist currents, including agreement that the capacity of the International’s affiliated parties to lead revolutionary union work must be put to “a practical test”.

Although some syndicalist currents, like the IWW, turned away from the new International, a significant layer of syndicalists were integrated into the International. They were prominent among those who later supported Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition against Stalinism.

The Profintern was built as an alternative to pro-capitalist labour officials’ drive to yoke unions together in a pro-imperialist world labour federation, known as the Amsterdam International.

The pro-capitalist officials seized on the Profintern’s existence as a pretext for expulsions of many Comintern supporters from their national and industry-wide federations.

In 1924, Zinoviev noted that the Profintern had been “founded at a moment when it seemed that we should break through the enemy front in a frontal attack and quickly conquer the trade unions.” But the decline of working-class struggles in Europe after 1920 enabled the “Amsterdam” leaders to fend off this challenge.

Nonetheless, in the early 1920s, the Communist International won influence in reformist-led unions in several European countries, while beginning to gain a foothold in the labour movement of colonial and semi-colonial countries.

And perhaps the Red International of Labour Unions’ most important legacy was its example in reaching out to encompass revolutionary fighters from outside the Marxist tradition.

8. Initiatives for Unity in Struggle

On January 7, 1921, the German Communist Party addressed an unprecedented appeal to the country's working class political parties and trade unions.

The communists' Open Letter, modelled on an initiative by the party's rank and file in Stuttgart, called for united action to defend workers' living standards, organise self-defence against right-wing gangs, free political prisoners, and promote open trade with the Russian soviet republic.

The main target of this challenge was the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), whose leadership had since 1918 led the reconstruction of Germany's capitalist state and helped organise a murderous assault on the working class.

Yet the Open Letter's proposal spoke to an urgent problem. Although the Communist Party numbered in the hundreds of thousands, most workers still backed the SPD. How could the communists win their support? The Communist International's Third Congress, held later in 1921, witnessed a vigorous debate over this question.

Its *Theses on Tactics* stated that the task "is not to establish small communist sects aiming to influence the working masses purely through agitation and propaganda, but to participate directly in the struggle of the working masses" and win leadership of the struggle.

Social-democrats are "daily demonstrating" their "inability to fight even for the most modest demands", the theses stated. Communists, by contrast, raise demands reflecting "the immediate needs of the broad proletarian masses". These demands "in their totality, challenge the power of the bourgeoisie" and "organise the proletariat in the struggle for workers power".

To put this approach into action, over the next year the International developed a policy — modelled on the Open Letter initiative — that called for a "united front" of workers' organisations.

"The working masses sense the need of unity in action" whether in "resisting the onslaught of capitalism" or in "taking the offensive against it" Comintern leader Leon

Trotsky explained in March 1922. Therefore, the communist parties “must assume the initiative in securing unity in these current struggles”.

The united front policy consists of specific initiatives aimed at winning the working class to support unity in struggle. But to that end, communists are “prepared to negotiate with the scab leaders” and, in Trotsky’s words, “correlate in practice our actions with those of the reformist organisations” and “obligate ourselves to a certain discipline in action”.

A united front is possible only when based on the communist parties’ independence, which had been achieved in the period of the International’s foundation. Communists participating in a united front retained this independence and freedom to act and present their views.

Negotiations with reformist leaders must be fully reported to the ranks, whose pressure is decisive in bringing a united front into existence, the International stated.

This orientation came under heavy fire from ultra-left currents in the International, who were so strong at the Third Congress that Lenin stood, as he later commented, “on the extreme right flank”. But the united front policy was also opposed by right-wing leaders, who — as Trotsky noted — struck a pose of intransigence as a cover for their passivity.

Parties in France, Spain, and Italy rejected the united front, and in Italy this led to a historic tragedy. As the fascists’ violent attacks began in 1921-22 to destroy the workers’ movement, the Italian Communist Party rejected anti-fascist unity with other working-class currents. Even when this unity surged up from below in the form of united anti-fascist defence guards, the party held aloof. Fascism’s triumph in 1922 crushed the Italian workers’ movement for two decades.

In Germany, by contrast, the communists’ appeal for unity against right wing violence won a broad response. When the capitalist politician Walter Rathenau was murdered by right-wing army officers in 1922, communists drew the social-democratic parties and trade unions into mass actions for a purge of right-wingers from the army, an amnesty for jailed worker militants, and suppression of the violent right-wing gangs.

Meanwhile, communists built united front action committees in many fields — defence guards, unemployed committees, housewives’ committees, as well as factory councils, which became an effective left-wing force in the labour movement.

Did the united front tactic relate in any way to the struggle for governmental power? The communists called for a republic of workers’ councils (soviets), and the councils that sprang up in Russia (1917) and Germany (1918) encompassed all workers’ parties. The demand “all power to the soviets” was thus set in a framework of working

class unity.

But in Germany in 1920 the question of power was posed in a context that demanded a different response. A right-wing military coup (the “Kapp putsch”) sparked a massive general strike. The rebel generals soon fled, but the strike continued. Most workers did not call for a republic of workers’ councils, but they did demand action against right-wing violence. To defuse the crisis, the head of Germany’s trade unions called for a “workers’ government” made up of workers’ parties plus the unions.

The Communist Party responded that formation of such a government would promote working-class mass action and progress toward workers’ power. It pledged to tolerate such a government as a “loyal opposition” while freely advancing its revolutionary program.

This statement evoked intense discussion in the International, drawing from Lenin a comment that while poorly formulated, it was “quite correct both in its basic premise and its practical conclusions”.

The “workers’ government” discussion that followed lacked precision. The core idea, however, was expressed in a 1922 resolution of the International’s Fourth Congress as an application of the united front tactic.

When the question of government is urgently posed for solution, the congress stated, and reformists strive for “a bourgeois/social-democratic coalition”, communists propose an alliance of all workers’ parties “around economic and political issues, which will fight and finally overthrow bourgeois power”.

Such an alliance’s victory could lead to a “workers’ government” whose tasks are “to arm the proletariat ... bring in control over production, shift the burden of taxation onto the propertied classes and break the resistance of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie”.

Such a government, the theses concluded, can be “an important starting point” for the establishment of full workers’ democracy.

9. From Lenin to Stalin

The Communist International was founded in 1919 by those who had stood firm against imperialist war and utilised the war crisis to “hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule” through revolution.

But when the next great imperialist war broke out in 1939, statements signed “Communist International” sang a different tune.

Prior to this war, the Comintern had been calling for a united struggle for peace embracing not only working people and oppressed nations but also “capitalist states ... concerned to maintain peace” such as Britain and France, while condemning the Nazis as “chief instigators of war”.

But when war broke out in 1939, the Comintern focused attacks on Britain and France, even saying that German workers preferred Hitler’s rule to a British victory.

Two years later, the Comintern reversed policy again, calling on the world’s peoples to join in a war alliance with the US and Britain, whose victory would, in the words of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, clear the way for a “companionship of nations based on their equality”.

With the goal of “aiding by every means the military efforts” of the Allied governments, the Comintern itself dissolved in May 1943.

After each of these reversals — and there had been others in 1935 and 1928 — all Comintern member parties did an instant about-face. Their politics switched from ultra-left rejection of any alliance with other working class parties, toward a quest for unity with elements in the capitalist class, and back again.

Through all these turnabouts, one element was consistent — a rejection of the revolutionary program and strategy developed by the Communist International in its congresses during Lenin’s lifetime between 1919 and 1922.

Instead, Comintern positions faithfully followed the shifts in soviet foreign policy under Stalin — allied with France from 1935, then with Germany from 1939, then with Britain and the US from 1941.

Soviet Russia had signed treaties with Germany in Lenin’s time, in 1918 and 1922.

But such pacts did not alter the Comintern's efforts to lead workers in overthrowing Germany's imperialist government.

Leon Trotsky, who led the communist opposition to Stalin's policies, pointed out in 1937 that the Communist International had by then become a "submissive apparatus in the service of soviet foreign policy, ready at any time for any zigzag whatever".

But the strongest force defending the Soviet Union from abroad, Trotsky pointed out, was the revolutionary working class movement — the very force that Stalinist policy was undermining. Stalinist policy "has brought nothing but misfortunes to the workers' movement of the world", including catastrophic setbacks such as the triumph of fascism in Germany (1933) and Spain (1936-39) that led directly to war.

The Comintern's demise was rooted in the rise in the Soviet Union of a conservative and privileged bureaucratic layer, which under Stalin's leadership seized control of the Communist Party and the state.

Lenin sensed the danger. In 1921, he described the soviet state as a car that refuses to obey its driver, "as if it were being driven by some mysterious, lawless hand".

The revolutionary working class that had created the soviet state was now demobilised and dispersed by the blows of civil war. In this context, Moscow's 4700 communists staffing government departments "are not directing, they are being directed", Lenin said, by "that huge bureaucratic machine" — a state apparatus that "is to a considerable extent a survival of the past". The vanquished capitalist society "imposes its culture upon the conqueror", he warned, absorbing and corrupting communist functionaries.

In 1922-23, during his final illness, Lenin sought to launch a struggle against this peril.

After Lenin was incapacitated by a stroke in March 1923, Leon Trotsky led this struggle. But the Left Opposition he headed was unable to prevent a bureaucratic faction from securing their grip on the Communist Party of the USSR and the Comintern.

The turn away from Lenin's course was symbolised by Stalin's concept that socialism could be achieved within the USSR, without workers' victory in other countries.

This ran counter to the Bolsheviks' view, which had been restated by the Comintern's Fourth Congress in December 1922: "The proletarian revolution can never triumph completely within a single country; rather must it triumph internationally, as world revolution."

Two years later, Stalin asserted "the possibility of building a complete socialist society in a single country" as "indisputable truth".

But this concept changed the Communist International's function. The priority

was no longer international revolution but merely, as Trotsky wrote in 1930, “to protect the construction of socialism [in the USSR] from intervention, that is, in essence, to play the role of frontier patrols”.

This appraisal was confirmed by the central slogan at the Comintern’s last congress, in 1935: “The fight for peace and for the defence of the USSR.” Comintern leader Palmiro Togliatti explained this as meaning, with regard to the Soviet Union, “We defend concretely its whole policy and each of its acts.”

The campaign against Trotsky and the Left Opposition in 1923-24 aroused widespread misgivings and opposition in the International. In response, Stalin and his allies asserted their control of the International through a campaign misleadingly called “Bolshevisation”.

In 1924, directives of the Comintern executive to member parties were defined as “imperative”, to be applied “immediately”. Its emissaries were given wide powers to act on its behalf. Moscow now hand picked national leaderships, Trotsky stated, on the basis of “readiness to accept and approve the latest apparatus grouping” in the party.

In the 1930s, the Stalinist regime executed the vast majority of Bolshevik leaders from Lenin’s time, along with hundreds of prominent figures in other communist parties who had taken refuge in the USSR.

During the decades following the Comintern’s dissolution in 1943, the immense obstacle presented by world Stalinism to progressive struggles weakened and finally shattered.

In our times, we see signs of a new rise of internationalism in the struggles of workers and the oppressed. Since the turn of the century, the worldwide movement against the Iraq war, the rise of popular struggles in Latin America, and other movements have shown broad understanding that the great questions of our epoch will be decided in the world arena.

In this context, the program and strategy hammered out by the Communist International in Lenin’s time has new relevance.

Appendix

The Russian Revolution & National Freedom

How the Early Soviet Government Defended the Rights of Russia's Oppressed Peoples

When Bolivian President Evo Morales formally opened his country's Constituent Assembly on August 6, 2006, he highlighted the aspirations of Bolivia's indigenous majority as the central challenge before the gathering. The convening of the Assembly, he said, represented a "historic moment to refound our dearly beloved homeland Bolivia". When Bolivia was created, in 1825-26, "the originary indigenous movements" who had fought for independence "were excluded", and subsequently were discriminated against and looked down upon. But the "great day has arrived today ... for the originary indigenous peoples".¹

During the preceding weeks, indigenous organisations had proposed sweeping measures to assure their rights, including guarantees for their languages, autonomy for indigenous regions, and respect for indigenous culture and political traditions.

This movement extends far beyond Bolivia. Massive struggles based on indigenous peoples have shaken Ecuador and Peru, and the reverberations are felt across the Western Hemisphere. Measures to empower indigenous minorities are among the most prestigious achievements of the Bolivarian movement in Venezuela.

At first glance, these indigenous struggles bear characteristic features of national movements, aimed at combating oppression, securing control of national communities, and protecting national culture. Yet indigenous peoples in Bolivia and elsewhere may not meet many of the objective criteria Marxists have often used to define a nation, such as a common language and a national territory, and they are not demanding a separate state. The response of Marxist currents to the national aspects of Latin America's indigenous struggles has been varied, ranging from enthusiasm to a studied silence. Yet an ability to address the complexities of such struggles is surely the acid

test of Marxism's understanding of the national question today.

Such disarray among Marxists is all the more costly in today's context of rising struggles for national freedom across Latin America and the Middle East today. The challenge is also posed in the imperialist heartlands, where we see a rise of struggles by oppressed minorities that bear more than a trace of national consciousness. For example, in 2006 the United States witnessed the strongest upsurge of working-class struggle in 60 years in the form of demonstrations and strikes for immigrant rights that were also, in part, an assertion of Latino identity. And the oppression of non-white and Muslim minorities in France has given birth to the provocatively named "Mouvement des Indigènes de la République".²

The Marxist position on the national question was forged around well-documented debates on the independence movement of long-constituted nations such as Ireland and Poland. But the writings of Lenin and his contemporaries before 1917 have little to say about nationalities in emergence, that is, peoples in struggle who lack as yet many characteristic features of a nation. But precisely this type of struggle played a central role in the 1917 Russian revolution and the early years of the Soviet republic. In the course of their encounter with such movements, the Bolshevik Party's policies toward national minorities evolved considerably. Sweeping practical measures were taken to assure the rights of national minorities whose existence was barely acknowledged prior to 1917.

The Bolsheviks' policies do not indicate what course to adopt toward national struggles today, each of which has a specific character and set of complexities. Nonetheless, the Bolshevik experience is a useful reference point.

Pre-1917 positions

The initial position of Russian Marxists on the national question was clear and sweeping. In 1903 the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP), adopted a program specifying the right of all nations in the Russian state to self-determination. The program also advocated regional self-rule based on the composition of the population and the right of the population to receive education in its own language and to use that language on the basis of equality in all local social and governmental institutions.³

In the decade that followed, the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP became the first Marxist current internationally to recognise the importance of the liberation struggles then taking shape across the colonial world. Lenin wrote in 1913, "Hundreds of millions of people are awakening to life, light and freedom" in a movement that will "liberate both the peoples of Europe and the peoples of Asia".⁴

Lenin also insisted on the distinction between the advanced capitalist countries, where “progressive bourgeois national movements came to an end long ago”, and the oppressed nations of Eastern Europe and the semi-colonial and colonial world.⁵ In the latter case, he called for defence of the right to self-determination and support of national liberation movements, in order to create a political foundation for unification in struggle of working people of all nationalities.

Limitations

In the test of the Russian revolution, these and many other aspects of the Bolshevik's pre-1917 positions proved to be a reliable guide. Some positions expressed before 1917, however, required modification.

For example, consider the definition of a nation provided in 1913 by Joseph Stalin: “A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”⁶ Stalin's article was written in collaboration with Lenin and was viewed at the time as an expression of the Bolshevik position. His objective criteria are a good starting point for analysis, but they have sometimes been misused to justify denying national rights to indigenous and other peoples that appear not to pass the test.

In addition, Lenin stressed that his support for national self-determination “implies exclusively the right to independence in the political sense”.⁷ In 1913, he stated, “Fight against all national oppression? Yes, certainly. Fight for any kind of national development, for ‘national culture’ in general? Certainly not.”⁸ Lenin is sometimes quoted as being opposed to federalism as a form of state, although he also endorsed federation as a stepping stone to democratic integration of nations.⁹

Such pre-1917 positions are sometimes applied today in order to justify opposition to the demands of national liberation movements. But they should be interpreted in the light of the way the Bolshevik position was applied in the decisive test of revolution.

The indigenous peoples of tsarist Russia

The oppressed peoples that made up the majority of the pre-1917 tsarist empire can be broadly divided into two categories.

On the western and southern margins of the empire lived many peoples — among them the Finns, Poles, Ukrainians, and Armenians — that met all of Stalin's objective criteria of nationality. As nations, they possessed clearly defined historical and cultural traditions. It was these peoples that the pre-1917 Bolsheviks had chiefly in mind when they discussed the national question.

But there were also many peoples in Russia — in the Crimea, on the Volga, in the Caucasus, and in central and northeast Asia — that had been subjected to settler-based colonisation similar to that experienced by the Palestinians, the Blacks of South Africa, and — in much more extreme form — the indigenous peoples of the Americas. These subjects of the Russian tsar, whom the Bolsheviks often spoke of as Russia's "Eastern peoples," had seen their lands seized, their livelihood destroyed, and their language and culture suppressed. They had suffered discrimination and exclusion from the dominant society.

When revolution broke out in 1917, these peoples, although varying widely in their level of social development, had not yet emerged as nationalities. The evolution of written national languages, cultures, and consciousness as distinct peoples was at an early stage. Most identified themselves primarily as Muslims. Assessed by Stalin's criteria for nationhood, they did not make the grade. But in the crucible of revolution, national consciousness began to assert itself, provoking and stimulating demands for cultural autonomy, self-rule, and even national independence.

This fact itself is worth pondering. A revolution is, in Lenin's phrase, a festival of the oppressed. Peoples long ground down into inarticulateness suddenly find inspiration, assert their identity, and cry out their grievances. We cannot predict the shape of freedom struggles that will emerge in a revolutionary upsurge.

The soviets take power

On November 15, 1917, one week after the workers and soldiers of Russia took power, the Soviet government decreed the "equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia" and the right of these peoples to self-determination up to and including independence.¹⁰ Subsequently, five nations on the western border, including Poland and Finland, asserted their independence, which the Soviet government recognised. Others opted to federate with the Russian Soviet republic.

But the matter did not stop there. The Soviet government invited each nation within Russia to hold a soviet congress to decide whether and on what basis to participate in its federal structure. National minorities were offered not only the ultimate right to separate but autonomous powers over language, education, and culture that gave expression to the right of self-determination. The government spelled out this policy in April 1918 with reference to Russia's Eastern peoples in an article by Stalin, then its Commissar of Nationalities. These regions, he stated, must be "autonomous, that is have their own schools, courts, administrations, organs of power and social, political and cultural institutions," with full rights to use the minority language "in all spheres of social and political activity."¹¹

This policy applied also to religious customs and traditions. Thus the Sharia — the Muslim common law — was recognised in traditionally Muslim territories as an integral part of the Soviet legal structure.

The Soviet government also endorsed the rights of the Muslim peoples to lands recently seized by Russian colonists, including when these lands had been utilised only seasonally by Muslim peasant nomads. It supported local initiatives to repossess such land in the North Caucasus and endorsed resettlement of Russian colonists in Turkestan as a means of restoring land seized by settlers after the defeat of an uprising of subject peoples in 1916.

It also worked to educate government personnel as to the social structure of the Eastern peoples. An appeal to Red Army personnel in 1920 urged that soldiers see the small independent producers and traders of these regions as allies, as toilers, not as profiteers. It noted that among these peoples, “a clear class differentiation has not yet taken place ... The producers have not yet been torn away from the means of production. Each handicraftsman ... is also a merchant. Commerce ... rests in the hands of millions of small traders, [each of whom] only has a penny's worth of goods.” Given all this, “the rapid implementation of communism ... nationalisation of all trade ... of handicraftsmen ... is impossible”. This analysis is strikingly applicable to the conditions of the indigenous masses today in Bolivia and other Latin American countries.

Promotion of national culture

With regard to the Eastern peoples, Soviet policy went far beyond support of land claims and autonomous governmental structures. The Soviet government supported the evolution into mature nationalities of peoples still only at the dawn of national consciousness. In this way, these peoples would be able to reach a cultural and political level that would facilitate their integration into Soviet society on a basis of equality.

The soviets therefore embarked on an ambitious program to promote national cultural development. Local experts were engaged to choose, for each ethnic group, the dialect best adapted to serving as the basis for a national language. Alphabets were devised for the mostly pre-literate peoples. Dictionaries and grammars were written and put to use in the publication of minority-language newspapers.

Education was started up in the minority languages, including within the Russian-speaking heartlands — in every locality where there were 25 students in the minority language group. By 1927, across the Soviet Union, more than 90% of students from minority nationalities were being educated in their own languages. The governments of autonomous republics were responsible for education in their national language beyond their own borders — a policy that bore some similarity to the Austro-Marxist

program of “national-cultural autonomy” against which the Bolsheviks had argued prior to 1917.

The same principle applied to the Jewish minority, which had no national territory. A Jewish commission of the Soviet government administered hundreds of Yiddish-language schools scattered among several national republics. Many leaders of this body came from the Bund, a Jewish Socialist current that had advocated such structures, against Bolshevik objections, before 1917.

By 1924, publishing activity was under way in the Soviet Union in 25 different languages, rising to 44 in 1927.

Preferential hiring

The Soviet government strove to assure that each nationality was represented in local governmental organs in proportion to its size in the population as a whole. This policy was termed “korenizatsiia” — “indigenisation” according to the Oxford dictionary, or “affirmative action” in modern idiom.

The Turkestan region of Central Asia provides a good test case, for there the soviets initially excluded Muslims from their ranks and turned a harsh face to the demands of the Muslim majority. In March 1918, the Soviet government called a halt to this policy, and when soviet elections were held in Turkestan the next month, 40% of those elected were Muslim. The proportion of Muslims in the local Communist Party membership rose from almost zero to 45% by the end of 1918. In 1919, the Communist Party central committee specified that candidates for government office could be nominated independently of the party by any Muslim workers’ organisation.

One veteran of those days recalls that Lenin reacted angrily to information that all the soviets in Turkestan used the Russian language, saying, “All our talk about Soviet power will be hollow so long as the toilers of Turkestan do not speak in their native tongue in their institutions.”¹²

By 1927, minority nationals predominated in the soviet executive bodies in their regions.

The Communist Party universities, a major source of new cadres for party and state, gave preference to candidates from minority peoples. By 1924 these peoples made up 50% of the overall student body, roughly equal to their weight in the population. But it took time to make good the imbalance in party membership. By 1927, Muslim peoples’ weight in the party membership had reached about half their proportion of the population as a whole.

Efforts were also made to speed economic development in territories of the Muslim peoples. They were encouraged to enter the working class, which in these territories had

previously been almost entirely Russian in composition. Progress was rapid: by 1926 minority peoples made up a majority of the employed work force in Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan, and Dagestan, and about 40% in Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan.

These achievements, of course, were possible only through the initiative and leadership of revolutionists from the minority nationalities themselves. With rare exceptions, there was no Bolshevik movement among the Muslim peoples prior to 1917. The leaders of this transformation came mainly from revolutionary nationalist movements — which many Marxists, then and now, disparagingly term “bourgeois”. The central leadership of the Communist Party repeatedly allied with these forces in order to overcome resistance to its policies toward Muslim peoples from within its own ranks.¹³

Baku Congress

The Bolsheviks argued within the Communist International in support of their approach toward oppressed nationalities, and it was codified by resolutions of the Comintern's Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East in 1920 and Second and Fourth World Congresses in 1920 and 1922. In his closing remarks to the Baku Congress, Gregory Zinoviev proposed an amended wording to the closing words of the Communist Manifesto: “Workers of all lands and oppressed peoples of the whole world, unite”—a concept that remains valid for our times.¹⁴ And armed with this understanding, the International won support rapidly during those years across Asia.

The mood of these years is captured by Babayev, who attended the Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku as a young Muslim Azerbaijani in 1920, serving as a guard. Interviewed many years later, he recalled that “when the call to prayer came, he found it natural to set aside his gun during devotions, after which he would ‘go back to defend with our blood the conference and the revolution’. Inspired by the [conference's] ‘declaration of holy war against the enemy of revolution’, he explains, “thousands of people, convinced there was no contradiction between being a Bolshevik and a Muslim, joined the Bolshevik ranks.”¹⁵ The Muslim delegates also utilised the Baku congress to voice their concerns about chauvinist abuses by Soviet officials in the autonomous republics. A lengthy resolution on this topic was submitted by 21 delegates, representing a wide range of nationalities. In his closing remarks, Zinoviev promised energetic corrective action. After the congress ended, 27 delegates travelled to Moscow to meet with the Communist Party Political Bureau, which adopted a resolution drafted by Lenin. The resolution's sweeping provisions included the decision to found the University of the Peoples of the East and instructions to rein in the authority of emissaries of the central government in autonomous regions.

Stalinist reversal

During the 1920s, a privileged bureaucratic caste arose in the Soviet Union, headed by Stalin, which showed increasing hostility to the rights of minority nationalities. This trend led Lenin, in his last months of activity, to launch a campaign to defend the rights of these peoples.¹⁶

After Lenin's death in 1924, the Stalinist forces gained control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Soviet state apparatus. Soviet republics in Asia were subjected to bureaucratic centralisation, chauvinist policies, hostility to minority language rights, and massive counter-revolutionary terror. Nonetheless, the gains of the Russian revolution in the domain of national rights were not wholly extinguished. In particular, the Asian Soviet republics retained enough strength to successfully assert their independence when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.

Conclusion

Lenin's pre-1917 articles on self-determination provided the Bolsheviks with a foundation for their course during the revolution. But the Bolshevik approach to the struggle of the oppressed nationalities was radically enhanced by the experiences of the revolution itself. In the process, the Bolsheviks showed a capacity to ally with and learn from the most advanced fighters for national freedom. They set aside old schemas and allowed real social forces to shape their strategy, one that might today be called "unity through diversity".

Today, in the midst of a new rise of liberation struggles in several continents, the policies of the Bolsheviks of Lenin's time provide an example of how the working class can ally with oppressed peoples in common struggle. The unity of the working class depends on solidarity with oppressed peoples and sectors. The program of this struggle includes not just political self-determination for oppressed nationalities, but unconditional support for their struggle to win the political, cultural, and economic rights needed to achieve genuine equality. And that may well involve — as in the case of the indigenous peoples of Russia in the years following the 1917 revolution — positive measures to assist these peoples in developing their cultural and political potential as nationalities.

Notes

- 1 <http://boliviariising.blogspot.com/>, August 14, 2006.
- 2 www.indigenes-republique.org/.
- 3 Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23* (University of London: London, n.d.), p. 14.

- 4 V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1960-71), Vol. 19, pp. 99-100.
- 5 *ibid.*, Vol. 22, pp. 150-152.
- 6 J.V. Stalin, *Works*, Vol. 2 (Foreign Languages Publishing House: Moscow, 1954), p. 307.
- 7 V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 22, p. 146.
- 8 *ibid.*, Vol. 20, p. 35.
- 9 *ibid.*, Vol. 22, p. 146.
- 10 John Riddell, ed., *To See the Dawn* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1983), p. 248.
- 11 Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23*, p. 24.
- 12 *ibid.*, p. 145.
- 13 For Lenin's comments in 1920 on the terminological side of this question, see Riddell, ed. *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite* (Pathfinder: New York, 1991), Vol. 1, p. 212 or Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 31, p. 241, or do an Internet search for "unanimous decision to speak of the national-revolutionary movement".
- 14 John Riddell, ed., *To See the Dawn*, p. 219.
- 15 *ibid.*, pp. 29-30.
- 16 See *Lenin's Final Fight* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1995) or do an Internet search for *Nationalities* or "Autonomisation".

Sources & Further Reading

The resolutions of the Communist International's four congresses held in Lenin's time (1919-22) and Lenin's works are available in the Marxists Internet Archive at www.marxists.org.

The proceedings of the first two Comintern congresses and related documents from the years 1907-20 are presented in *The Communist International in Lenin's Time*, edited by myself and published by Pathfinder Press (www.pathfinderpress.com) between 1983 and 1993. The series includes these volumes:

- *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International* (1907-16)
- *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power* (1918-19)
- *Founding the Communist International* (First Congress, 1919)
- *Workers and Oppressed Peoples of All Countries, Unite* (Second Congress, 1920, 2 volumes)
- *To See the Dawn* (Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East, 1920)

In addition to these sources, the appendix draws extensively on Jeremy Smith's important work, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, which uses Soviet archives released after 1990. See also Dave Crouch, "The Bolsheviks and Islam", in *International Socialism* 110.

Under the impetus of the Russian Revolution, the Communist International was founded in Moscow in early 1919. It was designed as a vehicle to bring together revolutionary vanguards from around the world and promote the development of the struggle for anti-imperialism, workers power and socialism.

In the 1920s and thirties the Russian Revolution underwent a bureaucratic degeneration. The Communist International also suffered this fate.

But in its first five years, when it was still led by Lenin and his closest collaborators, it elaborated a program and strategy that incorporated the lessons of the revolutionary era.

The purpose of this pamphlet is to introduce this program. Properly understood, it remains profoundly relevant to the struggles shaking the world today.

Resistance books