

The Comintern in 1922: The periphery pushes back

Monday 5 December 2011, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 4 December 2011).

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Until recently, I shared a widely held opinion that the Bolshevik Party of Russia towered above other members of the early Communist International as a source of fruitful political initiatives. However, my work in preparing the English edition of the Comintern's Fourth Congress, held at the end of 1922, led me to modify this view. [1] On a number of weighty strategic issues before the congress, front-line parties, especially the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), played a decisive role in revising Executive Committee proposals and shaping the Congress's outcome.

When I translated the first page of this congress, I was not far distant from the view of Tony Cliff, who, referring to the 1921-22 period, referred to the "extreme comparative backwardness of communist leaders outside Russia." They had an "uncritical attitude towards the Russian party," which stood as "a giant among dwarfs," Cliff stated. [2]

Duncan Hallas wrote of the Comintern's failure "to emancipate the pupil from excessive dependence on the teacher." [3] A similar view is advanced by historians hostile to the Comintern tradition, although they regard Bolshevik influence as not helpful but calamitous.

In recent years, a new generation of historians has focused attention on the dynamics of Comintern member parties, stressing the influence of their worker ranks and the parties' relative autonomy. Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew present the view, widely held among these historians, that "strategy was defined in Moscow, but tactics, to a certain extent, could be elaborated on the ground by the parties themselves." [4] However, the record of the Fourth Congress suggests that at least in 1922, the influence of front-line parties was felt in determining not only national tactics but international strategy.

I will review five questions on which this influence is evident:

- * Resistance to fascism.
- * Transitional demands.
- * Workers' and farmers' government.

* The anti-imperialist united front.

* The united front issue as a whole.

Resisting fascism

Five days before the congress began, Fascist chief Benito Mussolini took power in Italy, after a two-year rampage of state-encouraged Fascist violence against the workers' movement. Fascism was something new, but right-wing violence was a familiar threat. Advanced workers in Italy built a promising national movement of defense guards to fend it off, called the Arditi del Popolo. Unfortunately, both the Italian Communist and Socialist parties denounced the Arditi and banned their members from taking part. The Italian Communists opposed in principle taking part in defense guards not organized by their own party.

In Moscow, Nikolai Bukharin persuaded the Comintern Executive to write the Italian comrades calling for participation in the Arditi. The Italian party brushed off this advice, however, and Executive dropped the matter. At the Fourth Congress, leading Bolsheviks said nothing about the need to resist Fascist attacks, while Comintern President Gregory Zinoviev hailed the Italian party's conduct as worthy of "the most important chapter" in a "policy manual for Communist parties." [5] This astonishing endorsement confirms Paul Levi's fears when the Italian party was formed: the Executive had indeed become the prisoner of the Italians' ultraleftist course.

It was the German party that took the initiative to correct this error. Two days before the opening session, it adopted a motion instructing its delegation to "urge an international campaign against fascism, in its different forms." This need was raised during the congress proceedings by a number of delegates from Germany, Switzerland, and Czechoslovakia. Yet the discussion was not joined in plenary or commission sessions. It was not until seven minutes before the end of his summary on the Italian question that Zinoviev inexplicably changed course, accusing the Italian party of "gross errors" with regard to fascism. [6] "We must become a vanguard of the entire anti-fascist struggle" and get involved with "confused forces" such as the Arditi, he said. Zinoviev stopped short of endorsing an anti-fascist united front, but the Executive adopted and implemented such a policy soon after the congress.

In summary, the two contending positions on anti-fascist defense were advanced by the Italian and German comrades; the Executive vacillated between one and the other.

Transitional demands

Our second example of front-line party influence, the concept of transitional demands, dominated the congress discussion of program. Transitional demands, as Leon Trotsky later explained, aimed to "help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist program of the revolution." The concept was adopted by the Comintern Third Congress in 1921, on the grounds that Communists must offer "more than the bare program of the dictatorship of the proletariat." Typical transitional demands, in the German context, were for a workers' government and workers' control of production. [7]

In mid-1922, the Comintern executive began work to develop a program for the International. Bukharin opposed including transitional demands in the program on the grounds that they concerned merely tactical matters. Czech leader Bohumir Šmeral and Clara Zetkin of the German party argued for their inclusion, and the debate was referred to the Fourth Congress.

At the congress, Bukharin reiterated his view. A second report, by German Communist August Thalheimer, argued for inclusion of transitional demands in the program, stressing the dangers of a “separation of tactical principles from goals,” a characteristic of the Second International “that opened the door to their descent into opportunism.” [8] A few days later, Bolshevik leaders endorsed Thalheimer’s position, as did the congress, with Italian delegates dissenting.

German party leaders had obtained an open repudiation of the position of a leading Bolshevik on a principled issue.

Workers’ government

I’ve written elsewhere of the workers’ government demand [9], so I’ll restrict myself here to how it figured in Fourth Congress debates. Going into the congress, two interpretations of this demand were advanced. One, defended by Zinoviev, the Italian leadership, and a minority in the German party headed by Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow, held that the term “workers’ government” was merely a pseudonym for a dictatorship of the proletariat similar to that in Soviet Russia. The other, advanced by Comintern leader Karl Radek, the Germany party majority, and its allies in neighboring parties, saw a workers’ government as “one of the possible points of transition to the dictatorship of the proletariat,” whose tasks could include “arming the proletariat ... introducing [workers’] control of production, shifting the main burden of taxation to the shoulders of the rich,” and so on. [10]

A parallel debate concerned Zinoviev’s notion that a Labour Party in Britain would constitute a workers’ government. The German delegation introduced an amendment that sought to refute illusions on this score.

The portion of the Theses on Tactics dealing with these issues was the most frequently and thoroughly rewritten text in the Congress resolutions. The ultimately adopted draft, which has until now not been available in English, reflected the views of the German party majority on the disputed points. [11]

A similar alignment of forces took shape around differences on how to apply the united front policy that the Comintern had adopted a year earlier. The German party majority favored engaging in negotiations, when appropriate, with leaders of the Social Democratic parties and unions. The German minority and its allies were critical of such efforts and stressed the need to build the united front “from below.” The Italian, Czechoslovak, Polish, French, British, and U.S. parties were actively involved in the debate. Once again, Radek blocked with the German majority; Zinoviev was closer to the minority’s views. The final resolution took an intermediate position, acknowledging points made by both sides.

The anti-imperialist united front

The Fourth Congress also adopted a call for an anti-imperialist united front in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, aimed at “the mobilization of all revolutionary forces,” including those based outside the working class, in “an extended, lengthy struggle against world imperialism.” [12]

The term was new, but the concept had been endorsed at the Second Comintern Congress in 1920, with its call for support of national-revolutionary forces in the colonies. It was given life at the subsequent Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku, which responded to moves by national revolutionaries across Asia to link up with the Bolshevik-led revolution in Russia.

At the Fourth Congress, the need for an anti-imperialist united front was first voiced by the Indian delegate M.N. Roy. Tan Malaka, from the Dutch Indies, recounted his party's success in forging such an alliance with Islamic anti-imperialists, and called for the Comintern to endorse engagement with pan-Islamic forces. This call was echoed by Tahar Boudengha of Tunisia, who also denounced the chauvinism of the French party's members in Algeria. Two black delegates from the U.S. called for the building of a revolutionary movement among blacks in every continent. Many delegates from Asia denounced the inadequate attention to colonial liberation in the metropolitan parties and the Comintern congress itself.

The response of Bolshevik delegates was not uniform. G.I. Safarov, a leader of Comintern work in Asia, protested the "passivity" displayed on this question by a "considerable sector" of the Congress, while Radek dismissed complaints, saying, "interest in parties is tied to their deeds." [13]

Congress resolutions incorporated proposals from colonial delegates on several key points.

An alternative interpretation

The facts I have related can be interpreted differently, with Bolshevik leaders seen as the central actors. After all, Bolsheviks gave the main congress reports; Zinoviev and Radek dominated the proceedings. The congress resounded with calls for more centralism, more authority to the Moscow Executive.

Certainly, in all the main discussions, we see an interplay between Bolshevik leaders and spokespersons of front-line parties. Here are four reasons, however, to consider the front-line parties as the more dynamic force in this partnership.

1. Comintern leaders almost never refer to Bolshevik experience or quote from Bolshevik leaders in debating political policy. Even when there are obvious precedents for a policy in Bolshevik history, this is rarely mentioned.
2. The divisions in the Comintern do not relate to any perceptible differentiation within the Bolshevik party.
3. In almost every major debate, the Bolshevik leaders assigned to the Comintern are divided. Moreover, their alignments are not consistent; they shift over time and according to the issue.
4. The actions of Moscow Executive, on the issues we have discussed, display what Jean-François Fayet has called "persistent ambiguity." [14]

Much depends on how we interpret Radek's role. Here Fayet, his biographer, sums up his role aptly: Radek defended the authority of the Executive, but politically he upheld the united-front policy developed in collaboration with Paul Levi. As Radek himself said, when Stuttgart workers gave the united front its first formulation, "If I had been in Moscow, the idea would not even have crossed my mind." [15]

Clara Zetkin made much the same point a month later in a well-known letter to Lenin. The ECCI was "far too cut off" to do more than "recognise the broad lines of development," she said. It "cannot possibly survey all the concrete circumstances that must be considered." [16] Surely the conflicting views, for and against the united front, could only have been developed in the heat of the struggle.

A broader pattern

Disagreements related to the united front and related issues can be traced back to 1920, the year that the Comintern truly began to function. During this year, the postwar revolutionary upsurge in Europe began to ebb. Many communist workers believed that a renewed offensive, with greater audacity, could carry the day. This mood was first formulated by Bela Kun and other Hungarian exiles. Others, with Paul Levi in the lead, sought to counter with a strategy that could enable Communists to win the mass support needed for victory. These currents, both endogenous to the workers' movement outside Russia, provided the impulse for the ideas debated in Moscow.

Finally, with regard to our panel today. The main proponents of united front policy in Germany - Levi, Zetkin, Heinrich Brandler, Ernst Meyer, August Thalheimer, Edwin Hoernle, Fritz Heckert, Erich Melcher - had all been comrades of Rosa Luxemburg in the wartime Spartacus League. Their record suggests that, even after the expulsion of Levi, the concern of Luxemburg and the Spartacists to strengthen ties with the broad masses of workers remained a creative force within the Comintern.

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P.S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2011/12/04/the-comintern-in-1922-the-periphery-pushes-back/>

* This working paper was presented as part of the International Communist Movement stream of the Eighth Historical Materialism Annual Conference in London, England, on November 10, 2011 (<http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/conferences>).

Footnotes

[1] John Riddell, (ed.) 2012, *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922* (hereafter TUF), 1922, Leiden: Brill.

[2] Tony Cliff, 1979, *The Bolsheviks and World Communism*, in *Lenin, Volume 4*, London: Pluto Press, pp. 54-7.

[3] Duncan Hallas, 1985, *The Comintern*, London: Bookmarks, p. 71.

[4] Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew 1997, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, New York: St. Martin's Press, pp. 24-26.

[5] TUF, pp. 105-8.

[6] TUF, pp. 1053-4.

[7] Leon Trotsky 1973, *The Transitional Program for Socialist Revolution*, New York: Pathfinder Press, p. 75; *Comintern 1921, Protokoll des III. Kongresses der Kommunistischen Internationale*, Hamburg: Verlag der Kommunistischen Internationale, pp. 475-6; Alan Adler (ed.), 1980, *Theses*,

Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International, London: Ink Links, p. 286.

[8] TUF, 479-80, 497-8 (Bukharin); 510-15 (Thalheimer).

[9] See on ESSF (article 22599), [The Comintern's unknown decision on workers' governments](#).

[10] Comintern 1922, Bericht über die Tätigkeit des Präsidiums und der Exekutive der Kommunistischen International für die Zeit vom 6. März bis 11. Juni 1922, Hamburg: Carl Hoym Nachf., p. 123 (Zinoviev); TUF 167 (Radek); 1159-62 (resolution).

[11] See John Riddell, 2011, "The Comintern's Unknown Decision on Workers' Governments."

[12] TUF, p. 1187.

[13] TUF, pp. 720, 735.

[14] Jean-François Fayet, 2004, Karl Radek (1885-1939): Biographie politique, Bern: P. Lang, p. 352.

[15] Pierre Broué, 2005, The German Revolution 1917-1923, Leiden: Brill, p. 469.

[16] Ruth Stoljarowa and Peter Schmalfluss (eds.) 1990, Briefe Deutscher an Lenin, 1917-1923, Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 215.