

New voices and new views on revolutionary history

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Contents

- [Birth of Quebec communism](#)
- [Diagnosing the downfall of \(...\)](#)
- [Gaps in the Bolshevik experien](#)
- [Biography of a leftist current](#)
- [Rosa Luxemburg's misunderstood](#)
- ['Parties of a new type'](#)
- [Transition to workers' power](#)
- [Marxism and oppression](#)
- [Islamism and Marxism: conflict](#)
- [Women's and communist movement](#)
- [Reading the Communist Internat](#)

Some familiar issues were addressed with originality and new vigour at the Historical Materialism conference in Toronto on May 11-13 [1]. Attendance at the three sessions on revolutionary history, organized by Abigail Bakan (Queen's University), ranged between 30 and 75 of the 400 conference participants.

Birth of Quebec communism

Given that eight of 11 presentations had a European focus, the discussions were opened fittingly by Montreal scholar Daria Dyakonova with a paper on a little-studied aspect of revolutionary history here in Canada: the birth of communism in Quebec.

The pioneers of this movement faced objective obstacles, including severe repression and formidable opposition by the Catholic Church. In addition, Dyakonova explained, "after Lenin and especially after 1929," the Canadian Communist Party's "policies were determined from Moscow." The line dictated by the leadership of the Communist International (Comintern) was "often at odds with national or local needs."

In 1924, the party had only 100 members in Quebec, few of whom were French-speaking. Nonetheless, the party achieved much in these difficult years, even electing a member of Canada's parliament (Fred Rose) in 1945.

Diagnosing the downfall of Paul Levi

Frédéric Cyr, also of Montreal, summarized his recently completed dissertation on Paul Levi (1883-1930), the central leader of German communism for two years after Rosa Luxemburg's

murder in 1919. Study of Levi, Cyr said, has focused on "Our Road: Against Putschism,"(1) the pamphlet Levi wrote denouncing the Communist Party's ultraleft policy in the notorious March Action, a failed attempt to spark an insurrectionary uprising in Germany. "You should read the pamphlet, but it is not characteristic of his entire career," Cyr said, since it does not reveal his closeness to the Bolsheviks.

Levi met Lenin in 1916, and within a year was "one of Lenin's closest allies," Cyr said. "He gave Lenin a Trojan Horse inside the Spartacus movement" led by Luxemburg. It was Levi who convinced Luxemburg to agree to the German Communist Party's foundation in December 1918, he said. Overall, Levi stood politically "somewhere between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin."

How was it, then, that Levi came to be expelled from the Communist movement in 1921 for publishing "Our Road," a text with whose overall thrust Lenin was in broad agreement? Cyr pointed to the role of divergences in the Russian Bolshevik leadership.

During 1920, Cyr said, Lenin concluded that the Comintern must turn away from an "offensive" policy and orient toward a united front. This shift was evident in Lenin's pamphlet, 'Left-Wing' Communism, and in the decisions of the International's 1920 congress.(2) "Levi complied with - indeed, anticipated - Lenin's policy. But the Comintern continued to apply the 'offensive' policy, Cyr said, leading to the March Action fiasco. When Levi was expelled, "Lenin tried to get him back in," but these attempts failed.

Gaps in the Bolshevik experience?

Paul Kellogg (Athabasca University) zeroed in on the various explanations that have been offered for the March Action fiasco. Pierre Broué leaves the question open, Kellogg noted. Many German Communists of the time blamed the inexperience of German workers; British socialist historian Chris Harman focuses on inadequacies in the German leadership.(3) Yet in fact, Kellogg said, it was these very workers and Communist leaders who worked out an alternative policy several months before the March Action - the united front.

This innovation met with "sullen opposition from the Comintern Executive," including its most active Bolshevik members, Kellogg said. "Why did the Russian Bolshevik leaders go wrong, and why did the German Communists get it so right? In fact, the Bolsheviks were inexperienced in the sphere of advanced capitalism." Moreover, Bolshevik history was not free of ultraleft errors similar to those of the March Action.

Biography of a leftist current

Giving the last paper in this session, I offered yet another explanation. The Communist movement in Germany from the war years into the mid-1920s was sharply divided between a wing that I termed "mainstream," led initially by Rosa Luxemburg, and a leftist current whose best-known early leaders were Karl Radek and Paul Frölich. Each wing went through several incarnations and shifts in leadership, but retained continuity in essential policies.

The division had objective roots, I argued. The leftist current reflected the outlook of younger and less skilled workers. The revolutionary upsurge of 1918 in Germany been turned back, but economic and political crisis continued. A vanguard of tens of thousands was frustrated and impatient to act, while the majority of workers were pessimistic and passive. Conditions were similar in neighbouring countries.

“By mid-1920, the German leftists were expressing all the essentials of the ‘Theory of the Offensive’ that led their party to disaster, a year later, in the March Action,” I said. Certainly the Comintern Executive “was complicit in steering the German party down this course,” but there are signs that it was adapting to rather than directing the dynamic leftist current in Central Europe.

Audience questions hinted at yet other approaches. Thus:

- “Did the Executive’s policy on the March Action reflect Gregory Zinoviev’s theory of the workers’ aristocracy?”
- “Did the Comintern encounter a philosophical problem of theory and practice?”
- “Would any correct policy have in fact led to a successful German revolution?”

Rosa Luxemburg’s misunderstood role

Leading off the second session on revolutionary history, Helen Scott (University of Vermont) challenged the “perennial orthodoxy that [Rosa] Luxemburg’s political legacy is antithetical to that of Lenin and in extension the Bolsheviks.”

A “textbook interpretation” based on “sexist assumptions” caricatures Luxemburg: “where Lenin is hard, intellectual, and singular; Luxemburg is soft, emotional, and complex.” Supposedly, Luxemburg “worships spontaneity,” while Lenin builds the party.

In fact, said Scott, both Luxemburg and Lenin spent their lives building socialist organizations. They looked to the model of the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) following adoption of the 1891 Erfurt program and then, during the 1914–1918 World War, broke with the SPD and set out to build a new International. “Throughout their lives they often disagreed,” on some issues “consistently and fiercely. But they were on the same side of many more battles,” Scott noted. Moreover, their debates are “testimony to their commitment as Marxists to democratic open debate.”

Luxemburg’s response to the Russian revolution has been generally misunderstood, Scott maintained. Luxemburg saw the faults of Bolshevik policy mainly as “symptomatic of the daunting conditions facing a national revolution that had not internationalized.” Thus, in a letter to Polish Communist Adolf Warski in 1918, she termed land distribution to Russian peasants as “the most dangerous aspect ... of the Russian revolution” but drew from this the conclusion that “even the greatest revolution can accomplish only that which has ripened as a result of [historical] development.”

In this letter, Luxemburg summed up her attitude to the Russian October revolution as “enthusiasm combined with critical thought.” Surely, Scott concluded, “this would have been [her] continued attitude towards the Comintern, had she not been murdered on January 18 [1919].”

‘Parties of a new type’

Lars Lih’s presentation to this session challenged received notions about the Comintern’s formation from a different angle. It is commonly held, he said, that the Bolsheviks built a “party of a new type,” and that the Comintern extended this model to a world scale. In fact, neither Lenin nor the Comintern used the term “party of a new type.” It originates with Stalin in 1938, whose “Short Course” history of Bolshevism claimed its originality to lie in its dedication to “relentlessly purging

itself of 'the filth of opportunism'."

In reality, Lih said, the party of a new type was the German SPD in the years after it adopted the Erfurt program (1891), with its policy of a "permanent campaign" and of "building an alternative culture." The Bolsheviks sought to build a party like the SPD and found new ways of applying the SPD's tactics under tsarist rule. Lih has argued this view extensively in the "1912 debate."

"The Comintern did not reject this type of party; indeed, they are responsible for its survival," Lih said. As the Comintern moved in 1921-22 to adopt the united front policy and to fight for support from a majority of workers, "we see the old forms, the permanent campaign," in a new context of "trying to be a revolutionary party in non-revolutionary times."

Transition to workers' power

I was next up, for a presentation on the discussion at the Fourth Comintern Congress of the demand for a "workers' government." To start off, I cited the present situation in Greece. The largest left party, Syriza, is calling for a "left government," which many Marxists say would be nothing more than a continuation of capitalist rule in new guise. Meanwhile, a coalition of far-left groups, Antarsya, is calling for a revolution to achieve workers' power [2]. Leaving aside the question where this assessment of Syriza is accurate, I asked whether there was any transitional approach that, as proposed in the Comintern's Third Congress, could provide a bridge between present struggles and the socialist program of the revolution. The Fourth Congress call for a workers' government aimed to provide such a bridge.

The substance of my paper is available on this website and needs no summary here [3]. In conclusion, I said, "The Comintern decisions should not be imposed on today's vastly different reality, whether in Greece or elsewhere. The value of its call for a workers' government lies rather in awakening us to the fact that, even when there is no revolution and no soviet-type network of workers' councils, workers can still find a way to initiate the struggle for governmental power."

Marxism and oppression

The third session, entitled "Race, Gender, Nation, and Class," took up Marxism's relationship with social groupings subjected to various forms of oppression.

New York-based historian Jacob Zumoff described the encounter between the Russian revolution and the American Black movement in the early 1920s. From the Comintern side, "all initiatives came from Moscow," Zumoff said. "The Comintern intervened forcefully in the U.S. Communist Party, placing the fight for Black liberation at the centre of its work."

Previously, the U.S. Communist movement had continued the "colour-blind" approach of the prewar Socialist movement and was "not in any sense fighting black oppression." Bolshevik leaders insisted on a change of course. At the 1920 Comintern congress, Zumoff said, Lenin insisted that John Reed speak on the Black struggle. "We have Reed's note to Lenin, saying he did not want to do this, together with Lenin's reply, saying, 'Do it.'"

Revolutionary blacks joined the U.S. Communist Party in the 1920s because of the Comintern's anti-imperialism, Zumoff said.

In 1928, the Comintern decreed that Blacks in the U.S. South were a nation and called for their self-

determination. "This was an error, an expression of Stalinist degeneration," Zumoff said. "Nonetheless, the Communist Party did valuable and dangerous work on the Black question in the years that followed."

Islamism and Marxism: conflict and alliance

Rianne Subijanto, a researcher into Indonesian history, said that the record of Islamist-Marxist relationships during the Lenin era challenges any notion that they represent mutually exclusive categories. "Muslims, who take guidance from religious belief, usually regarded Communists as atheists." As for Communists, their "friendly attitude toward the Muslims was often ambivalent," she said. "However, in practical politics, communists and Muslims often found themselves united for the same goal, that is, to struggle against Western imperialism."

Subijanto noted a progression in Comintern views from the Second Congress (1920), where Lenin said "it is necessary to struggle against the pan-Islamic and pan-Asiatic movements," and the Fourth Congress two years later, which took a stance of "at least benign support of pan-Islamist movements." Moreover, at the Baku congress of 1920, several speakers emphasized there was no contradiction between Islam and communism.

The history of Islamism and communism should be seen "as a process rather than the meeting of two fixed categories. Their relation is mutually inclusive, rather than exclusive of each other.... [T]hey shaped and were shaped by one another.... Alliance and conflicts are necessary parts of their historical development."

Women's and communist movements as one

Himani Bannerji, based in both Kolkata and Toronto, said that in the history of Indian toilers, women's struggle and communism were not posed as separate things. "That was inconceivable in India when I was growing up."

Women were prominent in the independence struggle from its beginnings in the late nineteenth century. When the British split Bengal in 1905, "women poured into an armed liberation movement." Another armed movement of women arose in 1941.

Later, the Communist Party became integrated into the electoral framework of independent India, and its character changed, Bannerji said. But throughout the earlier period, women and women's concerns were well integrated into the Communist movement.

Reading the Communist International

The final presentation, by Abigail Bakan, greeted the recent publication of the proceedings of the Comintern's 1922 World Congress,(4) "allowing a mass, English-speaking audience to, in a sense, 'attend' the Fourth Congress." But now our work begins, she said. "How do we 'read' the Fourth Congress?"

Contemporary readings of the classical Marxist tradition, Bakan said, emphasize "the similarities between the movements of today with those that have come before us." However, works such as the Fourth Congress proceedings "bring to life the deliberations of activists and scholars living in

demonstrably different times. Many of the conversations and debates are strikingly relevant, but others appear, sometimes disturbingly, archaic.”

Regarding the “life and times” of women Communists in 1922, for example, “there is little to be nostalgic about.” The one-day congress discussion on women showed them still struggling for the right to participate on an equal footing in the Communist movement.

Quoting the editor of the Fourth Congress proceedings, John Riddell, Bakan noted that both the main women reporters at the congress, Clara Zetkin and Hertha Sturm, “commented on the prevalence in the [Communist] parties of what is now termed male chauvinism, a judgment unwittingly confirmed by chairman Alois Neurath in his patronising remarks at the close of the discussion.”

Yet while some of today’s Marxists have “forgotten the complexities of exploitation, oppression, and alienation,” Bakan said, “it is clear that the Communists of the Fourth Congress were collectively embroiled in these various types of human suffering, and struggles to challenge them.”

The Fourth Congress proceedings “is not a textbook, but a history book,” she said. “It is not a guide to how to think or act or strategize, like reading a recipe book or a bible. But it is rich in lessons of the incredibly challenging conditions of the time and some of the efforts to build a new world of freedom.”

The Historical Materialism process – the conferences, the journal, the publications, the networks – is part of “a kind of international, intellectual social movement,” Bakan said. “We are really only at the beginning of this process.”

The process will be continued at the London Historical Materialism gathering November 8-11, 2012 [4].

John Riddell

References

1. “Our Road” can be found in David Fernbach, ed., *In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Writings of Paul Levi*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012.
2. V.I. Lenin, ‘Left-Wing’ Communism: an Infantile Disorder.
John Riddell, ed. *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite: Proceedings of the Second Congress, 1920*. New York: Pathfinder, 1991.
3. Pierre Broue, *The German Revolution 1917-1923*, Leiden: Brill, 2005.
Chris Harman, *The Lost Revolution: Germany 1918-1923*, London: Bookmarks, 1982.
4. John Riddell, ed., *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922*, Leiden: Brill, 2012.

P.S.

* <http://johnriddell.wordpress.com/2012/05/28/new-voices-and-new-views-on-revolutionary-history/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.yorku.ca/hmyork/index.html>

[2] See on ESSF (article 24980), [Statement on the parliamentary elections to be held on May 6 in Greece](#).

[3] See on ESSF (article 23908), [Comintern's 1922 World Congress: A 'workers' government' as a step toward socialism](#).

[4] <http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/conferences/annual7/cfp>