

Liberate the Colonies! Communism and Colonial Freedom 1917-1924

Wednesday 28 August 2019, by [MOLLAH Nazeef](#), [PRASHAD Vijay](#), [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 28 August 2019).

Introduction, table of contents and link for free download of this new book by Indian publisher LeftWord.

At the close of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote a line of great hope and mystery – *workers of the world, unite!* What did this phrase mean? In 1848, workers of the world had no motive or means for unity.

seven decades later, Rosa Luxemburg wrote an ironic commentary on that phrase. War had wracked the European continent in 1914. Delegates of the trade unions and of social democratic parties had voted – almost unanimously – for war. The next year, in 1915, Luxemburg wrote, ‘proletarians of all countries, unite in peace-time and cut each other’s throats in war’!

Between the optimism of the *Manifesto* and the realism of Luxemburg sits the range of attitudes towards internationalism. Luxemburg was as optimistic as Marx and Engels about the necessity and possibility of internationalism. But she was acutely aware of the difficulties of internationalism: old prejudices sown amongst workers and peasants about people from other lands and against people in the colonized lands who were seen as racially inferior, deep resentments from far away produced amongst workers by the vagaries of international trade and the ‘crumbs’ given to some workers as a consequence of imperialism (producing a strand of workers that Lenin called the ‘labour aristocracy’).

The necessity of internationalism nonetheless pushed radicals to create a number of platforms for unity. Even as one failed, another came to take its place. The First International – the International Workingmen’s Association – was born in 1864 and ended in 1876. It was followed a decade later by the Second or Socialist International, which was formed in 1889 and which substantially ended its posture of radicalism when its principal member parties voted to fund their governments to fight the First World War. It was this vote by the parties of the Second International that provoked Luxemburg’s acerbic comment about unity in peacetime and divisions in wartime. The Second International remains active, but it is less than a pale shadow of what it was formed to become at its founding conference in Paris.

Finally, out of the radical energy of the 1917 October Revolution in the tsarist empire emerged a Third International – the Communist International (Comintern) – which, for the first time in world history, not only held fast to a radical politics, but brought together the peoples of the world into its organization. It was, unlike the two previous Internationals, a truly global project.

The Third International – the Comintern – lasted till 1943. It was a victim both of the stresses and pressures of the Second World War as well as its reduction into being an instrument of Soviet foreign policy rather than fully an instrument of world revolution.

Today, there is no such international. This is largely as a consequence of the weakness of the left.

Calls for international solidarity are frequent and the need for it is clear. There remain international associations of workers and peasants, reminders of the days of the Communist International. There are many platforms of left parties and of left movements, which often provide information and solidarity on a global scale. But these are much reduced forms of internationalism. They have neither the audacity of the Communist International nor its capacity.

Reading the texts of the meetings of the Communist International gives one a sense of the challenge that lay before the revolutionaries a hundred years ago as they struggled against the limitations of distance and culture to create the foundation for that line in the *Communist Manifesto* - workers of the world, unite! That phrase is an exhortation. But it does not take place by itself. It takes an immense effort, sacrifices of millions of people, diversion of resources that could have gone elsewhere.

Prehistory of the Communist International

Socialists and radicals of all stripes recognized by the mid-19th century that despite the difficulties, some kind of international forum was necessary. Marx and Engels were intimately involved in the formation of the International Workingmen's Association (1864), which was formed in Europe and had a distinctly European and North American character.

Marx was disappointed that the crisis of capitalism in 1857 had not produced an opening for the workers' movement. It became clear that capitalism would not collapse on its own - despite a major crisis in the banks due to widespread bad loans - and that organization of the workers was needed not only on a national but on a global level. That was part of the spur for the Association.

But, the Association - now known as the First International - was soon divided on political grounds. The communists - led by Marx - and the anarchists - led by Mikhail Bakunin - had diverse opinions about the organization of the Association and on the attitude of the Association to the State. It was this divide between the Reds (Communists) and Blacks (Anarchists) that crushed the Association.

In fact, the Association could not yet be fully true to the spirit of the *Manifesto*. It was largely a European movement, since there were no full-fledged radical organizations in Africa and Asia and few of them in Latin America. The first strike in Brazil dates to 1858, when typographers in Rio de Janeiro shut down their workplaces. But these strikes - of which there were many across Africa, Asia and Latin America - did not develop into organizations that could have been contacted by the Association. The Association did set up a section in Buenos Aires (Argentina) in 1872, although it floundered in the debate between the Reds and the Blacks and in the linguistic divides amongst the workers (French, Italian and Spanish). No robust organization of the workers or of radical thought were available to receive an invitation from the International Workingmen's Association.

Even if they were present, the technology for building connections across the oceans was not available. In the *Manifesto*, Marx and Engels wrote that the union of workers is 'helped on by the improved means of communication that are created by modern industry'. It needs to be pointed out that the first telegraph message between London and India was not sent and received until 1870, a full six years after the first meeting of the Association. The technology that Marx and Engels anticipated in 1848 had not yet created the possibility for unity. That would have to wait for decades.

Necessity pushed the socialists to try once more in 1889, when parties and trade unions from across Europe gathered in Paris to create the Socialist or Second International. This International had its roots in the slowly growing trade union organization across Europe, with some links to Latin America. The social democratic parties of the late 19th century had their main base in the trade union movement, so that the Socialist International was rooted as well in the unions and in their

linkages. But, even here, the relationship with political forces outside Europe and North America was limited. Trade unions were not to be formed in Africa and Asia until the first two decades of the 20th century. The anti-colonial parties had no substantial contact with each other until the 1927 Brussels conference of the League Against Imperialism (which was facilitated by the Comintern). Links between North America and Europe with Africa, Asia and Latin America were sporadic and uncertain. They did not enable the creation of an International that included the entire world.

Once more, the early years of the Socialist International were dogged by debates within the socialist parties as well as between the Reds and the Blacks. These latter divisions produced alternative, but less known, Internationals set up by anarcho-syndicalists and by anarchists. Over the course of its early history, the Socialist International drifted ideologically into the view that the trade unions and the socialists must fight to make the capitalist system more humane and that socialists must be rooted in their national political world in order to make a difference.

It was this anti-internationalist attitude that led most of the socialist parties in Europe to vote to fund their militaries as they went off to the senseless continental war that began in 1914 and that ended in 1918. The vote to fund this war grievously damaged the Socialist International. It was never to recover its shine.

Lenin's Breakthrough

Lenin and his closest comrades watched the collapse of the Second International with dismay. But they had anticipated it. They knew that there was weakness and rot in the heart of the socialist movement. The attitude of leaders of the German socialist movement – such as Eduard Bernstein – towards the German state and to German capitalism suggested that they would not be able to withstand the pressure of jingoism. It was clear too that they had not developed an adequate understanding of imperialism and of the self-determination of nations.

During the First World War, Lenin and his closest comrades met in Zimmerwald (Switzerland) in 1915 to dissect the collapse of the socialist movement into warfare and to find a way out. The Zimmerwald Manifesto wrote movingly that 'millions of corpses cover the battlefields' and that 'Europe is like a gigantic human slaughterhouse'.

Why did the Europeans go to war? The war, these radicals wrote, 'is the outcome of imperialism, of the attempt on the part of the capitalist classes of each nation to foster their greed for profit by the exploitation of human labour and of the natural treasures of the entire globe'. This assessment would be important to Lenin as he developed the ideas that would become central to his 1916 text *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*.

In the preface to the French and German editions of *Imperialism*, published in 1920, Lenin reflected back on the 'annexationist, predatory, plundering war' that had wracked Europe in the preceding years. This war, he wrote, had emerged as part of the normal development of capitalism, by the emergence of colonialism and finance to both plunder resources and shape markets as well as use debt to dominate most countries of the planet.

The nations of Europe and North America used their capitalist advantages to compete with each other for the right to annex the world. The antidote to this global catastrophe was to defeat imperialism in its colonies, to overthrow capitalism in its heartland and to build a proletarian world order. For Lenin, therefore, the colonial question was not a secondary question but essential to global revolutionary strategy.

The October Revolution in the tsarist empire proved Lenin correct. The vast, sprawling tsarist

empire resembled the world of the colonies, with a small European elite in the north-western part of the empire dominating an enormous array of nationalities from one end of Europe to the other end of Asia. The worker-peasant alliance and the demand for self-determination of the nationalities provided the political framework for the 1917 revolution.

Not long after the U.S.S.R. was formed, the capitalist powers encircled it and attempted a counter-revolution led by the deposed Russian aristocrats. Revolutionary energy from Moscow radiated in all directions, towards Germany and Eastern Europe certainly but also outwards to the east. The German Revolution (1918-19) and the Hungarian Revolution (1919) offered hope for the spread of the world revolution into Europe. But both of these were snuffed out. It was the defeat of the revolution in Europe that isolated the Soviet Republic and increased the determination to break the stranglehold by international revolutionary activity. The Soviet Republic had to turn to the colonies.

Lenin's admiration for anti-colonial politics goes back to before the First World War. He was dazzled by the pre-war revolutions in China, the Dutch East Indies, Iran and Turkey. 'Everywhere in Asia a mighty democratic movement is growing, spreading and gaining in strength,' Lenin wrote in 1913. 'The bourgeoisie there is *as yet* siding with the people against reaction. *Hundreds* of millions of people are awakening to life, light and freedom.' To Asia, Lenin offered, 'a reliable ally in the proletariat of all civilized countries'. [1] The term 'civilized' is here used bitterly, for these were countries whose civilization had been reduced to colonialism and capitalist brutality.

The idea of global unity between the advanced industrial workers of Europe and North America with the peasants and workers of Asia, Africa and Latin America was central to Lenin's political understanding. The right to self-determination of people who had been colonized was essential to Lenin's overall view of the political situation. Not only therefore did Lenin cast his eyes on the colonies as an essential site for political work, but he also saw the right of the colonized to self-determination as a core part of the global socialist agenda. These elements - most of them in place before the October Revolution of 1917 - would become the founding principles for the Communist International.

The Communist International

In March 1919, in the capital of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (later the U.S.S.R.), delegates came from across the world to create the Communist International (Comintern). Of the 35 organizations that came to Moscow, most were from within the U.S.S.R. or else from Europe and the United States. The only representatives born outside this zone were from China and Korea. Not one delegate came from the colonies of Europe and the United States.

Comintern couriers were soon to travel the world and make contacts with radicals from Australia to Mexico. The most well known such courier was Mikhail Borodin, who travelled to Mexico to help found the Communist Party there and who had an enduring influence in China (alongside another courier Grigori Voitinsky). Egon Kisch and Fedor Andreevich Sergeev as well as Sanzo Nosaka and Omi Komaki were some of the lesser known couriers. They played an essential role in making connections with radicals and inviting them to become part of the Communist International work. In July 1921, at the Third Comintern meeting, the International Liaison Department was established, from where communists such as Osip Piatnitsky and Berthe Zimmermann worked hard to connect movements outside the Communist orbit to the International. The work was dangerous and unrelenting, but necessary. No such organization could be produced without this kind of work.

It was because of the work of people like Borodin that the second Congress of the Comintern in July-August 1920 had a more global representation and a more global debate. Delegates came from across the Soviet East - from Armenia to Uzbekistan - as well as from Mexico to Indonesia, from

China to Iran, from India to Korea. These delegates came from left political formations, some with close ties to the colonial Communist parties and others from fledgling left groups with little previous external contact. Many had very colourful lives. Abani Mukerji (1891–1937), who would later become an early member of the Communist Party of India, came because he met the Dutch Marxist S.J. Rutgers in Amsterdam, where Mukerji had been on assignment not for the Indian revolutionary struggle but for the struggle in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia). Nonetheless, Abani Mukerji represented India. [2]

M.N. Roy came to Moscow after long conversations with Borodin and as the representative of the Mexican Communist Party, despite his long history in the early revolutionary movement in India. [3] Roy and Evelyn Trent had been living in the United States, from where they fled the long arm of British imperialism to Mexico. Avetis Sultanzade (1889–1938) represented the Communist Party of Iran, even though he spent most of his revolutionary life organizing the Iranian workers who had come to work in the U.S.S.R. [4] There was Tan Malaka (1897–1949) from Indonesia and Sylvia Pankhurst (1882–1960) from Great Britain, V.I. Lenin (1870–1924) and Alexandra Kollontai (1872–1952) as well as Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) and Angelica Balabanova (1878–1965) from the U.S.S.R. Within a year, the Comintern gathered together some of the most important leaders of very significant revolutionary movements from all the continents of the world.

Before the delegates came to Moscow, Lenin – the leader of the U.S.S.R. – sent a document with twenty-one conditions to be met by organizations for membership in the Comintern. Condition 8 is worth quoting here,

Every party wishing to belong to the Communist International is obligated to expose the tricks of ‘its own’ imperialists in the colonies, to support every liberation movement in the colonies not only in words but in deeds, to demand that the imperialists of its country be driven out of these colonies, to instil in the hearts of the workers of its country a truly fraternal attitude toward the labouring people in the colonies and toward the oppressed nations, and to conduct systematic agitation among its country’s troops against all oppression of colonial peoples.

One of the key implications of this intervention is that it is addressed to the Communists in the states of the colonizers, not to the Communists in the colonized world. The response of the Communists in the colonizing states all too often proved to be a disappointment. By and large the Communists in the colonizing states would neither act to follow these guidelines nor would they respond – over the years – to the Comintern’s explicit instructions to do more towards the anti-colonial struggle. [5] The clarity of Lenin’s thesis on imperialism and the importance of anti-colonial work for the world revolution simply did not seem to register with many of the radicals in Europe. Exceptions to the rule included the active support for the Rif War in Morocco, for the liberation war led by Augusto Sandino in Nicaragua, and for the struggle of the Ethiopians against Italian aggression. In pockets here and there – notably in the Americas – the role of Communists from states of the colonizers in the shaping of communist activity in the colonial world was significant and is only now being fully appreciated. [6]

On the last day of the First Congress of the Comintern, the delegates agreed to a manifesto that offered a strong criticism of the failures of European and North American radicals (see Chapter 2). Capitalism had laid waste to societies from one end of the planet to another. It had created a ‘kingdom of destruction where not only the means of production and transport but also the institutions of political democracy lie in bloody ruin’. In this context, the Comintern argued, the proletariat must ‘create its own apparatus’, solve the problems of capitalism by overthrowing capitalism. ‘The old parties, the old organizations of trade unions have in the persons of their leading summits proved incapable not only of solving but even of understanding the tasks posed by the new

epoch.' The unheard echo here was that the 'old parties, the old organizations of trade unions' had not taken seriously the colonial question, and the habits of the old had begun to slide into the new.

At the Second Comintern Congress (1920), Karl Radek rightly said, 'If British workers, instead of opposing bourgeois prejudices, support British imperialism or tolerate it passively, then they are working for the suppression of every revolutionary movement in Britain itself.' Anti-colonial work was the road to revolution in the states of the colonizers. It was not an act of *charity* but an act of revolutionary importance to the entire world. One of the key lessons of the Comintern was that it tried to *break* a habit amongst radicals in the states of the colonizers to replicate the colonial attitude towards anti-colonial struggles. There is no question that it was the Comintern that put the question of anti-colonial struggles on the table and demanded that radicals in the states of the colonizers move in a practical direction to undermine imperialism.

One of the key elements in these texts below is the work it took for the revolutionaries from the colonized states to get to Moscow and the work it took for them to make time to speak. The welcome letter to the Baku meeting evoked the romance of the journey. 'Formerly, you travelled across deserts to reach the holy places. Now make your way over mountains and rivers, through forests and deserts, to meet each other and discuss how to free yourselves from the chains of servitude.' The journey was dangerous, with delegates arrested and killed on the way. A boat with the Iranian delegates was attacked by the British air force, two delegates killed, while a British warship tried to block the Black Sea transit of Turkish delegates. [7]

When a young Salvadorian revolutionary - Aquilino Martinez - left the U.S.S.R. in 1934, he was detained and tortured by the Nazis (deported to El Salvador, he was condemned to life in an asylum). [8] Nonetheless the delegates came, eager to find a way to build their own revolutionary armour.

At the conferences, the Comintern secretariat seemed often to leave far too little time for the delegates to discuss the 'colonial question'. At the Third Comintern meeting, M.N. Roy was furious about the time constraint. 'I have been given five minutes for my report,' he said. 'Since the topic could not be exhausted even in an hour, I will use these five minutes to launch an energetic protest.' The feistiness of the anti-colonial radicals can be heard in their relentless attempt to get more time for issues that mattered to them, to fight to extend sessions to learn about each other's struggles and to build a proper analysis of the world situation. The spirited insistence of the delegates from across the colonized world is important to underscore. They are the ones who forced their comrades to take the 'colonial question' seriously.

At the Second Comintern Congress, Lenin pointed out that the work before the Communists should not be underestimated. It was one thing to force the radicals in the states of the colonizers to focus their energy on anti-colonial work. It was another thing to come up with a strategy and with tactics for comrades in the anti-colonial movement inside the colonized and 'backward countries'. The term 'backward' plays an important role in these texts. It refers to countries where capitalism has not developed fully and also to countries where the social benefits of wealth (literacy, well-being) have been forcibly denied to the population. The shattering impact of colonial conquest on Eastern societies is graphically portrayed by Roy in point 6 of his 'Supplementary Theses' and also by the second address of the Vietnamese freedom fighter Ho Chi Minh (Chapter 11). There was not always disdain in the use of the term 'backwardness', no indication in each of its uses that the people from the colonies were seen as inherently backward because of some cultural deficit.

The term 'backward' was a measurement of the harshness of colonial rule, which denied people the fruits of the wealth they had produced. To work in these conditions where literacy was - for instance - not available poses 'truly enormous' challenges. 'Yet,' Lenin said, 'the practical results of our work

have shown that despite these difficulties it is possible to awaken independent political thinking and independent political activity even where there is almost no proletariat at all.'

It was one thing to admit that revolutionary work was possible, indeed necessary, in the colonies, and it was another to clarify the strategy and tactics for that work. No one doubted that the primary task was the defeat of the colonial power. M.N. Roy's 'Supplementary Theses' noted, for instance, 'foreign domination constantly obstructs the free development of social life; its removal must therefore be the revolution's first step'.

Should the radical forces emphasize building a broad alliance with national-revolutionary forces towards the defeat of the colonial power or should they balance work to defeat the colonial power with efforts to develop a revolutionary process to inaugurate a communist state? Lenin and Roy had a celebrated debate on this issue at the 1920 Comintern meeting. They settled their differences on the level of strategy (see the opening of Lenin's speech in Chapter 3) but given the uneven nature of political struggles in different colonies, the underlying issue cropped up again in the years that followed.

Maring, from the Dutch East Indies, for instance, pointed out that he could 'see no difference between Comrade Lenin's theses and those of Comrade Roy'. Rather, Maring (or better yet, Henk Sneevliet, a Dutch Communist who worked in Indonesia and China) sought out the 'correct attitude towards the relations between the revolutionary nationalist and the socialist movements in the backward countries and the colonies'. Emphasis needs to be on the word *attitude*.

What was the role of the Comintern? Was it to direct the movements around the world or was it to provide internationalist assistance for the movements? It was clear that the Comintern would often be tone-deaf when it came to the dilemmas of movements in different parts of the world. The fact that it could only hold one major meeting of the Latin American Communist parties in 1929 - and then abandon the process - is a sign of the difficulties faced when Moscow attempted to drive its agenda in places as far off as Argentina. [9] The Dutch Communist David Wijnkoop intervened in a Comintern discussion to say, 'We must create the necessary preconditions so that every colonial country can develop its own revolutionary movement.' This idea of creating the precondition was a way beyond the notion that Moscow should give the revolutionaries their marching orders.

From 1919 to its suspension in 1943, the Comintern struggled to define its role and the Communists around the world struggled within the Comintern to ensure it was useful for their own revolutionary work and yet not a hindrance to them. It is important to have a balanced attitude towards the history of the Comintern, to see the value of the massive connections it enabled between revolutionaries from around the world and of the sensibility of internationalism that it created within the communist movements. At the same time, it is imperative that we not miss the problems posed by the attitude that 'Moscow is the Mecca of revolution', an attitude that made the Comintern's central office somehow more important than that of the communist movements around the world.

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It is a great pleasure for LeftWord Books to have collaborated with John Riddell to make this book. Riddell tells the story about how the editors from Pathfinder Press - Mary-Alice Waters and Barry Sheppard - came to see him after his shift at a machine shop in Brampton, Ontario (Canada). They wanted John to take up the task of translating and editing the records from the Communist International meetings during Lenin's life from 1919 to 1923. It is important to bear in mind that in June 1983, when this meeting took place, there was virtually nothing available of the Comintern record - at least in English. The main documentary text in print was Jane Degras's remarkable three-volume work, *The Communist International, 1919-1943* (1956). In quick succession, John, aided by

more than a hundred people, produced nine books of 6,791 pages from 1984 to 2019. For the full list, see 'About This Text' below.

No question that John has established a record that is invaluable for revolutionaries and for scholars of revolution. This volume would not have been possible without his immense knowledge, his abilities and his good humour as well as his warm collaboration with our colleague Nazeef Mollah.

The significance of this volume is that it collects the work of the Comintern from 1919 onwards on the 'colonial question'. It offers a window into the debates inside the Comintern over how to build the world revolution, not only in Europe but, *crucially*, in the colonized world. This was a point hammered into the Communist International by Lenin. At the Third Comintern Congress, Lenin said of the anti-colonial revolutionary struggle:

It is important to emphasize the fact that, for the first time in our International, we have taken up the question of preparing for this struggle. Of course, there are many more difficulties in this enormous sphere than in any other, but at all events the movement is advancing. And in spite of the fact that the masses of toilers - the peasants in the colonial countries - are still backward, they will play a very important revolutionary part in the coming phases of the world revolution.

His comment was met with loud applause. It is a comment that stands the test of time. It is the essence of the Comintern's policy to *liberate the colonies*.

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Contents

Introduction

- Vijay Prashad

Chapter 1: Soviet Russia Proclaims National Self-Determination

- Declaration of Soviet Government on Rights of Peoples of Russia
- Appeal to All Toiling Muslims of Russia and the East

Chapter 2: Manifesto of the Communist International to the Workers of the World

Chapter 3: Second World Congress Debate on Anti-Colonial Revolution

- 'Our basic idea: The difference between oppressor and oppressed nations', V.I. Lenin
- Supplementary Theses on the National and Colonial Questions, M.N. Roy
- Supplementary Report on the National and Colonial Questions, M.N. Roy
- 'Only social revolution will free the enslaved Black people', John Reed
- 'All Latin America is a colony of the United States', Louis Fraina
- 'Practical support needed for struggle in colonies', Karl Radek
 - Debate on Motion to Close Speakers' List
- 'The first thorough discussion of the Colonial Question', Avetis Sultanzade
- 'Not "support" but "active interest"', Antonio Graziadei
- 'China: A wide field for revolution', Liu Shaozhou
- 'Korea: A most unhappy country', Pak Chin-Sun
- 'Channel support through Communist groups', Roderic Connolly
- 'British Labour has failed to understand Ireland', Eamonn MacAlpine

- 'A liberation movement has arisen in Turkey', Ismael Hakki-Pasha
 - Renewed Debate on Closing Speakers' List
- 'A religious movement against evils of capitalism', Maring
- 'Take into account national minorities', Mariya Frumkina
- 'Help all movements against British rule', William McLaine
- 'Work in the colonies: The test of every party', David Wijnkoop
- 'Oppose anti-Jewish pogroms', A.N. Merezhin
- 'Assure rights of national minorities', Michael Kohn
 - Preparation for vote on the Theses
- Theses on the National and Colonial Questions
- Greetings from the Toiling poor of Khiva, Baba Akhunde Samilov
- Excerpts from Related Second Congress Resolutions
 - From the Statutes of the Communist International
 - From the Conditions of Admission to the Communist International

Chapter 4: Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East

- Summons to the Congress
- Session 1: Tasks of the Congress
 - 'Two worlds are meeting here today', Nariman Narimanov
 - 'We summon you to a holy war', Grigorii Zinoviev
- Session 2: World Political Situation
 - 'The East is rising hand in hand with Russian workers', Buniatzadeh
 - 'Ottoman Turkey had no predatory aims', Bahaeddin Shakir
 - 'Turkey acted as a tool of imperialists', Haydar Khan Amu Ughli
- Session 3: Turkestan and the Mountain Republic
 - 'We must speak frankly of the real situation in [Soviet] Turkestan', Narbutabekov
 - 'The Mountain poor stand ready for battle', Jalaluddin Korkmasov
- Session 4: India and Turkey
 - Indian revolutionaries appeal for aid, Declaration by the Indian Revolutionary Association in Turkestan
 - 'We march with the Third International', Enver Pasha's Declaration
 - 'Anatolia accepts the hand of Soviet friendship', Statement by Ibrahim Tali of the Ankara Government
 - 'Carry Turkish emancipation through to the end', Resolution adopted by the Congress Delegates
- Session 5: The National and Colonial Questions
 - Election of Women to Congress Presidium
 - 'The proletariat brings cultural assets to the East', Discussion: Matushev on the National Question
 - 'Only social revolution brings liberation', Discussion: Ryskulov on the National Question
- Session 6: Soviets and the Agrarian Question
 - 'Soviets: So the poor can build their own destiny', Theses on Soviet Power in the East
 - 'Refuse obligations towards feudal landlords; overthrow their power', Theses on the Agrarian Question
- Session 7: Concluding Remarks
 - 'Organize the activists in the East', Resolution on Council for Propaganda and Action
 - 'Peoples of Bukhara have been freed at last', Report by Rodzhabov on triumph in Bukhara
 - 'We will prove your most loyal comrades . . . we are not afraid', Najiye for Women of the East
 - 'A bright sun has reached us', Bibinur for Women of Turkestan
 - 'Workers of the world and oppressed peoples, unite!', Closing remarks by Zinoviev

- Correcting Abuses of Soviet Power in Turkestan
 - Communist Tasks Among Eastern Peoples
- Manifesto of the Congress to the Peoples of the East
- Composition of the Congress

Chapter 5: Third Congress of the Communist International: Resolutions from India, China and Iran

- Draft Resolutions Submitted to the Third Congress on the Colonial Question
 - 'Poor peasants and proletarians are the forces of revolution', M.N. Roy (India)
 - 'We must ally but not merge with national movements in colonies', Avetis Sultanzade (Iran)
 - 'We must free the masses from bourgeois leadership', Zhang Tailei (China)

Chapter 6: Third Congress of the Communist International: from the Minutes

- Significance of the Anti-Colonial Movement
- Inadequacies of the Congress Discussion

Chapter 7: Blueprints for Unity: China and Dutch East Indies

- Conditions for Support of National-Democratic Movements, G.I. Safarov
- Forging an Anti-Colonial United Front
 - 'I come from the Indies; I have travelled forty days', Tan Malaka

Chapter 8: Fourth Congress of the Communist International: from the Minutes

- 'The world proletariat greets the strivings of Islamic peoples', Willem van Ravesteyn
- 'For an anti-imperialist united front in the colonial countries', M.N. Roy
- 'Japanese workers are awakening', Sen Katayama
 - Call for Japan's Withdrawal from Russian Sakhalin
- 'Pseudo-Communists compete for French bourgeoisie's high regard', Tahar Boudengha
 - Protest Against Reduction of Speaking Time
- 'We must link up with revolutionaries in the colonies', Harry Webb
- 'For a united front with the Guomindang', Liu Renjing
- 'The red flag will wave over the pyramids', Husni el-Arabi
- 'For a pan-Pacific congress of workers', William Earsman
- 'Unify all the efforts of colonial revolution', G.I. Safarov
- 'Communists in the motherlands have neglected their duties', Orhan
- 'The Second Congress resolution exists only on paper', Karim Nikbin
- 'We face a vast organizational, political, and intellectual labour', Karl Radek

Chapter 9: Fourth Congress of the Communist International: Resolution

- Theses on the Eastern Question
1. The Rise of the Revolutionary Movement in the East
 2. The Conditions of Struggle
 3. The Agrarian Question
 4. The Workers' Movement in the East
 5. The General Tasks of Communist Parties in the East
 6. The Anti-Imperialist United Front
 7. The Tasks of the Proletariat in Countries of the Pacific
 8. The Tasks of the Metropolitan Parties toward the Colonies

Chapter 10: For Global Black Liberation

- Reports on the Black Question
 - 'Awaken the consciousness of the Black masses', Billings
 - 'The situation of Blacks is horrendous and fraught with danger', Claude McKay
- Theses on the Black Question

Chapter 11: Fifth Congress of the Communist International: Ho Chi Minh on the National and Colonial Questions

- 'What our European parties have done for the colonies is almost worthless'
- Victims of colonialism are 'ripe for insurrection'

The Long March to Colonial Freedom

- John Riddell's Reflections

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Footnotes

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