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The Baku Congress of 1920 Sounded the Call for the End of Empire

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A century ago this month, the new Soviet government summoned anti-colonial revolutionaries from across Asia to a gathering in Baku. The Baku Congress proved to be a watershed in the fight against European colonial domination and the rise of the Global South.

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In Baku, Azerbaijan, one hundred years ago this month, an unprecedented assembly of anti-colonial activists proclaimed the advent of a global struggle for colonial freedom. About 2,050 participants, drawn from thirty-seven mostly Asian and Muslim peoples, approved the call for a “holy war” for the liberation of peoples of the East in September 1920.

Even today, decades after most colonies achieved at least formal sovereignty, the call of Baku resonates in a world shaken by rising struggles against racism and white supremacy.

Calling in the East

The Baku Congress was convened by the Communist International, or Comintern, a year after its formation, just as the political balance in Europe was beginning to shift against the Comintern’s supporters. In the words of historian E. H. Carr, the Baku event signified “calling in the East to redress the balance of the West.” And indeed, the most enduring historical impact of Communism during the last century is the impulse it gave to anti-colonial liberation movements.

The Second, or Socialist, International, formed in 1889, had achieved little in this arena. True, it opposed colonialism in principle, but this condemnation was far from unanimous. At its 1907 congress this position was sustained only narrowly, by 127 to 108 votes. Moreover, many leaders of

the Socialist movement, then based primarily in Europe, viewed the goal of liberating the colonies as an obligation to be carried out only later, by a future Socialist government.

[Picture not reproduced here. Baku Congress, September 1920]

Meanwhile, during World War I, most leading European Socialist parties supported the war efforts of their respective capitalist governments, further entangling those parties in the defense of colonial empires. During this period, the nascent popular movements in the colonies usually demanded only a measure of autonomy rather than full independence. The Russian Revolution of 1917, however, took a different course, one that quickly gained wide respect abroad.

From Paris to Baku

At the time of the revolution, minority ethnic groups made up a majority of Russia's population. Muslim Asiatic peoples accounted for a sixth of the total, dwelling in vast territories afflicted with Russian settler colonialism. When a Bolshevik-led government based on soviets (councils) of workers, soldiers, and peasants took power in November 1917, one of its first decrees was to guarantee these minority peoples "free self-determination up to and including the right to secede."

Another early Soviet appeal pledged to Muslim workers and farmers that "henceforth your beliefs and customs, your national and cultural institutions are declared free and inviolable." These measures won wide support internationally, particularly among activists in the colonies. When the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 flatly rejected the idea of self-determination for colonized peoples, this spurred advocates for colonial rights to embrace the goal of full independence.

After supporters of the old order launched a war against the Soviet government, aided by armed contingents from the United States and other Allied powers, the Soviet regime rallied massive support among the victims of tsarist colonialism. By late 1919, close to 250,000 working people of Muslim origin were serving on the decisive Central Asian front in the Soviet Sixth Army, making up almost half its strength.

By the end of 1919, Soviet forces were victorious on the civil war's main fronts. The British armies that had penetrated Iran, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, and present-day Turkmenistan were retreating toward bases in Palestine, Iraq, and India. In the early months of 1920, Soviet armies approached the borders of Iran, Afghanistan, and China. Asian peoples in former tsarist Russia formed many autonomous Soviet republics.

'Builders of a New Life'

The time seemed ripe for an alliance of pro-Soviet forces with colonial liberation movements beyond Soviet borders. The initiative came from the Communist International, a world party of socialist revolution that had been launched in Moscow in March 1919.

The Comintern viewed colonized peoples not merely as victims of imperial dictates but as agents of social liberation. The Bolshevik leader Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (Lenin) set out this vision in November 1919 to a congress of Communists of the East.

Having previously been merely "objects of international imperialist policy, existing only as material to fertilize capitalist culture and civilization," the peoples of the East would now, Lenin predicted, "rise as independent participants, as builders of a new life." The world struggle for socialism would

be propelled by “a struggle of all the colonies and countries oppressed by imperialism.”

The Comintern’s Second World Congress, held in Moscow during three weeks of July–August 1920, featured a full discussion of colonial and national liberation. It adopted two sets of theses, one drafted by Lenin and one by the Indian revolutionary Manabendra Nath Roy, and proposed an alliance of revolutionary workers’ movements with “national-revolutionary” movements in colonial and semi-colonial countries.

A Revolutionary Pilgrimage

Just before the Second Comintern Congress, on June 29, 1920, the Communist International appealed to the “enslaved popular masses of Iran, Armenia, and Turkey” to meet in Baku in August, along with delegates from Soviet Asia, India, and beyond. According to the Comintern president Grigory Zinoviev, the Baku gathering would serve as “the complement, the second part” of the just-completed world congress.

The call for the Baku Congress, signed by two dozen revolutionary workers’ leaders of Europe and the United States, declared:

“Formerly, you traveled across deserts to visit 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, so as to unite in cordial alliance, in order to live in equality, freedom, and brotherhood ... may your congress bring strength and faith to millions and millions of the enslaved throughout the world. May it instill in them confidence in their power. May it bring nearer the day of final triumph and liberation.”

Celebrations of the congress were organized in Russia’s Asiatic communities, and delegates were chosen. They traveled to Baku along rail links through territories not yet fully cleared of anti-Soviet armed bands. Passengers sometimes disembarked from their train to gather wood to feed the locomotive firebox.

On one occasion, a White Guard attack cut the rail line, leaving a train carrying most of the European delegates to the Baku Congress temporarily stranded. Four delegates were killed en route, two of them machine-gunned by a British warplane during a boat trip.

Completing the Trek

An estimated 2,050 participants arrived in Baku for the congress. About 90 percent came from racialized peoples — a striking contrast to all previous socialist gatherings, which had been overwhelmingly European in makeup.

Among the Asian delegates, about 40 percent came from outside Soviet territory, mostly from Iran, Turkey, and the Caucasus. Eight Chinese and three Koreans registered — probably immigrant workers in Russia. The fourteen delegates from British India had literally completed the trek through mountains and deserts conjured up in the congress call: by foot to Kabul, across the Hindu Kush mountains, and then overland to Tashkent and beyond.

As the congress convened, on August 31, Baku Communists welcomed them with the following words: “A new world is awakening to life and to struggle: the world of oppressed nationalities ... of the East.”

The congress, which stretched over eight days, was unprecedented in size and scope. Two thousand participants, most of whom were new to political activity, speaking more than two dozen languages, debated and made decisions in plenary sessions without, of course, electronic amplification or translation equipment.

The logistical challenge was daunting. Soviet rule had been established in Azerbaijan only four months previously. The city was impoverished and disorganized by many years of war, and food was in short supply. Yet somehow meals were provided and sleeping space located. Time was found for varied cultural performances, which can still be viewed in a documentary prepared by the congress film crew.

Breaking Down Barriers

Amid the unavoidable confusion of plenary sessions, the many shouted complaints — dutifully recorded in the official minutes — dealt mostly with inadequacies of translation. The need for translation was all the more deeply felt because Asiatic languages had been stifled under tsarist rule. In the Baku Congress, by contrast, while Russian was the main working language, the sessions resounded with translations into many of the three dozen languages spoken by delegates.

Each speech was followed by a pause for translations. Given the many languages in use, this procedure caused confusion and delay, and eventually translation from the podium was limited to three languages. Even so, the untrained translators used widely varying methods — sometimes giving only brief summaries, sometimes carrying on much longer than the original speaker.

The resulting hazards were conveyed in an anecdote passed on by the famous US socialist and congress delegate John Reed, teasing a British delegate (probably Thomas Quelch):

“According to Reed, the British delegate’s timid and hesitant remarks were translated by Peter Petrov with such enthusiasm and such a spirit of invention that the hall soon erupted with cheers and shouts of “Down with British imperialism!” as swords and rifles were brandished in the air. The dismayed British delegate protested, “I’m sure I never said anything like that. I demand a proper translation.””

The main proposal before the congress — to build a militant alliance to expel British imperialism — had been foreshadowed in the conference call and evoked general agreement. The congress agenda was structured by reports presenting the social character of the revolution needed to achieve this goal, with strong emphasis on land reform, national rights, and the formation of workers’ and peasants’ councils.

Points of Contention

According to the credentials report, two-thirds of those present belonged to or sympathized with the Communist movement. Clearly, the response of the remaining “non-party” delegates, diverse in political outlook, would be decisive to the gathering’s outcome.

The congress presidium therefore organized these delegates into a special “non-party” fraction, whose repeated separate sessions were marked by no little controversy. According to Zinoviev’s subsequent account, the non-party fraction turned out to be much larger than parallel “Communist” caucus meetings, and included a fractious minority whose members “in fact belonged to bourgeois parties.”

One of these bourgeois politicians, Enver Pasha, was quite prominent. Leader of the “Young Turk” revolution of 1908, Enver later led Ottoman Turkey into the First World War and was complicit in Turkey’s wartime massacre of Armenians.

Enver had just turned up in Moscow, where he declared his support for the Soviet regime. He then went to Baku and requested speaking rights in the congress. This was rejected, but Enver’s written statement was read out. Enver then busied himself on the fringes of the congress promoting anti-Soviet activity in Central Asia; he soon took up arms against the Soviet republic.

The congress also heard from İbrahim Tali Öngören, representing the revolutionary nationalist movement in Turkey led by Mustapha Kemal (Atatürk). Despite its hostility to Soviet Communism, the Kemalist movement was receiving Soviet aid in its struggle to expel British, Greek, and French occupying forces from the country.

The congress adopted a resolution supporting the “national-revolutionary” struggle in Turkey but insisted that this movement should combat not only foreign domination but also class oppression within Turkish society. The statement urged Turkish peasants and workers to “come together in independent organizations to carry the cause of emancipation through to the end.”

Disagreements among the forty-one Jewish delegates regarding Zionist colonization in Palestine found expression in three position papers, two in favor and one opposed.

Women’s Liberation

A persistent disagreement arose over the role of the fifty-three women delegates present at the congress. The struggle of women for liberation was addressed during several congress sessions. Still, the active role of female delegates aroused objections from some delegates whose societies still practiced, to varying degrees, the seclusion of women. A proposal to elect three women to the Presiding Committee aroused strong objections from many non-party participants.

[Picture not reproduced here. Najiye Hanum, Turkey]

The debate in the non-party fraction continued for several days. On the sixth day of sessions, the chair called on the congress to include three women in its leading committee: Bulach Tatu, from Dagestan; Najiye Hanum, from Turkey; and Khaver Shabanova-Karayeva, from Azerbaijan, of whom the last two addressed the congress.

The proceedings at this point read:

“Yes, yes.” Applause, rising to an ovation.... Chair: “Long live the emancipation of the women of the East!” Loud applause. Shouts of “Hurrah!” All Stand. Ovation. A statement on the liberation struggle of women of the East was read out to the congress.

The resolution of differences over the role of women reflected a convergence of revolutionaries influenced by traditional religious beliefs and those with a Marxist outlook. One congress participant, Babayev, expressed this process in a comment made informally more than half a century after the Baku gathering:

“When the call to prayer came, [Babayev] 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 “declaration of holy war against the enemy of revolution,” he explained, “thousands of people,

convinced there was no contradiction between being a Bolshevik and a Muslim, joined the Bolshevik ranks.””

Abuses of Power

An even more explosive challenge came from Tashpolad Narbutabekov, chair of the caucus of non-Communist delegates, who sharply attacked the chauvinist practices of some Soviet officials in Central Asia. Turar Ryskulov presented a lengthy protest arguing the case against such abuses, signed by twenty-one delegates from Central Asia, the Caucasus, Iran, and India.

[Picture not reproduced here. Turar Ryskulov (1894-1938)]

The indignant Turkestan revolutionaries received a good measure of satisfaction. A few days later, Zinoviev spoke in their support. After the close of the congress, twenty-seven delegates travelled to Moscow and presented their complaints to the Communist Party's Political Bureau.

Lenin helped shape a decision addressing their grievances and taking corrective action. This is the only known case where a minority initiative at a Comintern gathering secured an alteration in Soviet internal policies.

A Hurricane of Propaganda

In his congress summary, Zinoviev proposed a significant rewording of the closing words of the Communist Manifesto: "Workers of all lands and oppressed peoples of the whole world, unite!" The Baku Congress closing statement called on the peoples of the East to:

"Go forward as one in a holy war against the British conquerors! ...this is a holy war to liberate the peoples of the East; to end the division of humanity into oppressor peoples and oppressed peoples; and to achieve complete equality of all peoples and races, whatever language they may speak, whatever the color of their skin, and whatever the religion they profess."

As the congress closed, it set up an ongoing Council for Propaganda and Action, which organized what the British government termed a "real hurricane of propaganda, intrigue, and conspiracy against British interests": books, pamphlets, educators, and organizers presenting the message of Baku in many lands and languages.

British forces soon completed their withdrawal from Central Asia, while pro-Soviet governments took root in lands stretching from the Caucasus past the Urals to the Pacific Ocean. Outside Soviet territories, however, the 1920s saw a temporary reconsolidation of the old colonial empires.

The Legacy of Baku

The rise of Stalinism in Soviet Russia pulled the Comintern away from the course set in Baku. In its later years, the Comintern was no longer a consistent partisan of colonial liberation. Within the Soviet Union itself, under the rule of Joseph Stalin, murderous repression struck down most of the Comintern's original leaders.

Among those victimized in frame-up purges were the speakers from Asia at the Baku Congress who were within Stalin's reach and whose fate is known: Tashpolad Narbutabekov, Turar Ryskulov,

Jalalutdin Korkmasov, Dadash Buniatzadeh (all killed), and Khaver Shabanova-Karayeva (jailed). Yet the influence of the Baku Congress lived on in the broader global anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist movement that moved from success to success after the Second World War.

During recent decades, with formal sovereignty largely achieved, imperial powers have deployed new means of domination: wars, drone attacks, sanctions, subversion, and oppressive trade treaties. Meanwhile, anti-colonialist and anti-racist struggles are on the rise in the old imperialist heartlands. In this new context, the spirit of the Baku Congress continues to find vigorous expression.

John Riddell

*Block quotes are based on the 1993 Pathfinder edition, "To See the Dawn."
Editions of the Baku Congress Proceedings.*

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<https://johnriddell.com/2020/09/30/the-baku-congress-of-1920-sounded-the-call-for-the-end-of-empire/>

The following centennial appreciation of the September 1920 Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East first appeared in Jacobin, and is reprinted with permission.

- Translation by Brian Pearce, 1977.
- Annotated and illustrated edition, "To See the Dawn: First Congress of the Peoples of the East," ed. John Riddell, Pathfinder, 1993, \$17.
- Online edition of selected Baku congress speeches and documents, "Liberate the Colonies: Communism and Colonial Freedom 1917-24, ed. John Riddell, Vijay Prashad, and Nazeef Mollah, New Delhi: Leftword Books, 2019.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NjNAq1ZCw92h5MV7y6NP1ETqHRC4Txk0/view>