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A Survey of Comintern Auxiliary Organizations - Part 9: Krestintern: The Comintern's Troubled Peasant International

Monday 11 October 2021, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 8 October 2021).

Launched in 1923 in Moscow, the Peasant International, or Krestintern, was at least in organizational terms perhaps the least successful of the auxiliary bodies built by the Communist International (Comintern).

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Within two years of its foundation, attention to the Peasant International “visibly languished,” according to historian E.H. Carr. Although the structure survived until 1939, its only “effective and durable creation,” Carr states, “was the International Agrarian Institute in Moscow.”^[1]

Nonetheless, Krestintern was an expression of a historic breakthrough by Marxism in charting a path to unity of working people in the factories and on the land.

Revolutionary peasant movements played a decisive role in twentieth-century anti-capitalist revolutions, notably in China, Vietnam, and Cuba. Moreover, in recent decades, the most effective global alliance of exploited working people has been the peasant-based [La Via Campesina](#).^[2]

During the Comintern era, peasant cultivators had great social weight across almost all of Europe. The Russian revolution of 1917 displayed the power of a revolutionary worker-peasant alliance. Yet at that time, few Marxists outside Russia considered such an alignment to be feasible in the main capitalist states of Central and Western Europe, where survivals of feudal landlordism were much less entrenched.

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In Germany, for example neither the Social Democratic Party nor the Independent Social Democratic Party projected a workers' alliance with the peasantry. Both rejected distribution to peasant cultivators of lands of the great Prussian landholders.[3]

'Take the Struggle to the Countryside'

By contrast, the revolutionary Spartacist current in Germany – predecessor of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) – advocated an alliance with exploited peasants. Its central leader, Rosa Luxemburg, called on the newly formed German Communist Party (KPD) in January 1919 to “take the class struggle to the countryside.” However, Luxemburg reiterated her opposition to land distribution to poor peasants in her September 1918 pamphlet “[The Russian Revolution](#).”[4] Similar views among Communists in Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Finland, and Poland undercut the prospects for worker-peasant unity during the 1919–1920 revolutionary upheavals in those countries.[5]

In Germany, however, the KPD took a decisive step forward on the peasant question in July 1919 by publishing an agrarian program calling for “all-sided assistance” to small peasants in defending and developing their farms, including, under certain conditions, distribution of land from expropriated great estates.[6] The term “small peasants” referred to farmers who worked their lands primarily through family labour, as opposed to “large peasants” who relied predominantly on use of exploited wage labour.

Lenin's Agrarian Theses

The KPD's decision on the agrarian question came a full year in advance of the Comintern's first debate on this question, which took place at its Second World Congress, held in Moscow July-August 1920. Lenin drafted theses on the agrarian question for the consideration of this congress. However, Lenin's proposal encountered strong objections from some delegates from the Comintern's Italian section and from the left-wing Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD). Disagreements were aired at length at the congress during a dedicated full-day discussion as well as under other agenda points.[7]

Lenin's theses declared that workers must act as the vanguard of all toilers, including exploited farmers. His theses called for Communists to focus their efforts on linking up with the different layers of exploited cultivators: the agricultural proletariat; semi-proletarians who both cultivate their own land and work for capitalist farmers; and “small peasants” working their own small holdings. The poorest layers of peasants, the theses maintained, would gain enormously from revolution, receiving a guarantee of their own landholdings and of land that they rent, as well as, where appropriate, land distributed from great estates. The theses specified that the workers themselves would decide how land confiscated from the great landowners would be utilized.[8]

Peasants of the East

A month after the close of the Second World Congress, a great revolutionary gathering in Baku, Azerbaijan, drew up theses on the agrarian question aimed at forging an alliance between workers and peasants in countries oppressed by colonial rule and oppression. The agrarian theses adopted by some 2,000 delegates at the Baku congress highlighted above all the need to:

[R]emove the prime source of all their oppression and exploitation, the power of the foreign capitalist conquerors and of their own despotic tyrants, the sultans, shahs, khans and beys....

[R]efuse to fulfil any obligations towards the feudal landlords; overthrow their power, abolish large-scale landownership ... and divide [the land] among the peasants, tenants, and labourers who till it. (Theses 3a and 3b)[9]

In March 1922, the Soviet People's Commissariat proposed to the Comintern that it organize an annual international agricultural conference. The reporter, Valerian Osinsky, proposed that the conference establish an Agrarian Bureau to lead the agrarian divisions of Communist parties, in consultation with the Soviet Commissariat. A resolution to this effect was adopted, but it appears not to have been acted upon.[10]

The next step came from the Comintern's Fourth World Congress, held in November–December 1922, which adopted an agrarian action program outlining immediate demands for the implementation of the Second Congress agrarian theses. The 1922 theses affirmed that Communists favour “distribution of land, livestock, and means of production to all land-hungry peasants on conditions that enable them to do well” and “assure them of a full subsistence.”[11]

The congress also proposed that, under certain circumstances, workers could ally with peasant forces in a struggle for governmental power. The Theses on Tactics adopted by the congress included, among the possibilities to be considered, a “[g]overnment of workers and the poorer peasants. Such a possibility exists in the Balkans, Czechoslovakia, etc.”[12]

Seeking to demonstrate how such a government might take shape, Comintern leader Leon Trotsky pointed during the congress to the Russian Bolsheviks' governmental coalition in the newly formed Soviet republic with “our Left Social Revolutionaries, who represented the peasantry in the workers' government that we formed.” The coalition, formed in November 1917, broke down in the spring of 1918. Subsequently, Trotsky noted, the Bolsheviks ruled alone as “a government wholly in the hands of the working class.”[13]

For a Workers' and Peasants' Government

The discussion was renewed in June 1923 at the Third Enlarged Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI). Comintern President Grigori Zinoviev suggested, in his opening report on June 12, that peasant movements in several parts of Eastern Europe were displaying unprecedented autonomy and dynamism:

“We are actually seeing for the first time in recent political history some cases where peasant parties have tried to play an independent political role – and not entirely without success. That is what we see in Czechoslovakia and in the Balkans. We are well aware

that peasant parties cannot play an independent political role in the long run. The peasantry follows either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat.”[14]

In this framework, the Third Enlarged Plenum sought to apply more widely the concept of a governmental alliance with the peasantry, reformulating the Fourth Congress call for “workers’ government” as one for a “workers’ and peasants’ government.”[15]

Defeat in Bulgaria

Three days before Zinoviev spoke, the strongest peasant-based party in Europe had suffered a crushing defeat. The Agrarian Union regime in Bulgaria, which had ruled the country since 1919, was ousted by a murderous military coup. During the conflict, Bulgaria’s powerful Communist Party stood aside, proclaiming its “neutrality.” The Enlarged Plenum’s final session condemned the Bulgarian party’s abstention and proposed a united front with the Agrarian Union to resist the rightist coup regime.[16]

The 1923 plenum resolution on the “workers’ and farmers’ government” reiterated the call of the Comintern’s Second and Fourth World Congresses for a differentiated approach to the peasantry’s various social layers, aimed at “neutralising the middle layers of the peasantry and winning the small peasants.”[17]

On June 14, two days after Zinoviev’s report on the workers’ and peasants’ government demand, the Moscow Communist Party newspaper *Pravda* published an article entitled “Peasant International,” proposing that such a new organization be created to implement the ECCI’s governmental slogan.

The article’s author was Tamasz Dąbal, a long-time leader in the Polish Peasant Party. He had joined the Communist movement in 1920, becoming its most prominent peasant-based leader.

The Comintern leadership quickly swung behind the proposal for a Peasant International. A founding conference was held in Moscow October 10–16, 1923, attended by 128 delegates from 40 countries, mostly from Eastern Europe and Asia. It formed an International Peasant Council headed by veteran Bolshevik leader, A.P. Smirnov, with Dąbal as his deputy. The international movement was known as the Peasant International or, by its Russian short form, as the Krestintern.[18]

Rightist Disorientation

The Peasant International’s negotiations with the Bulgarian Agrarian Union came to nothing. Only one peasant movement in capitalist Europe rallied to the Krestintern. In 1924 Stjepan Radić, leader of the Croatian People’s Peasant Party, joined the Krestintern on behalf of his party during a visit to Moscow. This party, an advocate of Croatian independence, was not anti-capitalist in orientation; Radić and his party quit the Comintern only a year later and joined a capitalist government.

The Radić episode stood in contradiction to the Comintern’s declared orientation to defend exploited peasants as opposed to rich farmers relying on wage labour. The Croatian party’s brief adherence ended up diminishing the Comintern Peasant Council’s authority.

Meanwhile, in Asia, the Peasant International joined with the Comintern in supporting the bourgeois nationalist Kuomintang [Guomindang]. The Comintern hailed this movement in 1927 as “a revolutionary bloc of workers, peasants, intelligentsia and urban democracy on the basis of a

community of class interests of these strata in a struggle against foreign imperialists and the whole military-feudal order.”[19] A few months year later, the Kuomintang launched an unprovoked assault on Communists in Shanghai, killing more than five thousand people.

In 1928, the Comintern took a sharp ultraleft turn put an end to its projects for alignment with peasant movements. According to Trotsky, the Peasant International was not even mentioned in Comintern President Nikolai Bukharin’s main report to the Comintern’s 1928 world congress.[20] Trotsky, main leader of the Left Opposition to Stalinist bureaucratism, condemned the Peasant International outright as:

[T]he phase of idealizing the peasantry, a wholly uncritical exaggeration of every symptom of its “break” with bourgeois society, an embellishment of every ephemeral peasant organization and a downright adulation of the “peasant” demagogues.[21]

In 1935, the Comintern reoriented to an effort to build alliances with left-leaning bourgeois political currents, which did nothing to revive the Peasant International’s fortunes. In the years that followed, the Comintern apparatus was progressively dismantled, and the Krestintern itself was shut down in 1939.

Meanwhile, in China, the Communist Party, having reoriented toward building a base among the peasantry, was entering the decisive period of expansion that led to its victory over the Kuomintang, its assumption of power, and the foundation of the People’s Republic of China in 1949.

At that time, south of China, a peasant-based insurgency was contending for power in Vietnam. An analogous uprising began in Cuba in 1956. Elsewhere in the Global South, peasant struggles played a significant role in anti-colonial liberation struggles, growing beyond the limits of peasant movements in the Krestintern era. And in subsequent decades, as previously noted, a peasant International did take shape, although without any organic tie to the workers’ movement.

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Notes

[1]. E.H. Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, vol. 3, p. 989.

[2]. See Riddell, “[World Farmers’ Alliance Challenges Food Profiteers](https://johnriddell.com/2008/04/03/48/).”
<https://johnriddell.com/2008/04/03/48/>.

[3]. The agrarian question in Germany during that period is discussed in John Riddell, ed., *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power* (hereinafter *German Revolution*), New York: Pathfinder 1986, pp. 213–41. The chapter, “Toward a Workers-Peasant Alliance,” draws on research by Pathfinder editorial team member Robert Dees.

[4]. Rosa Luxemburg, “[The Bolshevik Land Policy](#),” in Peter Hudis and Kevin B. Anderson, *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, New York: Monthly Review, 2004, pp. 290–3; Riddell, ed., *German Revolution*, pp. 228, 233.

[5]. Riddell, ed., *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!* (hereinafter, *Second Congress*), New York: Pathfinder, 1991, vol. 1, pp. 53–4. See also Julian Marchlewski, “The Agrarian

Question and the World Revolution,"in *Second Congress*, vol. 2, pp. 949-59, and [Kommunistische Internationale](#), no. 12 (August 1920), pp. 89-97.

[6]. Riddell, ed., *German Revolution*, pp. 239-40.

[7]. Riddell, ed., *Second Congress*, vol. 2, pp. 635-70.

[8]. For the draft theses, see Lenin, *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965, vol. 31, pp. 152-64, also available in Riddell, *Second Congress*, pp. 960-71 and [Marxists Internet Archive](#). For the theses' final text, as adopted by the congress, see Riddell, *Second Congress*, pp. 152-64.

[9]. See Theses 3a and 3b in John Riddell, Vijay Prashad, Nazeef Mollah, eds., [Liberate the Colonies: Communists and Colonial Freedom, 1917-1924](#), New Delhi: Leftword Books, pp. 139; Riddell, ed., *To See the Dawn*, New York: Pathfinder, 1993, pp. 195.

[10]. Mike Taber, ed., *The Communist Movement at a Crossroads* (hereinafter: *Crossroads*), Leiden/Chicago: Brill and Haymarket, 2018, pp. 210, 247-9.

[11]. Riddell, ed., *Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922* (hereinafter *Fourth Congress*), Leiden: Brill/Haymarket, 2011, pp. 955, 957.

[12]. Riddell, ed., *Fourth Congress*, pp. 1160-61. For text and commentary see also Riddell, "[The Comintern's Unknown Decision on Workers' Governments](#)." See also the Fourth Congress "[Theses on Tactics](#)."

[13]. See Riddell, ed., *Fourth Congress*, p. 1003.

[14]. Taber, ed., *Crossroads*, p. 417.

[15]. For the Enlarged ECCI Plenum resolution, Taber, ed., *Crossroads*, p. 650-6.

[16]. Taber, ed., *Crossroads*, pp. 646-9.

[17]. Taber, ed., *Crossroads*, p. 653.

[18]. George D. Jackson, Jr., *Comintern and Peasant in East Europe 1919-1930*, New York: Columbia University, 1966, pp. 68-9; Pierre Broué, *L'Histoire de l'Internationale Communiste*, Paris: Fayard, 1997, pp. 387-9,

[19]. Carr, *Socialism in One Country*, vol. 3, p. 791. Regarding the "anti-imperialist united front," see on this blog "[Fruits and Perils of the Bloc Within](#)."

[20]. Leon Trotsky, "[Kresintern i antiimperialisticheskaya liga](#)," in *Biulletin' Oppositsii*, nos. 15-16 or "The Krestintern and the Anti-Imperialist League" in *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1930-31*, New York: Pathfinder, 1973, pp. 34-35.

[21]. Trotsky, "Strategy and Tactics in the Imperialist Epoch," part 7, in *The Third International after Lenin*, New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1936, p. 119.

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- John Riddell's blog. October 10, 2021:
<https://johnriddell.com/2021/10/10/krestintern-the-cominterns-troubled-peasant-international/>

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Part 9 of a nine-part series on auxiliary organizations of the Communist International.