

The Russian Revolution and the Global South

Monday 15 February 2021, by [BILBAO Luis](#), [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2017).

In 1917, the mass slaughter of World War 1 weighed on working people like a nightmare.

Then, in November, word spread that the working people of Russia had assumed governmental power. "It was like a bolt from the blue when the news came ... of the establishing of the Soviet Government," Canadian revolutionist Malcolm Bruce later recalled. "There was a great uplift amongst the working class." The socialist educator Charlie Lestor told him, "Malcolm, this is it! This is the beginning of the world revolution." [1]

And so it was.

Over the 100 years, the impulse of the Russian revolution has spread more slowly than Malcolm Bruce expected and suffered many setbacks. Yet the seeds planted in 1917 continues to germinate and grow.

The Soviet example

The new government in Russia was called "Soviet" because it was based on councils of workers and peasants ("soviets") across the country. It quickly took sweeping measures to meet the most urgent needs of working people:

- All land was nationalized and peasant committees were placed in charge of its equitable distribution.
- Workers' right to supervise management of their enterprises was assured by law.
- Women received full equality under the law, including the right to vote and serve in government.
- The subject nationalities that then made up 58% of the population were assured of "free self-determination up to and including the right to secede."
- Muslim peoples, 15% of Soviet citizens, were told that "henceforth your beliefs and customs, your national and cultural institutions are declared free and inviolable." They were urged to "build your national life freely and without hindrance." [2]
- The Soviets called on all the warring powers to join in concluding a "just, democratic" peace without annexations or indemnities, one "based on the right of all nations to self-determination." They quickly concluded a cease-fire with Germany and its allies. [3]

The Soviet peace appeal induced U.S. President Woodrow Wilson to include similar-sounding promises in his "Fourteen Points" peace program - points that were largely ignored in the 1919 Paris treaties that wound up the war. The Soviet appeal, by contrast, was taken up by movements of workers and soldiers in the warring countries, who rose in rebellion in October-November 1918 and brought the war to an abrupt end.

In the years that followed, the social gains achieved by working people in Russia had a vast impact in other countries. The Soviet republic - after 1922 the "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics" - set

the pace on gender rights, measures to counter chauvinism and racism, and actions to protect minority languages and cultures. Communist parties were formed in the West on the Bolshevik model and, in many cases, grew to embrace tens or hundreds of thousands of members.

But in no Western country did the partisans of the Russian revolution achieve a breakthrough.

Unexpectedly, it was in the Global South - in the colonies and semi-colonies; the oppressed, dependent, and exploited nations - that the Russian revolution had its most enduring and transformational impact.

A revolutionary International

In March 1919, a conference in Moscow founded the Communist International (Comintern) - a world party dedicated to the spread of socialist revolution. The imperialist blockade of Soviet Russia limited attendance to 52 delegates. Thirteen of them represented nine Asian peoples, including leagues of Korean and Chinese workers in Russia. [4]

The conference manifesto condemned colonial oppression. "There are open rebellions and revolutionary ferment in all the colonies," it stated, projecting that workers' upsurge in Europe would bring colonial peoples much-needed assistance. Further:

The liberation of the colonies is possible only together with the liberation of the working class in the imperialist centers.... Colonial slaves of Africa and Asia: the hour of proletarian dictatorship in Europe will also be the hour of your liberation. [5]

The Manifesto's words reflected the hopes of socialists worldwide that Soviet power would likely spread across Europe within the year, toppling capitalist governments and colonial empires alike.

Translated into many languages, the Manifesto struck a chord among activists of colonial and semi-colonial peoples. Claude McKay, a pioneer Black Communist in the U.S., said that "this passage in the manifesto awakened interest among many groups of radical blacks, who distributed the document across the U.S." [6]

Other congress resolutions pledged support to colonial peoples "in their struggle against imperialism" and condemned the previously pro-war workers' parties for explicitly endorsing colonial rule. [7]

An ill-advised passage in another resolution denounced the imperialist states for sending "brutal, barbaric colonial troops" - that is, working people from Africa forced into the French army - into action against workers in Europe. Dutch delegate S.J. Rutgers protested against this passage, proposing instead to denounce the colonial powers for attacking workers in Europe "with the same ruthlessness with which they proceed against colonial peoples." [8]

And even as the congress met, African troops deployed in France's intervention against the Soviet republic were demonstrating their opposition to this war. French generals called them "uncontrollable" and soon withdrew them. The error regarding African troops was rectified in the Comintern's 1921 world congress. [9]

For 'combined' global struggle

In November 1919, eight months after the founding congress, Vladimir Uljanov (Lenin), the Soviet head of government, proposed a framework for global struggle against imperialism different from that found in the Comintern's March 1919 manifesto. By then, it was clear that workers' struggles

west of the Soviet republic had failed to score immediate breakthroughs. To the east, however, the most acute crisis of the Russian civil war had then passed, and Soviet armies, which included close to 300,000 Muslim and 50,000 immigrant Chinese soldiers, were advancing across Asia. Pro-Soviet groups among predominantly Muslim peoples, united in the Communist Organizations of the Peoples of the East, met in November 1919. Lenin addressed the gathering, explaining the altered world situation:

[T]he socialist revolution will not be solely, or chiefly, a struggle of the revolutionary proletarians in each country against their bourgeoisie - no, it will be a struggle of all the imperialist-oppressed colonies and countries, of all dependent countries, against international imperialism... [T]he civil war of the working people against the imperialists and exploiters in all the advanced countries is beginning to be combined with national wars against international imperialism. [10]

As this passage indicates, revolutionary experience in Russia had swept aside the earlier socialist concept that “peoples of the East” - that is, of Asia and Africa - would be passive recipients of freedom. Indeed, the Russian revolution itself was in large part a rebellion against tsarist colonialism.

Alliance with revolutionary nationalism

But how would the proposed alliance of workers’ and national uprisings be achieved?

This issue was addressed in the Comintern’s Second Congress, held in Moscow 9 July-7 August 1920. Among 218 delegates, 33 represented groups from 12 nationalities in Asia. Although most of these groups were quite small, Lenin stressed the significance of their presence in the first truly global congress of world socialism. The congress, he said, was taking the first steps toward union in struggle of the revolutionary proletarians with the masses of countries representing 70% of the world’s population who “find it impossible to live under the conditions that ‘advanced’ and ‘civilized’ capitalism wishes to impose on them.” [11]

The congress debate was shaped by Lenin’s encounter with M.N. Roy, a 33-year-old revolutionary from India. Clearly, a broad movement for national liberation was needed. Roy, however, drawing on Indian experience, doubted that an alliance with native bourgeois forces was possible. Roy and Lenin held extensive discussions, in which each modified his theses to accommodate suggestions of the other. In particular, Lenin changed his theses to recommend an alliance with “national-revolutionary” rather than “bourgeois-democratic” forces. Lenin explained:

The significance of this change is that we, as Communists, should and will support bourgeois liberation movements in the colonies only when they are genuinely revolutionary, and when their exponents do not hinder our work of educating and organizing in a revolutionary spirit the peasantry and the masses of the exploited. If these conditions do not exist, the Communists in these countries must combat the reformist bourgeoisie. [12]

The Comintern looks to the Global South

Two months later, a Comintern-organized “Congress of the Peoples of the East” convened in Baku, Azerbaijan. It was rightly described by Comintern president Grigorii Zinoviev as the “complement, the second half” of the Second World Congress. [13]

The seven-year cycle of war and civil war in European Russia was now drawing to a close, but Asiatic Russia and its southern borderlands were torn by upheaval and war. British armies were now in retreat from their Central Asiatic outposts, while the Red Army advanced southward and eastward. New Muslim-led Soviet republics sprang up in Russia and its borderlands. But British

armies had recently invaded Afghanistan and were still present in Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia, while Japanese troops remained in eastern Siberia.

For the Comintern, historian E.H. Carr noted, the Baku congress was to begin a process “of calling in the East to redress the balance of the West.” [14]

Convened as a mass anti-imperialist assembly of workers and peasants from Turkey, Armenia, and Iran, the Baku congress drew 1,891 participants, mostly from Asian Soviet republics but with delegations of more than 100 from Turkey, Armenia, Iran, and Georgia. Two-thirds of them recorded their affiliation as Communist, while the balance included a diversity of nationalist rebels of many persuasions. [15]

Fifty-five were women. There was protracted discussion at the congress on the proper role of women in the liberation movement. It wound up on the sixth day by presentation of a proposal to elect three women to the Presiding Committee. The minutes record, “*Shouts: ‘Yes, yes.’ Applause, rising to an ovation.*” [16]

The congress called for “the liberation of all humanity from the yoke of capitalist and imperialist slavery” and issued a celebrated call on Asian peoples to “go forward as one in a holy war against the British conqueror.” [17]

During the three years that followed, Comintern educational work and Soviet aid contributed to driving British and Japanese forces out of the region. Soviet governments were established in the Caucasus and Mongolia.

In the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), supporters of the Russian revolution forged an alliance with Sarekat Islam, an Islamic anti-colonial mass movement, and gained influence in its ranks.

In India, then ruled by Britain, a Communist movement took root in the late 1920s and contributed to the end of British rule in the 1940s.

In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh founded a revolutionary nationalist movement in 1925 which later, as the Vietnamese Communist Party, led a prolonged, heroic struggle for national independence and socialism.

National revolution in China

Yet it was in China that the Russian revolution had the greatest impact. China in 1921 remained dismembered by rival warlord armies and the footholds of many rival imperialist powers. Two forces vied for leadership of China’s struggle against imperialism and feudal landlordism: the Guomindang (GMD) and the Chinese Communist Party. Sun Yat-sen, the GMD’s leader until his death in 1925, admired the Soviet republic and spoke of creating a form of socialism in China. His movement, rooted in China’s nascent capitalist class, had wide support across the country. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), founded in 1921, consisted at first of only a few dozen intellectuals.

Initially, the two movements were allied. CCP members joined the GMD, which received Soviet military assistance. After Sun’s death, the GMD reoriented toward Western imperialism and waged war on the Communist movement. Yet the people’s revolutionary movement persisted. In 1946-49, it swept the CCP into government, setting China on the path to economic growth and great-power status.

Black liberation

But what of Africa and Latin America? They were not embraced by the term “Peoples of the East,” which reflected a Eurocentric outlook.

African peoples then had no voice in political life. Yet in 1919, Black workers in South Africa waged their first mass strike. The years following the Russian revolution saw the foundation of the first African political organizations for struggle against colonial rule.

A resolution at the Comintern’s Second Congress (1920) identified “Negroes in America” as an oppressed nation and pledged support for their liberation. In 1922, two leading revolutionaries in the U.S. Black community – Otto Huiswoud and Claude McKay – reached Moscow and took part in the Fourth Comintern Congress. It adopted their theses pledging support to the “international struggle of the Black race” in Africa, Latin America, and the U.S. The congress resolved to convene a “general conference or congress of Blacks in Moscow,” which was held in Hamburg in 1930 and contributed to emergence of a pan-African liberation movement. [18]

Latin America

The countries of Latin America, while mostly formally independent, were in fact subject to U.S. and British domination. Spared the crisis and destruction of World War 1, they experienced an upsurge of social struggles in 1918-20. An Argentinian Socialist party with 1,000 members affiliated to the Comintern in 1918, a small Communist group was formed the next year in Mexico, and everywhere the Soviet republic enjoyed wide sympathy. Meanwhile, a renewed upsurge of Mexico’s Great Revolution ousted the repressive Carranza government in 1920. It was some years, however, before Latin America was strongly represented at Comintern gatherings.

It was a delegate from the U.S., Louis Fraina, who first expressed at the Comintern’s 1920 world congress the views on Latin America of the Russian revolution’s supporters worldwide. “All of Latin America must be regarded as a colony of the United States,” he said, pointing to U.S. economic and financial penetration, its armies of occupation, and its enforcement of the Monroe Doctrine. “It is absolutely necessary to fight [U.S.] imperialism by launching revolutionary movements in Latin America,” Fraina continued, calling for “a gigantic revolutionary movement encompassing America as a whole.” [19]

Although the Latin American partisans of the Russian revolution were little known internationally in the early 1920s, they soon built strong and mature parties in many countries, with eminent leaders such as Luis Recabarren (Chile), José-Carlos Mariátegui (Peru), and Julio Antonio Mella (Cuba). In 1929, Latin American Communist parties held their own conference in Buenos Aires.

The Indigenous dimension

A central feature of the Mexican revolution, the struggle of Native peoples against landlordism and for protection and restoration of traditional communal landholding, was in step with the course of agrarian revolution in Russia. However, no mention of Mexican indigenous revolt has come to light in early Comintern proceedings. Still, the following interchange in 1920 between Lenin and Charles Phillips, a U.S. expatriate then living in Mexico, is intriguing:

Lenin ... asked what publications the Communists used to reach the peasantry. None, since the peasants were largely Indians, who were illiterate, replied Phillips. “Oh, well I can understand that,” said Lenin. “Of course. But you must find some way to reach them.... You’ve got to send out special people who can speak their languages.” Struck by this unexpected advice, Phillips fired off a letter to his comrades in Mexico. [20]

The Baku Congress, held the same year, protested oppression of indigenous peoples in an entirely

different context. Many of the Muslim peoples represented there had suffered from racist settler colonialism in the time of the tsars, and even under Soviet rule such abuses persisted. Narbutabekov, a delegate from Turkestan, denounced “colonizers ... working behind the mask of communism.” He received loud applause and cries of “Bravo.” [21] Comintern President Grigorii Zinoviev pledged corrective action. To obtain it, 27 delegates went to Moscow, where strong measures were taken.

But it was not until the later 1920s, thanks in part to the work of Mariátegui, that the Comintern turned its attention to the Indigenous movement in the Americas. Today, our new century is witnessing signs of worldwide convergence between indigenous insurgency and the heritage of the Russian revolution’s anti-colonialism.

Cuban dawn

After the rise of Stalin, Comintern policy toward the Global South diverged from the strategy adopted in Lenin’s time. However, the influence of the Russian revolution now flowed broadly through the entire global movement for colonial liberation. The example of October 1917 continued to inspire anti-imperialist struggles.

In the late 1950s, the Russian revolution’s example was one of the factors inspiring Cuba’s 26th of July Movement, a revolutionary nationalist movement of the type identified by the early Comintern. Under the leadership of Fidel and Raul Castro, Camilo Cienfuegos, Che Guevara, and their comrades, Cuban workers and peasants achieved power in 1959. During the years that followed, Cuban revolutionaries arrived at a fertile synthesis of Marxism and the liberatory traditions of their own country, exemplified by Jose Martí.

Despite the savage blows of U.S. imperialism, the Cuban revolution, building on the Russian revolution’s achievements, displayed resilience and continuity even greater than that achieved in Russia. Cuban assistance helped secure independence in Angola, bring down apartheid in South Africa, and defend the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua. Cuba’s humanitarian solidarity, above all through medical aid, touched the lives of millions. Indeed, Cuba applied the internationalist principles of the Russian revolution with a success beyond what was possible for Lenin’s generation.

And as we entered the new millennium, Cuba found new allies: the peoples of Venezuela, Bolivia, and other the countries of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA). Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez wove together the heritage of the Russian revolution, the teachings of Simon Bolivar, Indigenous tradition, and faith-based radicalism into an inspiring proposal for 21st Century Socialism.

Now, on the 100th anniversary of the Russian revolution, the peoples of the world are threatened by imperialist oppression and racism, neo-liberal impoverishment, and environmental destruction. In our time, as never before, the liberatory ideas of the Russian revolution retain their relevance and influence.

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P.S.

English version of the Spanish text in “Américo XXI, Desde Venezuela para todo el continente” (<http://americaxxi.com.ve/>), a magazine edited by Luis Bilbao and published in Venezuela.

John Riddell

<https://johnriddell.com/2017/11/01/the-russian-revolution-and-the-global-south/>

Footnotes

[1] Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada*, Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 2004, pp. 18-19.

[2] John Riddell, ed. 1993, *To See the Dawn* (hereinafter *Baku*), pp. 12-13 and 247-52.

[3] E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*, Penguin Books, 1966, vol. 3, p. 23.

[4] For list of delegates, see John Riddell, ed. 1987, *Founding the Communist International* (hereinafter 1WC), pp. 41-3.

[5] 1WC, pp. 227-8.

[6] Riddell, ed. 2015, *Toward the United Front* (hereinafter 4WC), pp. 808-9.

[7] 1WC, pp. 248, 202.

[8] 1WC, pp. 131 (Rutgers), 248 (resolution), 342-44 (background);

[9] Riddell, ed. 2011, *To the Masses* (hereinafter 3WC), pp. 556, 946.

[10] Ibid, p. 261. See also [Marxists Internet Archive](#).

[11] Riddell, ed. 1991, *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!* (hereinafter 2WC), pp. 38-9, 118, 123-5.

[12] 2WC, p. 213, also in [MIA](#).

[13] Riddell, ed. 1993, *To See the Dawn: Baku, 1920 First Congress of the Peoples of the East* (hereinafter *Baku*), p. 13.

[14] Carr 1966, 3, p. 261

[15] *Baku*, pp. 30, 242-43.

[16] *Baku*, p. 158.

[17] *Baku*, p. 231.

[18] *2WC*, 1, 283-90; *4WC*, pp. 800-810, 947-51.

[19] *2WC*, 1, pp. 229-30. See also speech by John Reed at the Baku Congress, Baku, p. 132.

[20] *2WC*, 1, pp. 12-13. From an interview with Phillips by Robert Dees c. 1988.

[21] *Baku*, p. 107.