Black liberation in North America and the Communist International

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The influence of the Communist International was decisive in the early 1920s in winning a generation of black revolutionaries to Marxism. On this the historians agree. But what did this influence consist of, and how was it exerted?

This question was posed by a comment posted to this website last month by Barry Sheppard. Over the last decades, Barry noted, Marxists have debated whether blacks in the U.S. constitute an oppressed nationality. Many of those opposing this concept have referred to a statement written by Joseph Stalin in 1913, and approved at the time by the Bolsheviks, that nations are characterized by the existence, among other things, of a common national territory. (For the full quote from Stalin, see "The Russian Revolution and National Freedom" on this website.) This statement seems to imply that U.S. blacks are not a nationality.

Barry asks how Stalin's definition relates to the Bolsheviks' and the Comintern's developing views following the revolution.

To answer this question, we must trace the interaction of the Bolsheviks and the Comintern with U.S. blacks in the first years after the Russian revolution of 1917.

Black resurgence

By the turn of the century, U.S. racist capitalism had imposed Jim Crow segregation across the U.S. South, where most blacks then lived, depriving them of the vote and of civil rights and subjecting them to racist terrorism. Within two decades, however, a new impulse to resistance was felt in sectors of the black community.

This resurgence found expression in a mass black nationalist and pan-Africanist movement – the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), led by Marcus Garvey, which functioned in the U.S., Canada, and across the Caribbean region. This radicalization also gave rise to a revolutionary current, grouped around the Crusader, a black newspaper founded in September 1918 by Cyril Briggs. Its views and trajectory had much in common with the revolutionary black nationalism later associated with Malcolm X.

The outcome of World War I further alienated blacks from racist U.S. society. As Jacob Zumoff notes, "Many black intellectuals felt betrayed when they realized that [President Woodrow] Wilson's post-war talk of 'self-determination' and 'democracy' excluded black people throughout the world." (Zumoff 2003, p. 290) When the victorious powers met in the Versailles Conference in January 1919, it was quickly clear that the peace treaty they were drafting would confirm colonial rule over black peoples in Africa and the Caribbean.

Meanwhile, the Soviet Republic, excluded from the Versailles conference, was implementing self-

determination of oppressed peoples within its borders and championing it worldwide. W.A. Domingo, a radical Black writer in New York, noted at the time that the Soviets "are willing to extend the principle of self-determination to even the toiling 'masses of Africa, Asia and all the colonies'" while seeking to reach out to "all the oppressed peoples of the world." (Berland 1999, p. 414)

Comintern manifesto

In March 1919, revolutionary socialists from more than two dozen countries met in Moscow to found the Communist International. Their conference manifesto announced:

> At best, Wilson's program aims at no more than changing the label on colonial slavery.... Colonial slaves of Africa and Asia: the hour of proletarian dictatorship in Europe will also be the hour of your liberation. (Riddell 1987, pp. 227-8)

According to Claude McKay, a pioneer Black Communist in the U.S., this passage in the manifesto awakened interest among many groups of radical blacks, who distributed the document across the U.S. (Riddell 2012, p. 809) Here was an unequivocal pledge to fight for liberation of blacks in the colonies of Africa and the West Indies.

By implication, this pledge applied to blacks in the U.S. as well. That conclusion, not stated at the Comintern's 1919 gathering, was made explicit in the International's second congress in Moscow the following year. "All communist parties must directly support the revolutionary movement among the nations that are dependent and do not have equal rights (for example Ireland, the Negroes in America, and so forth), and in the colonies," the congress theses on national and colonial questions stated. (Riddell 1991, 286) The 1920 congress also specified that active support for colonial liberation was a precondition for membership in the International.

During the congress discussion of the colonial question, U.S. delegate John Reed passed a note to Lenin, asking if this would be an appropriate occasion to speak on blacks in the U.S. Lenin's written reply, which has been preserved, was, "Yes, absolutely necessary." Reed then delivered a powerful indictment of racist oppression in the U.S. (Zumoff 2003, pp. 287–88; Riddell 1991, pp. 224–8)

Some months earlier, in October 1919, Briggs' Crusader had announced the formation of the African Blood Brotherhood for African Liberation and Redemption (ABB). This revolutionary association represented, in the words of Mark Solomon, "race patriotism, anticapitalism, anticolonialism, and organized defense against racist assault." (Solomon 1998, pp. 9-10) Its leaders, including Briggs and McKay, sought to unify black patriotism with revolutionary socialism. They spoke out strongly in support of the Soviet state and the Comintern.

Two years later, the ABB summarized its view of the Comintern in a programmatic statement: "The Third International [Comintern] has emphatically ordered its members to help the darker races and all other oppressed peoples in their struggles for complete liberation." (Berland 1999, p. 419)

Reorienting U.S. communism

The U.S. Communist movement played almost no role in this rapprochement. Until 1921, it was still locked in a sterile dogmatism that cut it off from the black struggle. The early U.S. Communist leader, James P. Cannon, describes the origin of its stance as follows:

> The earlier socialist movement, out of which the Communist Party was formed, never recognized any need for a special program on the Negro question. It was considered purely and simply as an economic problem, part of the struggle between the workers and the capitalists; nothing could be done about the special problems of discrimination

> and inequality this side of socialism.

Cannon quotes Eugene Debs, “the best of the earlier socialists,” as saying, “We have nothing special to offer the Negro.” (Cannon 1962, p. 230-31)

Reed’s remarks in Moscow in 1920, despite their militancy, did not go much beyond this framework. Nonetheless, the ABB leaders wanted to be part of the Comintern, and that meant joining its U.S. section. In December 1921, Briggs attended the convention of U.S. Communists that founded the Workers Party as an ABB fraternal delegate.

The convention reciprocated by recognizing, for the first time, the need both to do educational work among the Negro workers and to convince white workers “that to win, they must support the oppressed races in their struggle against race persecution and aid them in their fight to secure political, industrial, and social equality.” (Berland 1999, pp. 418–19) Subsequently, the ABB evolved into close alliance and ultimately fusion with the U.S. Communist movement.

1922: a Comintern congress debate

Two leaders of the ABB attended the Comintern’s Fourth Congress, held in Moscow in November–December 1922, and received status as delegates with consultative vote.

The first, Otto Huiswoud, had joined the Socialist Party in 1918 and, as part of its left wing, had participated in founding the U.S. Communist movement the next year. He attended the Fourth Congress as an official delegate of the U.S. Communist Party (CP) as well as an ABB representative. He appears to have left no account of his Moscow experience. (See van Enckevort 2001)

The second black delegate was McKay, who left us a vivid memoir of his visit to Moscow, entitled *A Long Way from Home*.

McKay, a poet widely known among U.S. blacks and internationally, made his way to Moscow on his own, without CP credentials. Initially, the majority of the U.S. CP delegation sought to exclude him from the congress, apparently because he agreed with the minority in the party that called for it to emerge from its underground existence. However, McKay won support from Sen Katayama, a veteran Japanese Marxist and a leader of the Comintern’s work among colonial peoples who, during his many years of residence in the U.S., had acquired a good feel for racism and black oppression

Another factor in McKay’s acceptance was the celebration of his presence by the Russian people. In McKay’s words:

> Never in my life did I feel prouder of being an African, a black, and no mistake about it.… The Moscow streets were filled with eager crowds before the Congress started. As I tried to get through along the Tverskaya I was suddenly surrounded by a crowd, tossed into the air, and caught a number of times and carried a block on their friendly shoulders.… I went triumphantly from surprise to surprise, extravagantly feted on every side. I was carried along on a crest of sweet excitement. (McKay 1970, p. 168)

The congress established a commission, chaired by Huiswoud, to draft theses on the black question. McKay was seated as a guest, invited to commission meetings, and asked, along with Huiswoud, to address a plenary session of the congress. Although the two black delegates disagreed on the CP’s underground character, they were, as McKay wrote at the time, “all of a unit on the purely Negro problem.” (Solomon 1998, p. 20; for the congress speeches, see Riddell 2012, pp. 800–5; 807–10.)

The commission presented a draft resolution, which was referred back for editing. The final draft,

introduced by U.S. delegate Rose Pastor Stokes was more rounded and developed than the original text. It presented the same recommendations, with one exception: a statement in the first draft that "work among blacks should be carried out primarily by blacks" was dropped and replaced by a pledge to struggle for full equality and equal political and social rights for black people. (Riddell 2012, pp. 806, 950)

This change must be considered alongside the commitment of the very same resolution to convene an international conference of blacks and the public call by Comintern leader Leon Trotsky, four months after the congress, for U.S. communists to rally a team of "enlightened, young, self-sacrificing Negroes," who were to carry the message of revolution to the black masses. (Trotsky 1972, p. 355)

Theses on the black struggle

The resolution, which is available online, is similar in many ways to the conceptions of the African Black Brotherhood. It makes the following points:

1. An upsurge of revolt among colonial peoples has "awakened racial consciousness among millions of blacks" in Africa and the United States.
2. "The history of blacks in the United States has prepared them to play an important role in the liberation struggle of the entire African race."
3. The Comintern hails Black resistance to the attacks of their exploiters and calls for the organization of an international black movement in Africa and across the western Hemisphere.
4. The Comintern seeks to show blacks that the "workers and peasants of Europe, Asia, and America are also victims of the imperialist exploiters" and are fighting for the same goals as blacks.
5. Communists should apply the Second Congress "Theses on the Colonial Question" to the situation of blacks, which is "an essential part of the world revolution."
6. Four specific recommendations:
   – Support every black movement that "undermines or weakens capitalism or places barriers in its path."
   – Full equality of the black and white races.
   – Against the colour bar in trade unions; for union organization of black workers.
   – Take immediate steps to convene a general congress of blacks in Moscow.

The central idea of the theses – that of an intercontinental black struggle for freedom – did not come from the Bolsheviks. Rather it was a strategy widely held at that time among radicals of West Indian origin, who counted among their number Briggs, McKay, Huiswoud, and also Garvey. It was espoused, in different forms, not only by the African Black Brotherhood but by Garvey's UNIA and W.E.B. Du Bois of the NAACP. (Cooper 1987, pp. 180-81)

After the congress, it proved necessary to postpone the project of a congress of blacks. In other respects, the resolution set the framework for a reorientation of the U.S. CP and the development of its work among blacks until the end of the decade, when a different position was adopted at the urging of Moscow.

What did the Comintern contribute?

Returning to Barry Sheppard's question, no one in the early Comintern referred to Stalin's 1913 definition of a nationality. Indeed, it was extremely rare for Comintern leaders in those years to buttress their case with quotations. Instead, they based their arguments mostly on current reality.

In addition, the reference to U.S. blacks as a nation in the 1920 theses, which were drafted by Lenin, was not discussed or developed at the time. Instead, the Comintern adopted a term no longer in use today but then current among black revolutionists: the black or African race.

The Comintern's contribution consisted of one central insight, which was rooted in the beliefs of those who built the Bolshevik party and established the Soviet state. Comintern leaders held that the liberation struggle of black people formed part of the world uprising of oppressed peoples against colonialism and racism. They therefore insisted on the duty of Communists everywhere to actively and vigorously support this struggle.

Beyond that, the Comintern's contribution lay in its capacity to listen to and learn from the most far-sighted exponents of black revolution of that time.

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https://johnriddell.com/2011/09/11/black-liberation-and-the-communist-international/