

Post WWI - Versailles vs Comintern: two visions of world peace

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June 28, 2009, was the anniversary of the two bookends of World War I, in which it is estimated more than 15 million people died. On that date in 1914 Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo and, five years later, in 1919, 90 years ago this year, the Versailles Treaty was signed in Paris.

The first war in which the capacity of modern industry to deploy, feed, arm and dismember people was so hideously demonstrated, WWI was experienced by its victims as the "war to end all wars". Unfortunately, it proved not to be.

Out of the ashes of the conflict two competing visions of world peace arose: Versailles and the revolutionary and democratic alternative represented by the Communist International (Comintern) emanating from the 1917 Russian Revolution.

US President Woodrow Wilson swept into the treaty negotiations declaring: "The world must be made safe for democracy." Over six months of intense horsetrading at Versailles a new imperialist order was hammered out, resulting in many of the conflicts that followed.

The number of people who have died because of the Versailles Treaty is beyond counting.

Wilson's policy was enunciated in his famous January 1918 "Fourteen Points" speech to a joint sitting of the US Congress. He spoke of open diplomacy, as opposed to the dreadful secret diplomacy that preceded WWI, providing "mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike".

Lenin's Decree on Peace

His speech was attempting to dampen the international resonance of Lenin's October 1917 Decree on Peace, through which Russia ended its part in WWI. Lenin demanded an immediate peace without annexations and without indemnities.

"The workers' movement will triumph and will pave the way to peace and socialism", Lenin proclaimed. Wilson's speech was designed to protect US post-war interests through free trade, collecting the European war debt, open maritime navigation and access to a US Pacific empire.

At least 27 nations were represented in the treaty process, but the only ones that counted were the victorious major powers: the British Empire, France, Italy and, above all, the USA. Australia's great contribution was to oppose a push by Japan to have a clause inserted proscribing discrimination on the basis of race or nationality.

Colonised and oppressed peoples came from all around the world as supplicants, begging for their national rights. For example: there were Vietnamese asking for independence from France and Koreans hoping for freedom from Japan.

In central Europe, with the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, new nationalist movements were springing up. Poland declared independence; the Czechs and Slovaks produced a newly merged state. The Croats and Slovenians joined with Serbia to form what became Yugoslavia.

Various Middle Eastern peoples, including Syrians, Lebanese, and an Arab delegation led by Prince Faisal with Lawrence of Arabia as translator, articulated their national desires.

Crumbs

What these emergent nations got was whatever crumbs the Powers were prepared to allow them, and it wasn't much. The decisions were literally made in private, initially by four men: Woodrow Wilson, Georges Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Vittorio Orlando of Italy.

Orlando left in a huff when a territorial grab he made was rejected, leaving the fate of the world in the hands of the remaining three.

Among other things, they redrew the borders of Europe to suit their nations' ruling classes' purposes, began the League of Nations to administer their new order and inflicted crippling reparations on Germany.

The new European nations were at least allowed some say in their borders, not so the people of the Middle East after the shambolic collapse of the Ottoman Empire. There, new borders, nations and rulers were not decided by the people on the ground, but by Britain and France.

Oil and strategic considerations determined the British and French governments' Middle East policy, plus blatant racism. The winner in the area was the Zionist movement, which emerged, through the Balfour Declaration, with the right to establish their own state in Palestine.

However, the ghost haunting the conference, unspoken but terrifying, was revolutionary Russia. Russia was excluded on the technicality that it had settled a separate peace with Germany. But, Communist parties were springing up in emulation of the Bolsheviks all over Europe and beyond and revolution was in the air.

Comintern

The Comintern, founded in March 1919 in Moscow on the Bolshevik's initiative, combined revolutionaries from various backgrounds: Marxists, anarchists and anti-colonialist nationalist fighters. Because of the raging civil war and the imperialist blockade, only 51 delegates could get to the Congress. Twenty-two countries were represented. Twenty per cent of delegates represented Asian peoples.

Lenin declared that the Comintern's foundation "heralds the international republic of soviets, the international victory of communism".

Even though the Russian Revolution was still desperately fighting for its survival against right-wing gangsters and foreign armies, Lenin proposed to the congress some theses explaining the nature and potential of soviet power.

These theses, expounding a new vision of democracy based on soviets, or workers' councils, were a clarion call to all the peoples of the world.

"The permanent and only foundation of [soviet] state power, the entire machinery of state, is the mass-scale organisation of the classes oppressed by capitalism", the theses said in part. Soviet power "is so organized as to bring the working people close to the machinery of government". That is why, the theses explained, the councils were workplace-based, not territorial.

The working people's mass organisations were joined in "constant and unfailing participation in the administration of the state". Obstacles to democracy such as the capitalist armed forces, bureaucratic and judicial apparatus were done away with.

At the Comintern's 1920 second congress colonial peoples began leading discussions about their liberation. Indian delegate MN Roy later said "for the first time, brown and yellow men met with white men who were no overbearing imperialists but friends and comrades".

The second congress resolved to unite "the proletarians and toiling masses of all nations" in a common struggle "to overthrow the landowners and the bourgeoisie". To achieve that "all communist parties must directly support the revolutionary movement among the nations that are dependent ... and in the colonies". It also called for "a vigorous campaign against restrictive immigration laws", equal wages for non-white workers and their unionisation - issues that still need to be resolved.

The Bolsheviks had already demonstrated their commitment to such principles when, in 1917, they proclaimed the right of all subject peoples within the former Russian empire to "free self-determination up to and including the right to secede".

This emancipatory line was strengthened at the Comintern-organised 1920 Baku Congress of Peoples of the East. The nearly 2000 delegates called for a peoples' "holy war" for liberation of the East. They called for ending "the division of countries into advanced and backward, dependent and independent, metropolitan and colonial!"

Stalinism

The historical tragedy, of course, is that Stalin came to corrupt and reverse these revolutionary sentiments. Beginning in 1924 he took control of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and, in 1928, began his infamous repression of the party's revolutionary wing.

In 1922, the Comintern's fourth congress restated its revolutionary principle: "The proletarian revolution can never triumph completely within a single country; rather must it triumph internationally, as world revolution."

Two years later, Stalin stated "the possibility of building a complete socialist society in a single country" is "indisputable truth".

Soon, the Stalinised Soviet Union began manoeuvring against the world's revolutionary masses and

with the Great Powers. Humanity was herded towards World War II.

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P.S.

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