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# National-Revolutionary Movements and the Comintern

Friday 19 February 2021, by [TABER Mike](#) (Date first published: 16 December 2020).

**The Congress of the Toilers of the Far East, organized by the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow and Petrograd in January-February 1922 was attended by delegations from China, Korea, Mongolia, the short-lived Far Eastern Republic, and Japan, as well as individual delegates from India and the Dutch East Indies. It complemented the First Congress of the Peoples of the East held in Baku in August-September 1920.**

The Congress of the Toilers of the Far East projected imperialism as the main enemy of workers and peasants throughout the colonial and semicolonial world.

The congress itself was convened in response to an imperialist conference that convened in late 1921 and was still going on. The Washington Conference of four powers – Britain, US, Japan, and France – known officially as the International Conference on Naval Limitation – took place from November 12, 1921, to February 6, 1922. It aimed to settle clashes involving rival imperialist interests in Asia and the Pacific, as well as to limit the naval arms race. While two treaties were agreed to by the conference, it nevertheless failed to mitigate the underlying conflicts of interest among the four powers involved.

As Korean delegate Rim Won-gun stated at the Far East Toilers Congress: “The Washington Conference ... was a gathering of imperialists, of world robbers who, not content with their past exploits, are gathering their forces to further exploit us.” (p. 212) Japanese delegate Mitzutani Kenichi echoed this sentiment. In Washington, he asserted, “they talk about universal peace, but their real aim is to grab as much as possible.” (p. 54)

Comintern President Grigorii Zinoviev, in his opening report, summed up the Washington Conference’s meaning:

On 10 December 1921 Washington saw the conclusion of a treaty between four of the most powerful governments of the present day, four of the most oppressive and reactionary imperialist governments: England, France, Japan and America. I think that this alliance, from its very beginning, will become known in history as the Alliance of the Four Bloodsuckers; the alliance of four of the most bloodthirsty imperialist powers which ... have concluded between themselves an armistice for the purpose of more successfully oppressing the nations at the expense of whose blood these imperialist robbers have been living for many a year. (pp. 70-71)

Zinoviev went on to state that not a single conscious person “could expect anything but new oppression and new exploitation from the imperialists.” (p. 74) He pointed out that these countries could free themselves only through deep-going social revolutions.

A Chinese delegate wholeheartedly agreed. "We believe that our emancipation cannot be accomplished by means of any compromise with the world imperialists, and that we cannot expect our salvation to come through their help." (p. 202)

The general approach taken by the Far East Toilers Congress was based on the theses on the national and colonial questions drafted by Lenin and adopted by the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920. Reporting on that resolution, Lenin had stated:

What is the cardinal idea underlying our theses? It is the distinction between oppressed and oppressor nations.... The characteristic feature of imperialism consists in the whole world, as we now see, being divided into a large number of oppressed nations and an insignificant number of oppressor nations... The vast majority of the world's population... belongs to the oppressed nations, which are either in a state of direct colonial dependence or are semi-colonies. [1]

That perspective dominated the congress agenda, which consisted of two major reports and discussions. One report was by Zinoviev on the international situation; a second report on the Communist stance on the national-colonial question was given by Georgy I. Safarov, a leader of Soviet and Comintern work among the peoples of the East.

In addition, there were detailed reports from the delegates of China, Korea, Mongolia, and Japan on the political and social situation in their respective countries. These reports described the economic and social situations of each country and showed the degree to which revolutionary movements were developing within them, to a significant degree inspired by the Russian Revolution.

*China* at the time was a field of deepening inter-imperialist rivalry. Much of northern China was under Japanese domination, while the British controlled Hong Kong and retained influence in other parts of the country; meanwhile, US interests were infringing on those of its rivals. A powerful anti-imperialist movement was born in China on May 4, 1919, initiated by students in response to attacks on the country's sovereignty by the imperialist powers, and the complicity of China's government toward these crimes.

*Korea* became a protectorate of Japan in 1905 and was effectively annexed in 1910. There too a strong revolutionary movement had developed. On March 1, 1919, Koreans staged mass rallies throughout the country, with an estimated two million participating in peaceful demonstrations, at which a declaration of independence was read. Japanese forces responded with brutality, killing 7,500 and arresting 47,000.

*Mongolia*, formerly part of the Russian tsarist empire, saw a national movement grow in response to the country's occupation by counterrevolutionary White forces during the Russian civil war that established a murderous regime. In response, Mongolian revolutionaries formed the Mongolian People's Party (MPP) and approached Soviet Russia for help. In July 1921 joint Mongolian-Red Army forces captured the Mongolian capital and established a "people's government" under the MPP's control.

*Japan* in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a rising imperialist power, with growing interests in China, Korea, and elsewhere in Asia. It was increasingly coming into conflict with imperialist powers in the West and had also joined in the counterrevolutionary war against the Soviet Russia. Nevertheless, social contradictions within Japan were coming to a head, along with a growing proletariat and the beginnings of a working-class movement, leading to the so-called rice riots of 1918. When the price

of rice doubled, protests and rebellions occurred throughout Japan from July to September, involving an estimated 10 million people in 33 cities, 104 towns, and 97 villages. Some 50,000 troops were employed to suppress the uprising.

In all these reports on the situation in the various countries, one theme came up repeatedly at the congress: the situation of women in the colonial world.

Only seven of the 150 delegates were women. But they made their voices heard, repeatedly raising the question of the special oppression suffered by women of the East, giving concrete examples from their countries. They also spoke of the need to mobilize women in the struggle against imperialism, fighting alongside men.

Chinese feminist and anarchist Huang Bihun exemplified these speakers: "Women are also human beings. Women need their freedom as well as men." (p. 57) She later stated: "Our tasks are the same as yours, and our aim is your aim: the destruction of capitalism. Our aim is to create a society in China based on equal rights for all, men and women alike." (p. 120)

A Korean female delegate, Kim Won'gyong, presented a similar view. "You, the delegates here assembled, can rest assured that the women of the East have been awakened, and they will march by your side with arms in their hands." (p. 211)

### **National-Revolutionary Movements**

The prospect of a united international struggle against imperialist oppression was enthusiastically greeted by the delegates.

Kim Kyu-sik from Korea said that "our slogan here should be *Toilers of the Far East, Unite*. In the past we have been struggling and toiling and fighting our battles separately alone." (p. 56)

A Chinese delegate echoed this view: "We believe that this Congress expresses by its very name the main task which is confronting the Far East, the task of revolution. We are certain that when all the revolutionary forces combine after the present Congress, the revolutionary movement in the Far East will become intensified and grow deeper roots than ever before." (p. 54)

The nature of the revolutionary movement in the colonial and semicolonial world had been debated at the Communist International's Second Congress in 1920. Of particular interest was its decision to view such movements as "national-revolutionary" in character rather than as "bourgeois-democratic."

In his report to the Second Congress, Lenin explained this decision, which is worth quoting at length:

[W]e have arrived at the unanimous decision to speak of the national-revolutionary movement rather than of the 'bourgeois-democratic' movement. It is beyond doubt that any national movement can only be a bourgeois-democratic movement, since the overwhelming mass of the population in the backward countries consists of peasants, who represent bourgeois-capitalist relationships....

However the objection has been raised that if we speak of the bourgeois-democratic movement we shall be obliterating all distinctions between the reformist and the revolutionary movements. Yet that distinction has been very clearly revealed of late in the backward and colonial countries, since the imperialist bourgeoisie is doing

everything in its power to implant a reformist movement among the oppressed nations too. There has been a certain rapprochement between the bourgeoisie of the exploiting countries and that of the colonies, so that very often—perhaps even in most cases—the bourgeoisie of the oppressed countries, while it does support the national movement, is in full accord with the imperialist bourgeoisie, that is, joins forces with it against all revolutionary movements and revolutionary classes. This was irrefutably proven in the commission, and we decided that the only correct attitude was to take this distinction into account and, in nearly all cases, substitute the term *national-revolutionary* for the term *bourgeois-democratic*. [2]

Lenin's framework was in evidence throughout the congress.

"In colonial and semi-colonial countries the first phase of the revolutionary movement must inevitably be a national-democratic movement," reporter Safarov told the delegates. We give our support to this movement, to the extent that it is directed against imperialism." (p. 260)

The question of the necessary alliance of the world proletariat and Communist movement with the national-revolutionary movements was a central theme. As Safarov put it, "The Communist International declares to the oppressed nations 'Your liberation lies in your hands, but you can win your freedom only by standing shoulder to shoulder with the international proletariat.'" (p. 222)

The prospect of such an alliance received a warm response from the delegates.

As Yi Chaegon from Korea told the body: "The toiling masses of the Eastern nations must also realise their position and they must realise that they must work hand in hand and in co-operation and become the real strength and bulwark of the proletarian movement.... We must devise ways and means to effect this in a more positive way - to effect the joining of the proletarian movement of the Western countries with the toiling masses of the Eastern peoples." (p. 245)

The perspective of such an alliance, and the possibilities for accomplishing it, runs all through the congress. This brings up the only significant thing about this excellent book that I'm not entirely happy with: its title.

On one level, *Alliance of Adversaries* is certainly an accurate description. In reading the congress proceedings one sees the rivalries, frictions, and suspicions that existed among participants. Many of the Chinese delegates were hostile to the Mongolian independence forces, as they felt Mongolia to be part of China. The Japanese delegation faced distrust from the Chinese and Korean delegates, in light of the crimes of Japanese imperialism toward their countries. The Korean delegates had their own internal rivalries, as did the Chinese. And one genuine adversary of the Comintern was present at the congress: the Kuomintang of China, which I'll return to later. The book's back cover seems to make clear that this is the alliance of adversaries that is being referred to, commenting that at the Far East Toilers Congress "inter-party alliances were fragile and risky." That description is accurate.

But at the same time, the title is open to misinterpretation, as some readers might imagine that it refers to the alliance between Communists and national-revolutionary forces *in general*, implying that this relationship was essentially adversarial in nature. But far from being adversaries, Communists and national-revolutionary fighters were natural allies in the worldwide struggle against the imperialist world order - without overlooking the distinction between the two.

## **Revolutionary Dynamics in the East**

Such a distinction is clearly drawn in Safarov's report on the Communist approach to the national-

colonial question:

[I]n colonial and semi-colonial countries like China and Korea, which are actually colonies of foreign capital, the Communist International and the Communist Parties are obliged to support the national-democratic movement. In these countries, the Communist Party must [call for] the overthrow of imperialist oppression, and support democratic demands like the nationalisation of the land, self-government, etc. At the same time, however, the Communist Parties must not abandon their Communist programme, just as they must not abstain from organising the working class in trade unions independent of bourgeois influence. Neither must they abstain from organising the working class in an independent Communist Party. (p. 265)

Safarov described the revolutionary dynamics in the countries of the Far East, taking up the class forces and relations within them, and in particular the growth of a proletariat there. "To the extent that foreign capitalism penetrates into such backward countries as China, it creates conditions of labour in the factories, and in all the industries, [that] are nothing short [of] the most brutal exploitation of the native working masses." (p. 227)

Of key importance, Safarov stressed, was the young proletariat's alliance with the peasantry. "These peasant masses must be won over to the side of the revolution." (p. 23) He added: "It is necessary that the working class should not isolate itself from the peasant masses" and that "it is necessary that it join hands with the peasant masses." (p. 266)

The worker-peasant alliance was thus seen as the foundation of popular revolutions in these countries of the East. For this, the creation of soviets - democratic councils of the toilers - was the indicated method for bringing this power to bear.

"The principle of the Soviet system consists in the self-organisation of the toiling masses," Safarov stated. (p. 261) He went on to speak about "the idea of soviets, as [the] most suitable form of organisation for the revolutionary struggle of the masses and for the revolutionary control of these masses over the democratic organs of power must be preached. Soviets are the best weapons in the hands of the toilers of every country, whether it has a predominant proletarian population or is a peasant country." (p. 231-32)

The question of class alliances and of relations with the national bourgeoisie was posed sharply in relation to the Kuomintang in China, the party founded and led by Sun Yat-sen that had been the leading organization of China's bourgeois-democratic revolution against the Qing dynasty in 1911.

At the time, imperialist domination was the central question in China, closely related to the struggle for national unification against various landlord and warlord cliques. The Kuomintang itself embodied a contradiction. As a revolutionary bourgeois party in a nationally oppressed country it sought to defend China's sovereignty and national interests to some extent, while at the same time many of its leading members feared the rising proletariat and refused to entirely renounce ties with the world bourgeoisie.

A Kuomintang delegate at the Far East Toilers Congress spoke several times, seeking to downplay class contradictions within China and his own party's bourgeois character. Readers will be interested in the considerable debate his interventions sparked, from both Chinese Communists as well as from Comintern leaders Zinoviev and Safarov.

Shortly after the congress, the Chinese Communist Party, encouraged by the Communist

International, approved the perspective of forming a united front with the Kuomintang and of becoming members. Chinese Communists initially viewed such an alliance as one between equals, with the CP pursuing its own line in defense of proletarian and preserving its organizational independence.

The story of how the Chinese Communist Party came to be subordinated to the Kuomintang in the mid- and late 1920s has been told before – including of how this policy was to a large extent imposed on the party by Comintern envoys Henk Sneevliet and Mikhail Borodin. In addition, historians have long debated the degree of responsibility of other individuals within the Comintern leadership such as Zinoviev and Karl Radek.

Regardless of how this policy originated, however, it became more and more dangerous over time. Contrary to the perspective laid out at the Far East Toilers Congress in 1922, the Chinese CP – at the behest of the Comintern leadership – became mere foot soldiers for the Kuomintang, abandoning any attempt to present an independent working-class line. The Kuomintang itself was falsely declared to be a “workers’ and peasants’ party.” [3]

Furthermore, under the direction of Joseph Stalin and Nikolai Bukharin, the new line was given a distinctly Menshevik character, in which the proletariat was to bestow political support to the national bourgeoisie. That line led to disaster in the aborted revolutionary upsurge of 1927, when the young Chinese proletariat was massacred by the Kuomintang led by Chiang Kai-shek. Thousands of Chinese workers were summarily executed, and the Chinese CP was bloodily suppressed. [4]

What this book shows, however, is that the alliance between Chinese Communists and the Kuomintang was originally presented in a radically different way from what it eventually became. This stance was outlined by Safarov:

We are convinced that this Party [the Kuomintang] has done great revolutionary work [that] was absolutely necessary in China, and we hope to fight side by side with this party in the future. But, on the other hand, we are not so naïve as to imagine that this party is a revolutionary Communist party....

Therefore, in dealing with you, followers of the Kuomintang Party, as allies, friends, and comrades, we at the same time tell you openly and frankly: We [support] and will continue to support your struggle in so far as it is a matter of a nationalistic and democratic uprising for national emancipation. But at the same time, we shall independently carry on our Communist work of organising the proletarian and semi-proletarian masses of China. (p. 259, 260)

In other words, Communists recognized the need to collaborate with the Kuomintang in the fight to advance China’s national revolution, but did not call for subordination to it or give up defense of working-class interests. There were to be no illusions in the Chinese bourgeoisie as an agent for revolutionary change; the real agent was seen to be the worker-peasant alliance.

Had such a line been continued, the events of 1925–27 would surely have developed differently.

## **A World Revolutionary Movement**

The Communist International was the first genuinely global revolutionary movement.

As Zinoviev put it at the opening of the Congress of the Toilers of the Far East, “[W]e, not only in

words, but in deeds, are trying to become the organisation not merely of the toilers of Europe, but also of the toilers of the entire world. The Communist International is all the time taking a clear account of the fact that the revolution of the toilers can be victorious under the present circumstances only as a world revolution." (p. 45)

The Baku Congress of 1920 and the Far East Toilers Congress of 1922 show the potential power of an alliance between Communists and national revolutionary forces on a world scale. They also reveal the power and example of the Russian Revolution in the colonial and semicolonial worlds.

While the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union and the Communist International during the late 1920s and 1930s had a deep impact on the world revolutionary movement, the Russian Revolution's legacy nevertheless continued to leave a mark on what would become known as the Third World. Its influence could be felt in the massive wave of the colonial revolution in Africa and Asia following the end of World War II, as well as in the anticapitalist revolutions in China and Vietnam and the proletarian revolution in Cuba, which remains a powerful factor in world politics today.

The First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East of 1922 shows the approach and the worldwide appeal of the young Communist movement. Reading and studying *Alliance of Adversaries* is recommended for all those seeking to understand the international projection of this movement and its continued relevance for the struggle to bring about revolutionary change.

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## Mike Taber

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## P.S.

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The record of the Baku congress can be found in *To See the Dawn*, a book published in 1993 by Pathfinder Press and edited by John Riddell. [5] The new book, edited by John Sexton, should be seen as a companion volume to it.

An English-language edition of the proceedings of the Far East Toilers Congress was published by the Comintern in 1922. A facsimile reprint of that initial edition was produced in 1970 by Hammersmith Books in London; the latter has been out of print for decades.

When I first read the Hammersmith reprint edition in the early 1980s, I was struck by the congress's political importance and its value for those studying the international Communist movement in Lenin's time. But reading that edition wasn't easy. There was no annotation to explain context or the numerous references to little-known events. Names of participants were transliterated unevenly, making it almost impossible to identify most delegates. Even the very act of reading had its difficulties. As a facsimile of the 1922 book, readers encountered page after page of poorly legible type.

The appearance of this new version of the congress proceedings, edited by John Sexton and published by the Historical Materialism Book Series (Brill in hardback and Haymarket in paperback), is therefore a welcome event. Contemporary readers now have a chance to study this long-underappreciated congress.

An impressive amount of time and energy clearly went into the book's preparation. While the original 1922 English translation was used, it was checked against the Russian and Chinese editions of the congress proceedings; the German edition was also consulted.

The new book contains several other features to aid the reader. An informative introduction by the editor provides context about the events leading up to the congress and the congress itself. It also provides background information on the situation in each of the countries, as well as on subsequent developments there. Well-researched footnotes explain events referred to in the text, making it possible to easily follow the reports and discussion.

Speakers are identified, and biographical information is provided for the big majority of the speakers. Much of the work to identify and give information on these individuals was done using material obtained from the Comintern archives in Moscow.

Finally, several photos obtained from the Comintern archives are included at the back of the book, giving a flavor of the meeting.

All these aspects of the book will help readers grasp the political significance of this historic meeting. Editor John Sexton is to be commended for the serious work that went into preparing this new version.

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## Footnotes

[1] John Riddell, ed., *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite! Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991), p. 211-12.

[2] *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!*, p. 212-13.

[3] The Comintern's assessment of the Kuomintang as a "workers' and peasants' party" can be found in the report on the national and colonial question given by Dmitry Manuilski to the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in 1924.

[4] For accounts of the Chinese revolution of 1925-27, see Harold Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010) and *Leon Trotsky on China* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1976).

[5] Much of the text of the Baku congress proceedings can also be found in *Liberate the Colonies: Communism and Colonial Freedom 1917-1924*, edited by John Riddell, Nazeef Mollah, and Vijay Prashad (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2019). A PDF is freely downloadable at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NjNAq1ZCw92h5MV7y6NP1ETqHRC4Txk0/view>