

# How socialists of Lenin's time responded to colonialism

Sunday 14 February 2021, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 14 December 2014).

**As the nineteenth century neared its close, revolutionary socialists were hostile to the world's imperial powers and to their colonial empires, which then encircled the globe. They foresaw the overthrow of colonialism as a by-product of socialist revolution in the industrialized capitalist countries.**

They had little knowledge, however, of the anti-colonial freedom movements that began to emerge at that time. It was not until the Russian revolution of 1917 that an alliance was forged between revolutionary socialism and the colonial freedom movement.

This talk aims to give a quick sketch of how this process took place, focusing on the congresses of the world socialist movement. [[1](#)]

As the international socialist movement took shape in the late 1800s and up to 1914, it consisted principally of parties in Europe and the European settler nations of North America, Australia, and New Zealand. The rest of the world was made up mainly of colonies, like British India or Indonesia, or semi-colonies, that is, nominally independent countries under imperialist domination, like China or Iran.

In 1889, workers' parties of many countries joined to form the Socialist International. It critical of colonialism, but some of its leaders held out hope that colonialism could be reformed. Its 1904 world congress was ambiguous on this point.

## **A reformed colonialism?**

At the next world congress, in Stuttgart in 1907, delegates favoring a reformed colonialism came very close to winning a majority. A commission on colonialism voted that under socialism, colonies could be a force for civilization.

Eduard David, a leader of the German Socialist party, was more blunt: "Europe needs colonies," he said. "It does not have enough of them. Without them, we would be economically like China."

A minority draft advanced by Karl Kautsky flatly opposed every form of colonialism. Colonial policy "destroys the wealth" of colonized countries, while "enslaving and impoverishing the native peoples as well as waging murderous and devastating wars." [[2](#)]

In the discussion, racist views were on full display. Hendrick Van Kol, who owned a plantation in Java and until then had been the International's most prominent spokesman on colonial issues, ridiculed the idea of approaching colonial subjects in friendship. "Suppose we bring a machine to the savages of central Africa," he said. "What will they do with it? Perhaps they will start up a war dance around it. (*Loud laughter*) ... Perhaps they will kill us or even eat us...." And a good deal more in that vein.

The congress defeated the pro-colonial motion by a narrow margin, 128 votes to 108. In Lenin's view, the closeness of the vote reflected the fact that colonizing countries were sustained not merely by the labour of proletarians within their borders but by that of "enslaved natives in the colonies." This provides a material basis "for infecting the proletariat with colonial chauvinism," he wrote.

Another debate in the Stuttgart congress affirmed, over some opposition, the right of peoples of colour to immigrate into the countries of advanced capitalism with full and equal civil rights.

### **Uprisings in the colonial world**

In the years that followed, socialists discussed the great uprisings of colonized peoples in Iran and China, the desperate resistance of African Blacks, and a democratic revolution in Turkey.

The revolutionary wing of socialism continued to hammer on the need to oppose colonialism in every form and support colonial liberation struggles. Lenin's 1913 article, "Backward Europe and Advanced Asia," pointed to colonial peoples as a vanguard force in the global struggle for socialism. "Everywhere in Asia ... hundreds of millions of people are awakening to life, light, and freedom," while "advanced" Europe is "plundering China and helping the foes of democracy," he wrote. [3]

### **Impact of World War**

The First World War broke out 100 years ago this month. Most socialist parties rallied to support their rulers and the war effort. A revolutionary minority remained true to the International's previous pledge to oppose such an imperialist war. Antiwar socialists often explained that they would unconditionally support a war of the colonial slaves against their European masters, but the world war was a contest among the slaveholders over dividing up the colonial slaves, in which socialists could not support either side. Among their demands was "immediate liberation of the colonies." Lenin called for support to revolutionary movements for national liberation, even if they were not socialist in character. But many of Lenin's allies did not support struggles for national self-determination; for example, Karl Radek and Leon Trotsky dismissed the 1916 Irish uprising against British rule. [4]

### **Revolution in Russia**

When the Russian workers and peasants established a government in 1917, one of its first actions was to proclaim the right of all subject peoples in the old tsarist empire to self-determination, including independence. Another early Soviet appeal pledged to Muslim workers and farmers that "henceforth your beliefs and customs, your national and cultural institutions are declared free and inviolable." They were called on to "build your national life freely and without hindrance." [5] These peoples were indigenous, in the sense that much of their land had been seized and their culture devastated by settler colonialism. Treaties through which tsarism had lorded it over and looted the Eastern peoples were now declared null and void.

These actions had a great impact among freedom fighters in the colonies. Among colonized peoples in the old tsarist empire, hundreds of thousands joined the Red Army. Although based in Soviet Russia, it was constituted as an international force fighting for liberation of all subject peoples. Soon there were 300,000 Muslims in its ranks and 50,000 Chinese workers. This reality provoked alarm among pro-imperialist forces across Europe. Russia was then viewed, even by socialists, as an outpost of "Asiatic backwardness." Now, the rightists feared, the despised Asiatic hordes were about to be unleashed on Europe.

### **Support to national revolution**

In March 1919, the Communist International was founded in Moscow. Russia was then blockaded by the imperialist powers, so the gathering was small. Delegates condemned the victors in the World War for having maintained their grip on the colonies. The congress's manifesto declared, "Colonial slaves of Africa and Asia: the hour of proletarian dictatorship will also be the hour of your liberation." This solemn pledge won widespread attention in the colonial world. [6]

Sixteen months later, a much broader Communist congress convened in Moscow, with representation from six Asian countries outside the former tsarist realm. The Red Army had now driven colonialist forces from most of Central Asia. Two days of the congress were devoted to the colonial question; theses were introduced by Lenin and a delegate from India, M.N. Roy. The two held detailed discussions before the congress; both modified their theses; and both texts were adopted. Their spirit is captured by Lenin's endorsement of a modification of a famous slogan by Marx and Engels: "Workers of the world and oppressed peoples, unite." [7]

Lenin's report on this item contained a passage that is occasionally questioned by some socialists today. He held that the Communist International must support "national-revolutionary" movements in the colonies, even if their leadership is bourgeois, provided they are genuinely revolutionary and do not obstruct educating the masses in a revolutionary spirit. This approach was then codified in the conditions for membership in the International: Member parties must "support every liberation movement in the colonies not only in words but in deeds."

The congress theses were put into action in September 1920 at a gathering of close to 2,000 participants representing 25 Asian peoples, the First Congress of the Peoples of the East, held in Baku, in Azerbaijan. Almost half were non-Communists. Many were Muslims newly won to revolutionary ideas.

The congress made a celebrated call for a jihad against imperialist Britain, which had occupied much of the region, to be waged by the peoples of the east and workers around the world. It was the occasion for an early debate on Zionist settler colonialism in Palestine, which the Communist movement strongly opposed. Russian settler colonialism in Central Asia also came up for sharp criticism.

### **Combating chauvinist abuses in Soviet Russia**

The revolution in this region had been spearheaded by Russian workers who formed part of the settler minority in Turkestan. From early 1918, the Soviet regime, cut off from the government in Moscow, followed a blatantly chauvinist course, "persecuting the indigenous population in a most brutal manner," as the Russian Communist Party later noted. [8] For example, indigenous people were excluded from Soviets, the agencies of government. In late 1919, the local soviets reversed course, but abuses continued. Twenty delegates submitted a protest to the Baku congress, which pledged action and sent a delegation to meet with the government in Moscow.

Corrective action followed, and it went very far. To take just one example, local sharia law was incorporated into the Soviet judicial system. This helped provoke a round of alarm in Western Europe about the triumph in Russia of Asiatic superstition. But this is a topic for a separate presentation.

The next world congress, held in mid-1921, focused narrowly on an internal crisis provoked by conflicts in Germany. The colonial discussion was well prepared, with three draft resolutions, but no time was available for discussion. Instead, a session was devoted to education aimed at workers outside the congress. Many speeches were not translated for delegates. M.N. Roy complained that the procedure was "purely opportunistic." A French delegate objected that "the main role has been

played by cinematography.” [9]

### **Lenin’s last world congress**

When the Fourth Congress convened in late 1922, delegates were present from nine non-Soviet countries of Asia, three countries in Africa, and five in Latin America. Two days were spent on the colonial question, and a resolution was adopted. [10] Even so, there were again protests, this time by 14 delegations, that this issue did not receive due attention. Several developments at this congress are worth noting:

1. Delegates from Indonesia and Algeria won agreement that the movement for Islamic anti-colonial unity, then called “pan-Islamism,” could play a progressive role in early stages of a liberation struggle.
2. The congress heard Black Communists from the U.S. and adopted a resolution on worldwide Black liberation.
3. Adopting a proposal by M.N. Roy, the congress called for an anti-imperialist united front, to “organise all the available revolutionary forces against imperialism.”
4. The Congress sharply condemned the failure of French Communists in Algeria to advocate national independence, reiterating that active support for liberation struggles was a condition of membership.
5. Less positively, the congress resolution on South Africa did not take up the fact that the general strike in Transvaal in March 1922 had been waged, in part, in defence of the colour bar against Black workers.

The congress failed to fully discuss what was then perhaps the most urgent issue in the field of anti-imperialist struggle. The Chinese Communists had decided to support and join a bourgeois-led liberation movement, the Kuomintang, while continuing independent Communist educational and party-building work. This crucial decision barely mentioned at the congress, probably because of the delayed arrival of the Comintern representative in China. The omission was unfortunate. After the congress, the Chinese party downgraded independent work, creating conditions for the revolution’s disastrous defeat in 1927. But that story belongs to a discussion on the rise of Stalinism in the International.

The Fourth Congress is the last held under the leadership of Lenin and the leadership team around him. In the Stalinist period that followed, the policies of unconditional support of colonial liberation and an anti-imperialist united front were not carried forward.

Socialist policy on colonialism in Lenin’s time should be seen as a learning process. Some issues were not fully thought through, as in China. Relics of Eurocentric attitudes still lingered. The questions of indigeneity and settler colonialism were not addressed, other than in Central Asia and to some degree in Palestine. Even so, the anti-colonialism of the Communist movement at that time was a great advance.

Only several years after Lenin’s death, in 1928, did the Communist movement come to grips with indigeneity, and this happened not in the Soviet Union but in Latin America. The most advanced expression of this engagement is found in the works of José Carlos Mariátegui. [11]

What does this heritage mean for us today? After 1945, the colonial empires of Lenin’s time passed away, to be replaced by new forms of imperial domination. Colonies became semi-colonies; domination became indirect. Semi-colonies evolved in different directions, and a few – especially China – became manufacturing powerhouses. But during the last three decades, the era of capitalist “globalization” and neoliberalism, the limited sovereignty achieved by semi-colonies has been

radically reduced. Even the weaker imperialist powers have been affected, as in Greece.

Resurgent social struggles in such dependent countries usually aim first at restoring a measure of democratic control of the national government. In some cases, gains in that process have then been utilized in an effort to reassert sovereignty and regain some of the social achievements lost through neoliberalism. There are elements of national liberation in such a process, in which ideas from the anti-colonial struggles of old can have relevance in a new context.

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## John Riddell

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## P.S.

This text was first presented at the Ideas Left Outside conference on Elbow Lake, Ontario, August 2, 2014.

John Riddell

<https://johnriddell.com/2014/12/14/how-socialists-of-lenins-time-responded-to-colonialism/>

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## Footnotes

[1] This text references the six volumes of [documents that I edited with Pathfinder Press](#) as well as [my edition of the Fourth Comintern Congress](#) and [a volume on the Third Congress](#) now at the printers, both published by Brill and Haymarket Books.

[2] On the Stuttgart congress, see John Riddell, ed., *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, New York: Pathfinder, 1984, pp. 1-20, 36-42. For quotations, see pp. 6 (David and Kautsky), 14 (Van Kol), and 39 (Lenin).

[3] *Lenin's Struggle*, p. 99. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 19, pp. 99-100.

[4] *Lenin's Struggle*, pp. 212, 357, 369, 372-379.

[5] Riddell, ed., *To See the Dawn*, New York: Pathfinder, 1993.

[6] Riddell, ed., *Founding the Communist International*, New York: Pathfinder, 1987, pp. 227-8.

[7] Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 31, p. 453; *To See the Dawn*, pp. 14, 219.

[8] *To See the Dawn*, p. 26.

[9] See session 23 in Riddell, ed., *To the Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International*, scheduled for publication by Brill, 2015. Quotations are from pp. 1018 and 1030 in the German edition of 1921, *Protokoll des III Kongresses*.

[10] Riddell, ed., *Toward the United Front*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012, pp. 649-737; 1180-90.

[11] See Harry E. Vanden and Marc Becker, eds., *José Carlos Mariátegui, an Anthology*, New York: Monthly Review, 2011.