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A Survey of Comintern Auxiliary Organizations - Part 3: The Communist Youth International

Sunday 3 October 2021, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 15 May 2021).

The Comintern's youth wing, sometimes referred to by its Russian acronym, KIM, was the direct continuation of the International Union of Socialist Youth Organization founded in 1907 under the aegis of the Second International.

When the outbreak of war in 1914 shattered the world socialist movement, the IUSYO soon reconstituted itself at a gathering in Switzerland in March 1915 on the basis of militant opposition to the imperialist war. For its appeal, see "[1915: The Youth Challenge to War](#)." [1] The ISUYO elected the German youth leader Willi Münzenberg as its international secretary and launched a journal, *Jugend-Internationale*. In 1917 the youth International and its journal rallied to support the Soviet government in Russia.

In 1916, Lenin, who worked closely with Münzenberg at that time, published a review of *Jugend-Internationale*, which included [the following well-known summary](#) of the case for autonomy of revolutionary youth movements:

"The middle-aged and the aged often do not know how to approach the youth, for the youth must of necessity advance to socialism in a different way, by other paths, in other forms, in other circumstances than their fathers. Incidentally, that is why we must decidedly favour organisational independence of the Youth League, not only because the opportunists fear such independence, but because of the very nature of the case. For unless they have complete independence, the youth will be unable either to train good socialists from their midst or prepare themselves to lead socialism forward."

We stand for the complete independence of the Youth Leagues, but also for complete freedom of comradely criticism of their errors! We must not flatter the youth.[2]

At an underground congress in Berlin in November 1919, the youth International declared its adhesion to the newly formed Comintern and took the name Communist Youth International (CYI). [Historian Nathaniel Flakin](#) notes that delegates insisted on autonomy for the youth organizations, but declared that the CYI was "organizationally linked" to the Comintern, basing "itself on the resolutions of the First [Comintern] Congress." [3]

Survey of Comintern Auxiliary Organizations: Contents

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Organized from its centre in Berlin, the CYI grew rapidly, declaring on its first birthday that it encompassed forty-five national youth organizations, predominantly in Europe, with 600,000 adherents, including members of the Communist youth federation in Soviet Russia.[4]

The second CYI congress was scheduled to convene in Jena, Germany, on 7 April 1921. It was a moment of crisis for the Communist International (see "The Comintern's Great Turn of 1920-21"). The German CP (KPD) was recovering from a disastrously failed general strike (the "March Action"), which had been launched with strong encouragement from Comintern emissaries. Comintern leaders in Moscow disagreed on how to assess this experience.

On 1 April 1921, the Comintern Executive Committee instructed the CYI to treat the Jena discussions as "not binding" and to transfer the congress to Moscow, where it would be held simultaneously with the Third Comintern Congress. The CYI acquiesced.

New Relationship to Comintern

The Second CYI congress accordingly convened in Moscow in July. It transferred the International's headquarters to the Soviet capital, and released Münzenberg, then aged 32, to undertake a crucially important assignment organizing relief for famine-afflicted regions of Russia. The youth congress took note of the vastly altered conditions of its work. The CYI no longer stood alone as a revolutionary International. The Communist parties that it had helped constitute in dozens of countries of Europe had now taken shape and found their feet. The Communist youth no longer played a vanguard role in the world Communist movement.

[A resolution of the Comintern congress](#) clarified the youth wing's redefined relationship to CYI:

"One of the most immediate and important tasks of the Communist youth organisation is to vigorously clear away all remnants in its ranks of the ideology of its political leadership role, left over from the time when it was completely autonomous...."

The Communist Youth International is a component of the Communist International, and it therefore subordinates itself to the decisions of the Communist International congresses and its Executive Committee.... Efficient mutual representation and close, ongoing collaboration will assure that the Communist International can exercise constant supervision and that the Communist Youth International can develop fruitful work in every field of its activity....[5]

Münzenberg gave a major report to the Third Comintern Congress on these developments, stressing the impoverishment and oppression afflicting the working youth who were among the most highly exploited workers. Many millions of workers had been drawn into industry as machine attendants,

but given the great reduction apprenticeship programs they no longer had any perspective of rising to higher status, he stated. Richard Schüller expanded on these points the next year in his lengthy report to the Comintern's Fourth Congress.[6]

Based on this analysis, the CYM's Second Congress shifted its emphasis toward engaging in the economic struggles of worker youth. Its Third Congress, in December 1922, stressed the need to organize members in a network of cells, based as much as possible in workplaces. This new emphasis anticipated the campaign launched by the Comintern itself two years later, suggesting that the CYI's organic link to the Comintern had not done away with its distinctive originality and creativity. Unfortunately, the workplace-cell structure ("Bolshevization") was applied in such a manner as to speed the bureaucratic degeneration of both the Comintern and its youth wing.[7]

In the late 1930s, as the Comintern progressively shut down its main auxiliary organizations, the CYI structures remained in place. The Youth International was finally dissolved, simultaneously with the Comintern as a whole, in 1943.

Notes:

[1]. See also Riddell, ed., *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International: Documents 1907-1916, The Preparatory Years*, New York: Monad, 1984, pp. 281-82

[2]. V.I. Lenin, "[Youth International](#)," in *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964, vol. 23, pp. 63-66.

[3]. See Nathaniel Flakin, "[100 Years of the Communist Youth International](#)," in *Left Voice*.

[4]. E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1966, vol. 3, p. 399.

[5]. Riddell, ed., *To the Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International*, Leiden: Brill/Haymarket Books, Leiden/Chicago, 2015, pp. 1030-33.

[6]. See Riddell, ed., *To the Masses*, pp. 765-77 (report by Münzenberg) and Riddell, ed., *Toward the United Front, Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International*, Leiden/Chicago: Brill/Haymarket, 2011, pp. 783-800.

[7] See Joel Geier, "[The Forgotten Fifth Congress: Bridge between Lenin and Stalin](#)."

An annotated collection of documents of the Communist Youth International, edited by Mike Taber, is in preparation as part of the [Comintern Publishing Project](#), with the goal of publication by Brill and Haymarket Books in 2023.

P.S.

• John Riddell blog. May 15, 2021:
<https://johnriddell.com/2021/05/15/cyi/>