

# THE NATIONAL AND COLONIAL QUESTION IN THE FIRST FIVE YEARS OF THE COMINTERN, 1919-24

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## Introduction

Marxist analysis of the National and Colonial question in the First Five Years of the Communist International has been limited in quantity, superficial in quality and in the case of Soviet and Chinese historiography, deliberately distorted to serve party interests. Even those on the Trotskyist left have found little of theoretical import to detain them in this period and area. Lenin had after all laid down the 'correct' line in 1920. The real task they assume is to see how far this was revised *after* 1924 under the impact of ascendent Stalinism. The earlier period — precisely because it was Leninist — is thereby denied the critical attention it deserves. Indeed Trotsky himself hardly discusses the years *before* 1924. His new and limpet-like adherence to Leninism made him critically shy of analyzing Lenin on the National and Colonial question. The cult of Lenin affected everyone, and not just the official Soviet leadership in the 1920s.

How is the period between 1919 and early 1924 best characterized? Those were first and foremost years of theoretical transition and fluidity. The rigidities of Stalinism had yet to be introduced. The impact of the collapse of the Second International and the success of the October revolution on theoretical discourse, was still immediate. This was the high point of the Russian Revolution politically and programmatically; immensely rich and yet also immensely open-ended.

There were however two paradoxes about the Russian revolution. The first was that it had in practice made a mockery of 'orthodox' European Marxism of which Bolshevism had been a part. The bourgeois revolution had been consummated in proletarian dictatorship. Economic and social backwardness had been turned into its political opposite. The Bolsheviks had achieved in practice what they had always considered a theoretical impossibility and in so doing had injected a tension between theoretical orthodoxy and political achievement. The first paradox of October therefore was that few Bolsheviks were theoretically prepared for it. The second was that even fewer learned from it. As Harold Isaacs eloquently said of the Bolsheviks:

When the wave receded and left power in their hand it found them still clinging to their 'pre-revolutionary' antiques. The experience of October had passed, barely leaving a trace upon them.

There is a more specific problem which has to be addressed however. It has been argued, by Trotsky in particular that it was Stalinism *after* 1924 and 1925 which led to the debacle in China in 1927.<sup>2</sup> The Chinese Communists pushed into an almost unbreakable alliance with the Kuomintang (KMT) were forced by the logic of that alliance to subordinate themselves, the proletariat and the peasantry, to the Chinese bourgeoisie within the framework of the bourgeois revolution. Two related charges can be distilled from Trotsky's analytical polemic. Firstly, that the Comintern had developed, under Stalin and Bukharin, an entirely false analysis of the national bourgeoisie. Secondly, that their rigid stages view of the colonial revolution – the political consequence of the polemic against Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution – was not only theoretically impossible, but disastrous politically. The end result of these mistakes was Chiang Kai-Shek's destruction of the working class movement in the coup in April 1927 and the decimation of the insurgent peasantry in spring and summer of the same year.

The correctness of Trotsky's critique is in my mind beyond doubt. However, the problem emerges as to the precise origin of the disastrous Comintern policy in China. For Trotsky there is no doubt that Stalin and Bukharin are largely to blame after 1924 and 1925. Equally, according to Trotsky, their policy stands in opposition to an earlier Bolshevik or Leninist line. Writing in June 1928, Trotsky highlighted the difference:

It would be unwise pedantry to maintain that, had a Bolshevik policy been applied in the revolution of 1925–1927, The Chinese Communist Party would unflinchingly have come to power. But it is contemptible philistinism to assert that such a possibility was entirely out of the question.<sup>3</sup>

Trotsky's implicit assumption is that there were two diametrically opposed periods and policies. One correct – one false. One Leninist and Bolshevik – one Stalinist. One with which he expressed theoretical and political solidarity – one which he opposed. The question which he never asked, (in fact never posed) was to what extent there might have been more continuity than discontinuity between one phase of Comintern history and another? Indeed might it not be argued that Trotsky attempts to draw too rigid a contrast between one period and another on the national and colonial question? Furthermore, is he correct in assuming or implying that his own quite distinct position on the colonial revolution was the same as the Bolsheviks as he often claimed? In what follows I hope to answer these questions.

### **The Colonial Question: Continuity or Discontinuity?**

In discussing the long neglected question on Comintern colonial policy two broad questions emerge as being most important. First, and above all others, what was the general strategy established by the Comintern by 1924? Was there, for example, a clear and unambiguous rupture with old Bolshevism

and its stages theory? How did the Comintern perceive the relationship between the bourgeois revolution and proletarian dictatorship? And were any lessons drawn from the Russian experience?

Second, what analysis was made of the political economies of individual colonial countries and in terms of that, of the colonial bourgeoisie? What role were the latter assigned in the colonial revolution, if any? Finally, what analysis was there of the relationship between the colonial bourgeoisie and imperialism on the one hand, and the proletariat and peasantry on the other?

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There is, in my view, no strong evidence to suggest that the Bolsheviks attempted a theoretical revision of their previously held conception of revolutionary strategy in the years between 1917–1920. It was not, it was true, a pressing problem. It was assumed that the European revolution was imminent and would succeed. In this situation controversies which had divided Russian Marxism before 1917 might have appeared to be both unnecessary and inopportune. The debates on the National and Colonial question in 1920 should therefore be seen not only as attempting to outline a new strategy for the colonial world, but as a reflection of Bolshevik thinking on their own revolution.

Two sets of theses were drawn up, by V.I. Lenin, and by the young Indian Marxist, M.N. Roy. Strangely, neither dealt with the particular socio-political character of the colonies. The relationship between the bourgeois revolution and proletarian dictatorship was not discussed, nor, in fact, was it raised as a problem in their theses in any systematic fashion. If anything it was Roy rather than Lenin who appraised the question in his ninth thesis, where he stated briefly that: 'The revolution in the colonies is not going to be communist in its first stages.' However, having argued this his analysis became entangled in an inconclusive discussion on the use of peasants' and workers' Soviets.

The two sets of theses were then discussed in detail in commission. Unfortunately, we do not have a full stenographic report of the deliberations. Clearly, however, a 'lively debate had occurred,' as Lenin admitted in his speech on the work of the commission. His statement is extremely important and I quote it in full:

The question was posed as follows: are we to consider as correct the assertion that the capitalist stage of economic development is inevitable for backward nations now on the road to emancipation and whom a certain advance towards progress is to be seen since the war? We replied in the negative. If the victorious revolutionary proletariat conducts systematic propaganda among them, and the Soviet governments come to their aid with all the means at their disposal – in that event it will be mistaken to assume that the backward peoples must inevitably go through the capitalist stage of development...with the appropriate theoretical grounding, with the aid of the proletariat of the advanced

countries, backward countries can go over to the Soviet system and, through certain stages of development, to communism, without having to pass through the capitalist stage.<sup>4</sup>

Although Lenin's position appears clear at first sight, it cannot be taken as a simple and decisive rejection of the stages strategy. Firstly Lenin implies that only the *prior* success of the European revolution would allow the colonies to avoid a long period of capitalist development. In 1920 a successful European revolution was anticipated but if this necessary prior condition was not fulfilled, did that mean that the backward countries would have to go through the 'caudine forks of capitalism' as Marx had once referred to them?

Secondly Lenin's argument does not proceed from an analysis of the *internal* class structure of the colonies. He made no theoretical case for the dictatorship of the proletariat, even though this is the only possible political solution to the colonial revolution. This is crucially important. He only suggested one external factor which might make it unnecessary to pass through a capitalist stage: namely, the success of the European revolution.

The 2nd Congress thus left a legacy on the question of strategy and overall perspectives that was ambivalent and in need of further elaboration. Those looking for an embryonic theory of permanent revolution will have a long and disappointing search. It plainly is not there. Nonetheless, the case for a two stage revolution is not made with any degree of conviction either. There is a dialectical tension and open-endedness in Lenin which escapes a simple classificatory label.

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The most striking development after July 1920 was the rapidity with which the 'tensions' in Lenin's position, were removed. What he left 'open', subsequent Comintern spokesmen tended to terminate. What was a problem for Lenin was solved in a mechanical and rigid way by his successors. Lenin's ambivalence was transformed into Comintern dogmatism.

Consider two examples in 1922:

1) The 1st Congress of the Toilers of the East in January (convened to protest the Washington Conference of late 1921). The delegates were communists and various bourgeois nationalists. The whole tone of the Congress was essentially anti-Western rather than specifically communist. Nevertheless important spokesmen from the Comintern were present. Indeed Georgi Safarov's contributions were designed to provide the main theoretical framework and guidelines for the discussions.<sup>5</sup>

In his 'Report on the national-colonial question and the Communist attitude thereto', he made it clear that 'The chief task with which (the Chinese working masses) is confronted is to achieve emancipation from the foreign yoke' and its replacement with 'a democratic government which will bring down the cost of living.'

In a later speech the delegates were told: 'In colonial countries the first phase of the revolutionary movement must be a national-revolutionary movement.' In Mongolia for instance, 'to preach communism and the proletarian revolution is ridiculous...It is quite clear that it is no use putting the cart before the horse...It is impossible to skip over a number of inevitable historical stages.'

But perhaps the most revealing statement was made in his comparison of the Chinese and Japanese revolutions. Its schematism would have shamed Lenin and pleased any self-respecting Menshevik. As he prophesied:

The Chinese labour movement is beginning to walk. We are not building any castles in the air for the near future...We do not expect the Chinese working class to take the commanding position which the Japanese workers are able to gain in the near future. But the young Chinese labour movement is growing.

Safarov's general view was by no means an isolated phenomenon.

2) At the 4th Comintern Congress in the last two months of 1922 Radek (who was to be one of the main Comintern spokesman on China) reproduced the same position. He advised communists in the colonial countries that:

The time has not yet come for the final struggle for emancipation...you still have a long road to travel side by side with the revolutionary bourgeois elements.<sup>6</sup>

It was precisely this rejection of any strategy which went beyond the bourgeois democratic revolution that was to be the political axis of Comintern policy in the colonial countries. An example of this can be seen in the Comintern's policy for China. It is often forgotten (or conveniently ignored) that the political subordination of the Chinese Communist Party to the KMT, the result of the Comintern's two-stage theory of colonial revolution, had in reality occurred long *before* the political ascendancy of Stalin and Bukharin. It had effectively been implemented by 1923. It would be useful to reconstruct the way in which this occurred.

From 1921 onwards Mareng [Henryk Sneevliet], the Comintern representative in China, had sought to forge a firm alliance between the communists and the nationalists. By 1922 he had succeeded. The specific organizational form this alliance took should not detain us here. The important factors were: firstly, that the alliance whatever its organizational expression, was based on the strategic assumption that the coming Chinese revolution would be national only; and secondly, that all of the detailed negotiations conducted by Mareng were ratified both by the Executive committee of the Comintern and the Politburo of the Russian Party. In short his specific proposals had been sanctioned at the very highest level.

The Executive Committee in a statement on the 12th January 1923 talked of the 'central task for China' as being the 'national revolution'. The Joffe-Sun

Yat-Sen agreements on the CCP-KMT alliance, signed on the 26th January 1923, made it clear in the first paragraph that there was no possibility of 'leaping over stages of historical development'. As Joffe put it:

Dr Sun is of the opinion that, because of the non-existence of conditions favourable to their successful application in China, it is not possible to carry out either communism or even the Soviet system in China...the most important and most pressing problems are the completion of national unification and the attainment of full national independence.<sup>7</sup>

Little wonder therefore that at the 3rd Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in June, the manifesto declared that: 'our task is to lead the workers and peasants into joining the national revolution...'<sup>8</sup> The point is – this was not just the Chinese line – it was the Comintern position in 1923. Not just for China alone, but for all the colonial countries.

It is now possible to answer the questions posed above. The general strategy developed by the Comintern by 1923 and 1924 was unambiguously bourgeois democratic. I can find no suggestions of any serious attempt to pose or even discuss the possibility of proletarian dictatorship as a solution to the tasks of the anti-imperialist struggle in the colonies. That is, a well developed stages conception of the colonial revolution preceded Stalinism. The lessons of the Russian Revolution were not grasped. The 'tensions' that can be found in Lenin in 1920 had disappeared without trace by 1922..

### **The Comintern and the National Bourgeoisie**

Two points must be made before considering the attitude in the Comintern on the colonial bourgeoisie during the first five years.

1) That the essence of Russian Bolshevism before 1917 – and what divided it from Menshevism – was a deep hostility towards its own bourgeoisie. The contradiction of Bolshevik theory was that its slogan – the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry – combined this hostility with an ambivalent approach to the nature of the Russian Revolution. In this respect the formulations of the Mensheviks and of Trotsky were more consistent than that of the Bolsheviks – before the latter (under Lenin's urging) finally oriented itself to proletarian dictatorship in April 1917. This theoretical contradiction was carried over in Comintern policy towards the colonial bourgeoisie.

2) The Bolshevik's hostility toward its own bourgeoisie, however, was not simply reproduced in formulations about the bourgeoisie in the colonial countries. In fact before 1917 Lenin had developed a quite positive assessment of their role.

In May 1913 Lenin noted:

Everywhere in Asia a mighty democratic movement is growing, spreading and gaining strength. The bourgeoisie there is *as yet* siding with the people.

Writing a year earlier he argued, with embarrassing gusto:

In Asia there is *still* a bourgeois capable of championing sincere, militant, consistent democracy, a worthy comrade of France's great men of Enlightenment and great leaders of the close of the 18th century.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, there appeared to be two pressures, and not just one, working on Lenin by the 2nd Congress of 1920. A scepticism about the potential of the Russian bourgeoisie to participate in its own democratic revolution (the result of Bolshevik experience in Russia); and a contrary belief that the colonial bourgeoisie *might* be able to play the role which its Russian counterpart could and did not.. These two elements appeared in Lenin's theses most clearly.

What is most striking about Lenin's original draft is the partial accommodation he seems prepared to make to the national bourgeoisie. A comparison of the theses of Lenin and Roy brings this out most clearly. Lenin, while posing the necessity of proletarian leadership and independence in the anti-imperialist struggle, stressed the importance of an alliance with what he termed the 'bourgeois democratic liberation movement'. Although he tried to make this alliance conditional and temporary, an alliance of some sort was still posed.

Roy rejected any sort of accord, however temporary or conditional, because this might lead to the subordination of the proletariat and peasantry to the native bourgeoisie. This was possibly a difference in emphasis rather than overall strategy, but it is a difference that should not be ignored. In the commission it was Roy and not Lenin who was forced to retreat and his uncompromising theses were toned down: 'the co-operation of the bourgeois nationalist revolutionary element was now deemed useful.'

Lenin while agreeing that 'in many if not most' cases the colonial bourgeoisie had come to some sort of accommodation with imperialism, still insisted that where it had not, support could still be rendered. The alliance, however loose, conditional and even unlikely still remained important in Lenin's thinking.

Of course, in practice Lenin might have ruled out such an alliance even though he continued to stress its desirability. He was equally insistent that communists must only enter into an alliance on a temporary basis, where there was no organizational dilution and, perhaps most important, as long as communists continued to struggle *against* their erstwhile allies. It seems that Lenin was torn by a theoretical and political contradiction which he had as yet not resolved. He insisted — unlike Trotsky — that the colonial bourgeoisie could still be anti-imperialist. Hence the necessity of assistance and support. At the same time he expressed grave reservations about the alliance.

The ambivalence of the 1920 theses can be demonstrated by looking at developments in 1922 and 1923. At the Fourth Congress of the Comintern it was argued that a

compromise with imperialist domination becomes more acceptable to the indigenous bourgeoisie...which carries on the struggle of a weak and oppressed bourgeoisie against a powerful and highly developed metropolitan bourgeoisie...this struggle is a struggle between competitors, and therefore contains possibility of compromise..

And again:

The bourgeoisie has come a lot too late to the colonial and semi-colonial countries and is thus in no wise inclined to play the role of liberator...the national-revolutionary movement cannot achieve victory under the leadership of the bourgeoisie.

The same view was expressed in the theses. Indeed they express a thought which was absent in 1920. As soon as the proletariat and peasantry are drawn into the struggle, the bourgeoisie will capitulate:

The national bourgeoisie will be unable and unwilling to lead the struggle against imperialism in so far that struggle assumes the form of a revolutionary mass movement...As the proletarian and semi-proletarian peasant masses are drawn in, the big bourgeoisie begin to turn away from the movement in so far as the social interests of the lower classes come to the forefront. There is a long struggle ahead for the young proletariat in the colonies... against imperialist exploitation and their own classes.<sup>11</sup>

In short it is impossible in reality to struggle both against and with the national bourgeoisie. This is the key point. However, compare these statements (which probably go further than the theses of 1920) with those made by Safarov at the First Congress of the Toilers of the East ten months previously.<sup>12</sup> The whole emphasis was different. The other part of Lenin's dialectical picture emerged: the alliance with the national bourgeoisie had become the aim above all else. Scientific analysis of the bourgeoisie in the colonies was replaced with moral exhortation to it not to compromise with imperialism and reaction.

We do not wish any forcible Sovietisation, but on the other hand, we say, that in as much as we support the national-democratic movement, we demand a loyal attitude to the labour movement, to the Communist Party and to the working class.

As Trotsky was to argue at another time, but in the same context:

It would be absurd in such a case to demand that the devil should generally become converted to Christianity, and that he use his horns not against workers and peasants, but exclusively for pious deeds. In preventing such conditions we act in reality as the devil's advocate, and beg him to let us become his godfathers.

But Safarov was not content with exhortation alone. Although he argued, rhetorically, that communists 'must not connect themselves with any democratic party' he went on to add:

We do not intend to hide the truth. We know perfectly well that in the nearest future there can be no sharp conflicts between us and the bourgeois democratic elements organized in the national revolutionary organizations.

But this was the whole point for Lenin. The prior condition for an alliance between communists and 'these bourgeois democratic elements' was such a conflict. In reality Safarov removed the key condition for any type of principled co-operation between revolutionaries and nationalists. The dialectical tension of Lenin's position was eliminated.

This point was demonstrated forcibly in Comintern practice in China in 1922–23. In forging the alliance between the Chinese communists and the KMT, the Comintern and its representatives ignored nearly every stipulation laid down by Lenin. Firstly the communists merged organizationally with the Kuomintang in 1922 and 1923, thus sacrificing the independence of action which Lenin had deemed essential. Secondly, in establishing the KMT as the central focus of the 'national revolution', the leadership of that struggle was handed to the colonial bourgeoisie. In order to facilitate this they even redefined the class character of the Kuomintang. Thus in January 1923 the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) declared that the Kuomintang was based on four classes: the liberal democratic bourgeoisie; the petty-bourgeoisie; the intelligentsia; and the workers. The peasants were added as an afterthought in 1925. Finally the Comintern declared all criticism of the KMT taboo.

In short, every condition and safeguard laid down in 1920 was overturned. The Comintern had sanctioned, if not initiated an organizational 'merger' between the communists and nationalists; the leadership of the movement had been handed over to a non-proletarian force; an uncritical, and obviously long term, strategical alliance had been established with bourgeois democracy. As ECCI put it in January 1923: 'The only serious national-revolutionary group is the Kuomintang.'<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

Is it possible to explain this contradiction between two sets of contrary statements: between the theses of the Fourth Congress and actual policy in

China; between Safarov's attitude to the colonial bourgeoisie and that of the Comintern itself?

The simplest and most obvious answer is that the Comintern said one thing and did another. But this is a statement of fact, not an explanation. Part of the answer clearly lies in the ambivalent legacy on the national and colonial question bequeathed by Lenin. On both general strategy, and the attitude to the colonial bourgeoisie, his formulations allowed for different interpretations, especially on the question of the relationship between communists and nationalists in the colonial revolution. Were the communists to struggle *against* or *with* the colonial bourgeoisie. Lenin had answered by saying *both*.

However, although such a position was tenable theoretically in practice it was impossible. Roy, and later Trotsky recognized that as soon as the proletariat and peasantry expressed their specific class interests, the colonial bourgeoisie would be pushed into compromising with Imperialism. A strategic alliance with the colonial bourgeoisie, if it is was to be tenable required the subordination of the class to the national struggle or its repression.

But why should Comintern members interpret Lenin's ambivalent position on the colonial bourgeoisie one way and not another? Lenin had only posed the alliance with this class as being possible. It was equally feasible to decide that because a principled alliance was impossible in practice, the communists' task was to struggle against the national bourgeoisie. One possible answers to this key question is that even by 1922 the Comintern as a revolutionary instrument had been subordinated to the needs of the Soviet State's need for allies abroad and although nationalist bourgeoisie were unreliable, at least some diplomatic mileage might be made in that direction. Hence the revolutionary potential of the colonial revolution was subordinated to Soviet requirements. There is some truth in this, but it does not constitute the whole explanation. Lenin, remember, eliminated the contradiction in Bolshevism in April 1917 by calling for a second, proletarian revolution.

The Comintern removed the contradictions of the 1920 thesis on the colonial question by moving in the opposite direction. They moved effectively to Menshevism because they were in a different historical conjuncture. Lenin was able to rearm the party in and after April against strong opposition because the revolutionary situation in Russia provided him with the objective situation in which such a re-arming was accepted as necessary.

The spontaneous unwinding of the film of revolution forced the Bolsheviks, with Lenin's help, to redefine their conceptions. After 1920 it was the film of reaction and retreat, not revolution in Europe, which was unwinding. In this situation the contradictory elements of the 1920 theses were more likely to be interpreted in a reactionary, and not a revolutionary way—even though the colonial region was moving into a revolutionary phase. This what was happening in 1922 and 1923. The effect of Stalinism after 1924 —the policy of socialism in one country, was to freeze this reactionary tendency into a vice-like mould.

## Notes

1. Harold Isaacs, *The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution*, (1938).
2. See Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin*, (1970).
3. *Ibid*, p.185.
4. Lenin at the Second Congress of the Comintern. See V.I. Lenin, *The National Liberation Movement in the East*, (Moscow, 1969).
5. See *The First Congress of the Toilers of the Far East*, (Petrograd, 1922, Reprinted Hammersmith, 1970). See also (in Russian) G Safarov, *The National Question and the Proletariat* (Moscow, 1923).
6. For documents pertaining to the Fourth Congress of the Comintern see J. Degras, *The Communist International, 1919–1943*, Vol.1, (London, 1976), pp.382–393.
7. For the Joffe–Sun Yat–Sen agreement see X.J. Eudin and Robert C. North *Soviet Russia and the East, 1920–1927*, (California, 1957), pp. 131, 141.
8. For a guide to the early history of the Chinese Communist Party see the relevant section in Robert North *Moscow and Chinese Communists* (Stanford, 1963).
9. *The National Liberation Movement in the East*, p.82.
10. *Ibid*, p.58.
11. On the Fourth Congress theses on the national and colonial question see Degras, *ibid*, pp.382–393.
12. See *The First Congress of the Far East*, pp.156–174 for Safarov's contribution.
13. See Degras, *ibid*, for the ECCI meeting of January 1923.

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