

The Issue of Palestine at the Second Congress of the Communist International

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Abstract:

Daily sessions of the Second Congress of the Communist International were held in Petrograd's Tauride Palace. Delegate Alfred Rosmer described the second congress' architectural setting: "the debating hall was like that where parliaments meet in every country ... there was a high rostrum, an amphitheater where the delegates were seated, and a gallery for spectators." Built by Prince Grigory Potemkin during the eighteenth century as a city residence, and renovated several times since his death, representatives convened under the tiered chandeliers of the Tauride's white-painted convention hall. In the Prince's debating hall, delegates discussed dictatorship of the proletariat, "hitherto a theoretical question, [it] was now posed as a concrete problem—in fact, as the most urgent problem" before curious spectators. How radical could a discussion be, held in the home built by the favourite of Catherine the Great, who died during negotiations over the Treaty of Jassy which ended a war with the Ottoman Empire? What place would Arab national liberation play in the Tauride, and what of Palestine? The second congress of the Communist International remained in session until 7 August 1920. Historian Alexander Schölch points out that—under such circumstances—Arab communists didn't respond very well to Bolshevik forms of organization, as when Poale Zion distributed a pamphlet calling on Arab laborers to stay away from their places of employment on international workers' day and join with Jewish workers under the banner of the red flag. Schölch invited fellow-researchers to "imagine an Arab coffee house in Jaffa [on May Day 1921], where a small shopkeeper, a docker and an orange picker discuss the contents of the [Arabic leaflet] of which they find a copy."

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The Tauride Palace

Congress II of the Communist International began 23 July 1920, with two sessions dedicated to discussion of the structure and role of Communist parties, with a summary report and theses delivered to the body by Chairman Grigori Zinoviev. While opening ceremonies were held in Moscow, few days afterward, debates continued in the former imperial capital Petrograd.

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In the Prince's debating hall, delegates discussed dictatorship of the proletariat, "hitherto a theoretical question, [it] was now posed as a concrete problem—in fact, as the most urgent problem" before curious spectators.² How radical could a discussion be, held in the home built by the favourite of Catherine the Great, who died during negotiations over the Treaty of Jassy which ended a war with the Ottoman Empire? What place would Arab national liberation play in the Tauride, and what of Palestine?

Indifference & Flowery Eloquence

Rosmer satisfied himself this gathering was more inclusive than its predecessor, given that: "delegates had come from all corners of the world."³ A. A. Andreev recalled, "in the hall, the delegations of different countries gathered together in separate groups: English, Germans, French, Italians, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Indians, blacks, Arabs, and others. Conversations in different languages was heard, and here and there snatches of national songs, particularly among the Italians and the French"—of which Rosmer was one.⁴

It's interesting Andreev recalled Arabs among the international groups—because none attended.⁵ While 103 organizations were represented (including 48 communist parties) from 52 different countries,⁶ Lenin's was the sole voice raising the national and colonial question, and even he buffered assertions with the

¹ I Verkhovtsev, "Vozhd' III Internatsinala," *Don* 4 (1970), p. 27.

² Alfred Rosmer, *Moscow Under Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review, 1972), pp. 65, 60.

³ Alfred Rosmer, *Moscow Under Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review, 1972), p. 66.

⁴ *Vospominaniia o Vladimire Il'iche Lenine*, volume 4, page 17, quoted in I Verkhovtsev, "Vozhd' III Internatsinala," *Don* 4 (1970), p. 27, no. 1. See also George S. Schuyler, Oral History, 19 September 1960, *Black Thought and Culture* database.

⁵ R.A. Archer (trans.), *Second Congress of the Communist International: Minutes of the Proceedings* [in two volumes]. (London: New Park Publications, 1977), v. 2, pp. 297-32.

⁶ V. Desiaterek, A. Latyshev, "Uchit'sia Vevoliutsionnoi Bor'be," *Molodoi Kommunist* 4 (1973), p. 42.

qualifying terms “provisionally.” Consequently, the communist international as a whole “had relatively little to say about revolutionary possibilities in Asia and in colonial countries.”⁷

Palestine had received Zionist settlers in two waves of immigration (*‘aliyat*) before the first world war; by the time of the second congress, Yehiel Kossoi moved to Moscow where he got a job in the Comintern administration in charge of Middle Eastern affairs. Under the party name “Avigdor” he was sent to the Nile valley to gather information on the Egyptian leftist movement; subsequently, he attended communist international events as representative of an Egyptian party.⁸ In short, even the Arab communist parties were represented by Europeans. S. Averbukh (party names, “Haidar” and “Abusiam”) was a member of the *Poale Zion* movement that had been recognized by the Second International.⁹

Historian Demetrio Boersner despairs of the level of political engagement on “the eastern question.” Of the discussion, he wrote: “it was extremely disappointing, inasmuch as most of the delegates who spoke had nothing to contribute except very vague generalities; the discussion indicated that even though the Comintern as a whole had taken a step toward greater awareness of the importance of the East, the individual delegates were still unable to analyze this aspect of their activity in a practical and dynamic way.”

After a number of delegates explained at great length that their peoples were very revolutionary, the chair proposed to reduce the time allowance to five minutes for each speaker, which won the assembled delegates’ acceptance. Boersner concludes, “Western indifference and Eastern flowery eloquence had combined to reduce the discussion of ‘the oriental question’ to a sort of necessary evil, to be gotten over with as quickly as possible.”¹⁰

Lenin’s Charm

A photograph from the second Comintern congress shows a speaker at the center of a crowd between the Tauride’s hall’s high columns. As historian Jaan Pennar points out, the second congress was the first opportunity to develop theses on national questions, responding to the Treaty of Versailles signed in Versailles’ Palace of Mirrors the previous summer. The Versailles peace treaty had affirmed that territorial conquest was not a valid means of acquiring territory.¹¹

⁷ Joel Beinin, “The Palestine Communist Party, 1919-1948,” *MERIP Reports* 55 (March 1977), p. 5.

⁸ In Egypt, he married Joseph Rosenthal’s daughter. See Tareq Ismail, *Communist Party of Egypt*.

⁹ Documents from the second Comintern congress are at RGASPI/489/1; the official publication was *2oi kongress kominterna; stenograficheskii otchet*

¹⁰ Demetrio Boersner *The Bolsheviks and the National and Colonial Question, 1917-1928* (Geneve, E. Droz, 1957), pp. 108, 109.

¹¹ Jaan Pennar, “The Arabs, Marxism, and Moscow: A Historical Survey,” *Middle East Journal*, 22:4 (Autumn 1968), pp. 435; See also Maher Sharif, *Filasīn fī al-arshīf al-sirrī lil-Kūmintrin* (Damascus: Dar al Mada lil-Thaqafah wa-al-Nashr, 2004), and Grigorii Grigorievitch Kosach, *Kommunisty Blizhnego Vostoka v SSSR v 1920-*

The question was what role Lenin's leadership would offer the national liberation of Ottoman provinces. Victor Godonnèche related an anecdote about Lenin's charm.¹² "One afternoon when he had come to the Kremlin on his own he suddenly heard a voice asking him, 'French?' it was Lenin hurrying after him, wanting to start a conversation. The discussion continued as far as the congress hall when, before entering, Lenin held Goddonèche back for a moment, to enquire what he thought of the congress, and what his impressions were." Elements were readily recognized as Lenin's charisma: a cordial manner, friendly inquiries of comparative strangers.¹³

Of the Bolsheviks, Bertram Wolfe characterized Lenin as follows: "in a world where most intellectuals were in love with ideas, and accustomed—whether by temperament or the pressure of circumstance—to a yawning gap between the dream and the deed, Lenin was an organization man—indeed the organization man—of whatever movements he planned or took part in."¹⁴ With the assembled delegates' use of parliamentary procedure to restrict discussion of colonial issues, the question was how Lenin would (or if he could) pursue this particular idea.

A Charter for the Communist International

Surviving photographs record banners with an overlapping hammer and sickle, symbol of the cooperation between industrial workers and peasants, hung above the speaker and around the perimeter of the hall.¹⁵ Immediately surrounding the speaker's raised platform, stenographers' and translators' work spaces were protected from the press of the crowd by booths; soldiers were also on guard in the hall.

1930-e gody (Moscow: RGGU, 2006). See also E. H. Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935* (New York: Pantheon, 1982); William Chase, *Enemies within the gates? The Comintern and the Stalinist repression, 1934-1939* (New Haven: Yale University, 2001); Kermit McKenzie, *Comintern and world revolution, 1928-1943: the shaping of doctrine* (New York: Columbia University, 1963). See also Kirill Anderson, "A New Life for the Comintern Archives," *Comma: International Journal on Archives* 3/4 (2002).

¹² See also A. Akhtamzian, "Vneshnepoliticheskaya deiatel'nost' V. I. Lenina *aprel'-oktiabr' 1921 goda)," *Mezhdunarodnaia Zhizn'* 16, 11 (1969), pp. 67-70.

¹³ Alfred Rosmer, *Moscow Under Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review, 1972), pp. 140-141.

¹⁴ See "A Party of a New Type: The Foundation Stone of the Communist International," in Milorad Drachkovitch and Branko Lazitch, editors, *The Comintern: Historical Highlights; Essays, Recollections, Documents* (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 1966), p. 23. In this context, Stefan Possony's reference to the role of conspiratorial tactics to answer the question, "was the Comintern really the heir of the international workingmen's association?" takes on added interest. See "The Comintern's Claim to Marxist Legitimacy," in Milorad Drachkovitch and Branko Lazitch, editors, *The Comintern: Historical Highlights; Essays, Recollections, Documents* (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 1966), pp. 3-19. Helmut Gruber was similarly clear: "the categorical Marxism-Leninism, already elevated to dogma in Lenin's lifetime and used so adroitly thereafter by Stalin to cloak his policies, no longer conformed to some of the leading ideas of the master." Helmut Gruber, *International Communism in the Era of Lenin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, DATE?), p. 16.

¹⁵ *2oi Kongress: Deiateli Kommunisticheskogo Internatsionala* (M: 1920), p. 1.

The second congress' primary task was to discuss and adopt a charter for the communist international. Identifying the dictatorship of the proletariat as a sole and unique means to free humanity from capitalism, such a charter would define the organization's objectives: struggle by all means (including force of arms) for the overthrow of the international bourgeoisie and establishment of an international Soviet republic. In order to achieve this goal, the Comintern must have a coherent central organization, which was responsible for coordinating the activities of individual sections active in each country.

Faced with disappointments across Europe, the delegates attending the communist international's second congress groped toward a theoretical solution and organizational issues. The powers of this world congress were defined according to the following: in addition to publishing a journal, the communist international will have four official languages, oversee creation of illegal communist organizations, and provide technical and other forms of support to such organizations.

After Zinoviev's theses were unanimously adopted by the assembled delegates, debate moved to conditions for admission to the Communist International, a discussion which ultimately produced a document known as the 21 Conditions by which the Poale Zion party sought the Communist International's recognition as the Communist Party of Palestine.

On July 25, the Commission on Conditions for Admission voted 5-3 on a Lenin's proposal limiting membership in the ComIntern to parties with a clear majority on their governing Central Committee favoring affiliation. Membership in the ComIntern would not be granted through an administrative procedure; rather, it was a political procedure, by which any applicant party would have to impress the Central Committee of its integrity and political leadership within its home jurisdiction.

National and Colonial Questions

Between the delegates' sung choruses of the "*Internationale*," V. I. Lenin returned to the national and colonial question, invoking the former Ottoman governorates (or *vilayets*) as yet another example (with Syria, and the division of China) of the conflict between England and France.¹⁶ Historian Demetrio Boersner insists, "instead of the western tendency which showed itself fully at the first congress and partly at the second congress, and which claimed the proletariat of the west would revolutionize the east, the [executive committee] now stated the opposite: that the nationalists of the east would revolutionize the west."¹⁷

¹⁶ Communist International. *2nd Congress*, Petrograd and Moscow (Washington DC: United States. Department of State, 1920), p. 23.

¹⁷ Demetrio Boersner *The Bolsheviks and the National and Colonial Question, 1917-1928* (Geneve, E. Droz, 1957), pp. 106-107.

Historian Duncan Hallas underscores the unique historical moment during which revolutionary delegates gathered at the Tauride Palace. For Hallas, the key issue was, “what should a revolutionary party do in a non-revolutionary situation? in 1919 this was not an issue [but] by 1921 it was central.” During August 1920, the Soviet Red Army advanced on Warsaw, the following month witnessed Italian workers’ uprising, and of course the spring of the following year witnessed German workers’ uprising. For Hallas, these indicated that capitalism’s postwar recovery was shaky and uneven.¹⁸

The communist international’s executive committee promulgated an appeal for the liberation of Algeria and Tunisia on May 20, 1920. In part, it stated: “the French civilization in North Africa expressed by an intolerable burden of taxes, leading to the untold misery of the proletariat, peasants and workers ... Blows endured by the communists merely enhance the prestige of communism ... and the communist party appears in full light to the indigenous masses as the unique champion of their rights.” The new communist international in Moscow lay blame squarely on the workers of the *métropole*. “It is the French proletariat which should ensure the victory of revolution in the colonies, and which should against French imperialism.” In this most modern state, the values of the political left were compromised: “these leaders of the French Socialist Party poisoned the soul of ordinary soldiers and workers. They helped the imperialist bourgeoisie raise a muddy wave of unspeakable, monstrous chauvinism across the whole country. They helped set the bourgeoisie serfdom in the factories and destroy even the most moderate labor protection act.” According to Moscow, the complicity of France’s left continued even after the first Russian revolution: “they assumed full responsibility for imperialist slaughter.... When the February revolution occurred in Russia, Albert Thomas, on behalf of the party, and on behalf of the French imperialists, arrived in Russia in order to convince the Russian workers and soldiers to continue the imperialist war.”¹⁹

Mr. Rafos’ contribution to the French-language *Communist International* (no. 9, 1920), “The Jewish Communist Movement,” laid bare the recent history of the Poale Zion political party, which sought registration as the Communist Party of Palestine. The text was brutal, first in accusing the party of having “abandoned active propaganda for the handing over of Palestine to the Jews,” identifying the party’s “dull struggle,” its “political disorganization,” and the fact that it was “demoralized

¹⁸ Duncan Hallas, “The Communist International and the United Front,” *International Socialism* 74 (January 1975).

¹⁹ For Mann’s significance in the Comintern, see Alfred Rosmer, *Moscow Under Lenin* (New York: Monthly Review, 1972), p. 136; Helmut Gruber, *Soviet Russia Masters the Comintern: International Communism in the Era of Stalin’s Ascendancy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1974), p. 113.

by the participation of its leaders in the directory of the Ukrainian National Alliance as part of the Soviet Union's ongoing civil war with White forces.

And the evening of 2 August, the executive committee reported, "we have received a protest against the granting of credentials to Palestine, with the argument that it does not do to drive the Jewish proletariat to Palestine. The Commission will still have to concern itself with that."²⁰ To suddenly-attentive delegates seated under those Tauride tiered chandeliers, Lenin shouted out Communists were free to support bourgeois liberation movements, just as long as these allies would permit activists to organize local workers and peasants along revolutionary lines.²¹

The second Comintern congress adopted Lenin's "theses on the national and colonial questions" as its official policy.²² In 1920 the Second Congress of the Comintern had issued a statement on the colonial and national question, in which we can read the following: "A glaring example of the deception of the working people of oppressed nations by the united forces of imperialism of the Entente and the bourgeoisie of these nations is the Palestinian adventure that is being put forward by the Zionists (and Zionism in general, which, in claiming to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, in practice is advocating the expulsion of the Arab working people from Palestine, where the Jewish workers constitute only an insignificant minority, a role that is exploited by Britain."²³

CONCLUSION

The second congress of the Communist International remained in session until 7 August 1920. Historian Alexander Schölch points out that—under such circumstances—Arab communists didn't respond very well to Bolshevik forms of organization, as when *Poale Zion* distributed a pamphlet calling on Arab laborers to stay away from their places of employment on international workers' day and join with Jewish workers under the banner of the red flag.²⁴ Schölch invited fellow-researchers to "imagine an Arab coffee house in Jaffa [on May Day 1921], where a small shopkeeper, a docker and an orange picker discuss the contents of the [Arabic leaflet] of which they find a copy."²⁵

²⁰ Minutes of the Second Congress of the Communist International, Evening Session of August 2.

²¹ Degras, *Communist International, 1919-1943, Documents*, pp. 138-130. See also "The Palestine Communist Party, 1919-1948" *MERIP Reports* 55 (March 1977), p. 5. See also George Lenczowski, "Evolution of Soviet Policy Toward the Middle East," *The Journal of Politics*, 20, 1 (February 1958), p. 166.

²² See also Nollau, *International Communism*, p. 59.

²³ A. Kramer, "Stalinism and Zionism," *In Defense of Marxism*, 15 May 2003.

²⁴ Budeiri, p. 23. According to him, it was a later PCP statement condemning the clash in Affula (after new Jewish landowners evicted Arab sharecroppers, which left one Arab dead and several Arabs and Jews injured) which brought Arabs over to the workers' movement. Budeiri recounts, "the action at Affula delivered the Party's propaganda to a wider audience than its meager resources allowed, and presented it to the Arabs in a positive light."

²⁵ Asef Bayat, director of the Institute for Study of Islam and Modernity in Amsterdam, notes journalists writing in English from outside the region emphasize a type of overseas popular opinion they call "the Arab street." He writes,

As Schölch explains, the workers “fail[ed] to understand it. Who are the Jewish and British capitalists, and who are the Jewish workers who say they have come to Palestine to fight them? ... Our imaginary visitors to the coffee house are not impressed by the leaflet; they throw it on a heap of rubbish.” Stay away from their places of employment for a day, march with Jewish workers? Under a *red* flag?²⁶ Red was hardly a color under which working men would march; it was a color which signified women’s legal exercise of their sexuality.

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“the ‘Arab street’ has become a minor household word in the west, bandied about in the media as both a subject of profound anxiety and an object of withering condescension.”

²⁶ Andrew Schölch, “The Communists of Palestine,” review of Alexander Flores, *Nationalismus und Sozialismus im arabischen Osten. Kommunistische Partei und arabische Nationalbewegung in Palästina 1919-1948* (Münster: Periferia Verlag, 1980). *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 11, 1 (Autumn, 1981), p. 164. In Arab consumer markets, the color red is frequently associated with women’s sexual expression.

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