

## IMPERIALISM AND THE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL

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*The article charts and discuss the historical use of the concept of imperialism in the Communist International (Comintern; Third International, 1919–43). By analyzing first, the establishment and framework of the Comintern’s understanding and use of imperialism as a political and instrumental tool, the aim of the article is to look beyond the official and sanctioned policy of the Comintern on imperialism between the wars. In doing so, the author examines and discuss internal discussions as they evolved over time at Comintern headquarters in Moscow by analyzing documents filed in the Comintern Archive (RGASPI) in Moscow. Key concepts focus on the Leninist perception of imperialism; the periodization debate, and contextual explanations linked to the frequent policy shifts of the Comintern and its relation to Bolshevization and Stalinization. In conclusion, the article highlights the historical trajectory of imperialism and anti-imperialism as a constituent source of Bolshevik policy making in its interpretation of global society.*

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As national oppression is inseparable from imperialism as such, it can only be finally abolished by a joint and consistent anti-imperialist struggle of the masses of the people in oppressed nations, carried on hand in hand with the international revolutionary proletariat, by uniting the forces of the toilers of all nations for the overthrow of imperialism and the capitalist system. . . . There could not be a crueller satire on the freedom of peoples which was promised in the Versailles Treaty than the practice which is adopted by the Versailles system of imperialism.

Otto W. Kuusinen, report at the Session of the Presidium of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, Moscow, 6/6-1931<sup>1</sup>

At the session of the Presidium of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) in Moscow on 6 June 1931, the Finnish émigré communist and secretary at Comintern headquarters Otto W. Kuusinen (1881–1964), reported “On the National Liberation Movement of the Oppressed Peoples in Europe.” The primary aim of Kuusinen’s report was to posit a new momentum for the anti-imperialist movement in Europe by reviving the Comintern’s anti-imperialist platform and officially sanctioned policy, and, how this could be utilized to advance “the situation of the enslaved toiling masses” in Europe. Kuusinen emphasized the need of forging a new anti-imperialist movement that could

underscore the situation of “oppressed peoples of Europe” and how this should be connected with national minority movements on the continent. However, Kuusinen’s report should instead be interpreted as the continuation of Lenin’s definition of imperialism as he had introduced it first, in the pamphlet *Imperialism: the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), and second, how the character of imperialism was stipulated at the notorious debate between Lenin and the Indian national revolutionary Manabendra Nath Roy (1887–1954) on the national and colonial question at the Comintern’s Second International Congress in Moscow 1920. The Communist International (Comintern; Third International, 1919–43) and imperialism, and its active counterpart—anti-imperialism—were dominant themes that constituted a central part of the ideological panorama of international communism between the wars. The inaugurating congress of the Comintern took place in Moscow on March 2–6, 1919, an event that aimed to fulfill Lenin’s vision of creating the broadest front as possible in support of “international Bolshevism.” In 1919, the Comintern was first and foremost concerned with positioning itself as the “world party” of and for the proletariat, and most importantly, expected to use the Comintern from an instrumental perspective to “create not just a Communist world, but also a world of communism.”<sup>2</sup> Connected to the Comintern’s portrayal and understanding of imperialism it is possible to locate political themes, which throughout the “world party’s” existence evolved and were interlocked with propaganda against various forms of social and national oppression, for example, fascism, colonialism and the war threat against the Soviet Union in the 1920–30s. The use of the term “imperialism” in the Comintern’s directives, instructions, resolutions, or personal observations of the world by distinguished persons in the Comintern hierarchy, emerges distinctly in an assessment on the scope of the “world party’s” activities between the wars (1919–39). The Comintern’s perception of imperialism was consistently influenced and shaped by the Bolshevik’s political interpretation of this phenomenon (*Imperializm*), which throughout the existence of the Soviet Union (1917–91) posited the Bolshevism, and later, Stalinism against Western society, having the later represent a hostile political system in terms of being the “camp of imperialism” (*lager “imperializma”*) or the embodiment of militant “international imperialism” (*mezhdunarodny imperializm*).<sup>3</sup> Imperialism is in its purest form, and regardless of the historical difficulty of establishing a genuine definition of the term, irrefutably connected to empire and imperial power. Accordingly, therefore, imperialism is the exercise of power either through conquest or through political and economic dominance; hence, it is a practice of power administered from imperial centers,<sup>4</sup> for example, the British and French empires between the wars. From the Comintern’s perspective then, it was equally used as an interpretative framework of the world, which, on a frequent basis, was adjusted to the continual policy shifts emerging and sanctioned by the Comintern throughout the entirety of its existence. Imperialism was a broadly discussed topic inside the Comintern’s structural and organizational spheres, engaging, and involving individuals and departmental institutions, and occasionally the debate on imperialism mirrored friction, confusion, and embedded interpretations of the topic. From a broader and institutional perspective,

however, the Comintern's framing of imperialism should include an understanding of chronology; the subjection and implementation of Bolshevization and Stalinization first, in Moscow, and second, in domestic alignments and the national sections (the communist parties); and finally, as Brigitte Studer writes, the Comintern "was in fact an organization in continuous transformation, both structural and political."<sup>5</sup> By taking into account a chronological linear stretch of the Comintern's framing of imperialism, dating from the publication of Lenin's political pamphlet on imperialism to the declaration of "The Anti-Imperialist People's Front" by Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian communist and Comintern General Secretary between 1934 and 1943, at the Seventh (and last) International Comintern Congress in Moscow 1935, imperialism was first of all, conceptualized from an ideological perspective, and then, it assumed and added ideological value which that tried to encapsulate and formulate the unique position of international communism as a counter-narrative of "a better world."

The aim of this article is to trace the historical trajectory of how the Comintern debated, conceptualized, and framed imperialism as a political and organizational agenda. What this implies, therefore, is not to focus exclusively on the official and sanctioned policy of the Comintern on imperialism, but rather, to discuss and establish an overview on the internal deliberations at an individual and organizational level at Comintern headquarters in Moscow. Further, to disclose how the "world party" adopted its own theoretical interpretation of imperialism as a societal and structural phenomenon in the aftermath of the Great War (1914–18), and during the interwar years. By departing in the establishment of the Comintern in 1919, and the consolidative aftermath of 1921, this shows us the establishment of a repetitive foundation of the concept, and how it was further developed by the Comintern between 1926 and 1939. The main reason for why is twofold. First, establishment and work of various sympathizing organizations and associations in support of the colonial liberation struggle, enterprises supervised at Comintern headquarters in Moscow, but instrumentally developed outside of the Soviet Union, primarily in Europe and the U.S., for example, the "First Congress against Colonialism and Imperialism" in Brussels February 10–14, 1927 and the establishment of the *League against Imperialism and for National Independence* (LAI, 1927–37) as an international anti-imperialist organization; or the introduction of "writing class, thinking race" with the official formation of the radical anti-imperial association the *International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers* (ITUCNW, 1930–36) in Hamburg in July 1930. The later was established on initiative of the Profintern, the Red International of Labor Unions (RILU, 1921–37), and aimed explicitly at positing the class struggle as the most central question of the Black liberation movement visa-a-vi the Pan-Africanist emphasis on race of W. E. B. Du Bois' *National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples* (NAACP). In its initial phase, the ITUCNW was a political project of the Trinidadian born George Padmore, a communist and future visionary of the Pan-African agenda, and trade unionist and communist James W. Ford from the U.S.<sup>6</sup> Second, the Comintern's use of imperialism adjusted itself to the policy and continual ideological shifts emanating from the

Bolshevik leadership in Moscow. The latter had a perpetual effect on the Comintern as an international organization between the wars. Finally, it all boils down to the central question: what was the attitude of the Communist International toward imperialism? The narrative of the Comintern's perception of imperialism and anti-imperialism is located in the ambiguous and hopeful but eerie setting of the interwar period; however, the 1920s must be seen here as a postwar period rather than as prelude to the coming global crisis of the 1930s, ending with the ensuing state of war in 1939.<sup>7</sup> In all of this relied the ideological foundation of the Comintern partly upon the idea of positioning itself against the global system of imperialism, in which the advocacy of anti-imperialism became pivotal either in official policy making disseminated in communist publications; or through the establishment of sympathizing committees, associations or organizations that evoked the issue of oppression and social injustice, where, for example, the *League against Imperialism and for National Independence* resonated for a short period as one of the more prolific undertakings of the Comintern to broadcast a message of resistance against colonialism and imperialism.<sup>8</sup>

This involves empirical challenges, nonetheless. Just by checking references connected explicitly to "imperialism" in the files of the Comintern Archive in Moscow concerns first, to primarily sort out and establish coherent patterns, and second, in categorizing the content of the internal discussions on imperialism at Comintern headquarters. Above all, the Comintern was a political, social, and cultural phenomenon of the twentieth century, and to generally understand the history of this institution, one should perceive it as an international organization, established at its inaugurating congress in Moscow on March 2–4, 1919, and activated through Lenin's political vision of uniting the international communist movement. Second, Lenin's pretext was of getting the Comintern to assume the role of as the true heir of Karl Marx's *International Workingmen's Association* (IWA; the First International, 1864–76), and thereby posit itself both as an opponent to the defunct socialist Second International after the Great War, and to offer a counter-narrative (Bolshevism and communism) to disillusioned anti-colonial activists in juxtaposition to the liberal internationalism which the victorious powers advocated at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919, in conjunction with the establishment of the League of Nations.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the Comintern was genuinely based on organizational principles,<sup>10</sup> a structure shaped along Lenin's idea of "democratic centralism" as it was introduced in the "Twenty-One Conditions," and adopted at the Second International Comintern Congress in Moscow 1920. "Democratic centralism" colluded that "[A]ll parties belonging to the Communist International should be formed on the basis of the principle of democratic centralism," demanding of the parties to be "organized in a sufficiently thorough way, [and] when it possesses an iron discipline," having the members abide and endow the "center with complete power, authority and ample rights." In practice, and as it was played out in the 1920–30s, this resulted at least unofficially in the complete obedience of the national sections (the national communist parties) toward the center in Moscow: Comintern

headquarters.<sup>11</sup> Based on this organizational premise from the Comintern's perspective, it can be suggested that imperialism was conceptualized and portrayed as a global structural and oppressive system that permeated entire societies, ranging from cultural values to political ideas. However, to disseminate this worldview, the Comintern depended on the full and total obedience from the sections, the national communist parties, and in a second step, the mass and sympathizing organizations.

It cannot be refuted that the Comintern's use and theoretical understanding of imperialism was genuinely based on Lenin's political pamphlet *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. According to Lenin, the purpose of the pamphlet partly aimed at addressing "the fundamental economic . . . essence of imperialism," and partly declare that the Great War signified "the period of imperialism," which invariably signified how the world faced "the eve of the socialist revolution." Based in the dialectical work of Karl Marx, however, the pamphlet had been inspired and designed explicitly on the writings of the Austrian Marxist Rudolf Hilferding and John A. Hobson's *Imperialism: A Study* (1902), something Lenin admitted, but at the same time, he observed that the form of imperialism, which had emerged in the beginning of the twentieth century and leading up to "the imperialistic war," confirmed the "monopoly stage of capitalism." The conclusion was further supported in Nikolai Bukharin's *Imperialism and World Economy* (1918), which further explicated the significance of capital investment in competition with trade and its relation to imperialism. Lenin stated that 1914–18 had been an "imperialistic war," which, according to one contemporary survey of the Comintern and published by the German and former communist Franz Borkenau in 1938, had been carried out solely for the reason of redistributing the power and geography of imperialist powers as colonial empires.<sup>12</sup> Yet, what did Lenin's definition of imperialism convey to the global community in the aftermath of the Great War, and how was it portrayed by the Comintern in 1919?

### **The Establishment of the Comintern's Official Line on Imperialism, 1919–21**

The manifesto of the Comintern at the inaugurating congress in Moscow called out to all victims of "imperialism." Written by Leon Trotsky, the manifesto's principal argument accused the Versailles Peace Conference and League of Nations of acting as protectors of the oppressive imperialism administered by the victorious powers (Great Britain, France, U.S., and to some degree, Italy) of the war. Radicalism and militancy fueled the aim of the manifesto, particularly for the reason of positioning the Comintern as an international organization, and of furthering the regime and rule of the Bolsheviks' in Soviet Russia. Hence, the Comintern took stride in advocating a swift overthrow of social and political structures by emphasizing the need of gathering international support for "the struggle against imperialistic barbarism . . . round the banner of the Third International."<sup>13</sup> Apparently, the leadership of the Comintern in Moscow expected to

function as a new voice on the international political arena, and at the same time, take every opportunity at hand to refute the reconstruction of the world under the guise of the League of Nations.

In 1920, the rhetoric's and search for a viable understanding of imperialism and how it should be advocated by and through the Comintern, not only changed, it also manifested itself during the crucial debate on the national and colonial question between Lenin and Roy at the Second International Comintern Congress in Moscow. While the former expected of communists in the colonies to forge active collaborations with bourgeois democratic movements due to the apparent weakness of the communist movement, Roy feverishly disagreed with Lenin and opposed the idea of getting the Indian nationalist revolutionary movement to establish relations with the Indian National Congress, which he rebuked as "a debating society." Considering Roy's background as a Bengali revolutionary nationalist, and after having travelled the world in the 1910s, experiencing crucial moments of political learning in Mexico, the U.S., and before travelling to Moscow in 1920, lived in Berlin for a short period where his view of the colonial freedom struggle against imperialism collided extremely with Lenin's perception of the same struggle. Roy wrote a letter to the Dutch communist Sebald Justius Rutgers, authored prior to him leaving Berlin for Moscow in 1920, where he outlined how he would introduce his political vision at the Second International Comintern Congress in Moscow. For Roy, the congress was an opportunity to deliver "criticism of the Nationalist Movement" as nothing but "a bourgeois political affair," however, at the same time, Roy feared that there existed an "indifference of the masses" toward imperialism in the colonies, and, therefore, should the anti-imperialist movement "take its stand on the field of class struggle by the side of the world proletariat." At the congress, however, Lenin pointed out to Roy that there existed no functional communist party in India, and consequently, the idea was abstract and unrealistic from a theoretical point of view. In the end, the debate exposed Roy's antagonism and Lenin's conception of the colonial struggle that derived a compromise between the two of them.<sup>14</sup>

In comparison to the celebratory ambiance of the first congress in 1919, at the second congress emerged tendencies and statements about imperialism that permeated throughout the history of the Comintern. By this I mean that imperialism no longer stood by itself as a derogatory description of the world outside of Soviet Russia, it was now linked to a range of descriptive terms that aimed at fully explicating the Comintern's understanding of imperialism, and even more, to posit an understanding of the world as a threat against the future development of Soviet Russia. Aside from Roy and Lenin's debate, what does Lenin's "report of the commission on the national and colonial question," and the final theses on the topic convey to us about the Comintern's understanding of imperialism? First, the report colluded that regardless of the Great War and its end, the world still existed "in this age of imperialism" and it was, therefore, necessary to "proceed from concrete realities, not from abstract postulates," Lenin stated. The differentiated characteristics of imperialism was explicitly important to

distinguish following Lenin's argumentation on the national and colonial question. Concisely, it dealt with the nature of oppression and oppressed nations, and how the Comintern should adapt itself to meet this challenge, or as Lenin declared, the challenge dwelt on covering the entire scope of global imperialism rather than to focus only on India and "other big Asian countries."<sup>15</sup> Second, the "Theses on the National and Colonial Question" introduced the Comintern's *lingua franca* on imperialism. By taking its departure in "the imperialist war" of 1914, and the fallacy of the League of Nations in determining a righteous peace in accordance with the principle of self-determination, the theses' distinct antagonism aimed at showing how "the great imperialist powers" would prolong the "centuries-old enslavement of the colonial and weak peoples." The Comintern's position on imperialism and anti-imperialism would, as a consequence of the above, make the distinction between, for example, "capitalistic imperialism;" "England, the stronghold of imperialism;" "European imperialism;" "foreign imperialism;" or the "overthrow of imperialism." Finally, the "Theses..." demanded of the "world party" and the national sections to ferment a stricter and militant attitude vis-a-vis the socialist movement, that is, the Second International and its historical failure during the Great War of not protesting against the war. In the end, the Comintern concerned itself with how to advance the prospect of realizing the "relation of the Comintern with the revolutionary movement in the colonies,"<sup>16</sup> a dictum that outlined the future trajectory for the "world party," that is, the work of establishing functional local, transnational and global relations, connections, and networks. Hence, a major part of this relied on getting the Comintern to introduce various concepts on how to approach and understand the different characteristics of imperialism. In a longer perspective, the "Theses..." earned their historical impact via two distinctive issues: first, how the colonial question was stipulated in the "Twenty-One Conditions," and second, the central role of "imperialism" at the "First Congress of the Peoples of the East" in Baku, Azerbaijan, on September 1–7, 1920. The "Twenty-One Conditions" had been approved and adopted at the Second International Comintern congress in 1920, and according to article eight, it was outlined that "every party desirous of belonging to the Third International [Comintern] should be bound to denounce without any reserve all the methods of "its own" imperialists in the colonies," and "demand the expulsion of its own Imperialists from such colonies."<sup>17</sup>

Thus, as the congress had delineated the theoretical frameworks of imperialism, article eight in the conditions specified the practical implications of the "Theses..." Immediately after the congress convened the Baku congress, which, according to Solmaz Rustamova-Tohidi's concise study, has to be seen as "one of the Comintern's most important measures in the field of its oriental policy." Further, the Baku congress coincided in the context of the failed revolutionary attempts and general societal unrest in Europe (Hungary and Germany in 1919) while Soviet Russia was combating the societal tremors of the Civil War and War Communism,<sup>18</sup> thereby, the event coalesced the need and aspirations of the Bolshevik regime of gaining acceptance outside of Soviet Russia's borders.

Central aspects of the Baku congress tried to galvanize some form of platform for the Comintern's use of imperialism as a political framework, and even more, it allowed for delegates from a wide variety of national backgrounds to meet and discuss issues explicitly connected to colonialism and imperialism. However, in general terms, the event served primarily as a reason for the Comintern "to win them [the Far Eastern delegates] fully to communism" under the guise of uniting workers and peasants in the colonial countries with the European radicalized proletariat against "Western imperialism."<sup>19</sup> Hence, while the events connected to 1919–20 specified and confirmed the Comintern's position on imperialism, at least in theory, what is of interest here is to disclose an overview of the internal discussions on imperialism as a political framework within the Comintern, and how these discussions invariably related to events that unfolded in the beginning of the Comintern as an international organization and in the shape of a trying to function as a "world party."

The formative period of the Comintern in 1919–20 was turbulent, however, the period between 1921 and 1935 witnessed how the "world party" was succumbed to frequent policy shifts, which, in a shorter and longer perspective left lasting marks on the organization in terms of sustainability and ideological credibility. As with other of the Comintern's agendas and campaigns against various social and political issues, an understanding of this cannot be fully adjusted if we do not take into consideration the periodization of the Comintern's fluctuating policy changes during its existence. The periodization debate of the Comintern includes distinguishing the transformation of the organization from the revolutionary period (1919–23) to the "united front" policy (1923–28); the Third Period, or as it is more known as, "class against class" (1928–34); and the "Popular Front" against fascism and war (1935–39).<sup>20</sup> In this chronological framework emerged and manifested Bolshevization and Stalinization itself as underlying guiding principles in the structural and ideological work of the Comintern. Notwithstanding this development of international communism as a movement, it is in this context a closer reading of imperialism and its active counterpart, anti-imperialism, is possible to do. Hence, periodization represents here a model of agency and political attribution, as Norman LaPorte, Kevin Morgan, and Matthew Worley suggests,<sup>21</sup> however, it can be added that periodization brings coherence to a discursive interpretation of the Comintern's conflated relation to imperialism and anti-imperialism between the wars.

In 1921, Soviet Russia was marked by the societal consequences of War Communism (1918–20), standing on the edge of a real crisis that pervaded the entire Russian society from top to bottom. To solve the serious situation, Lenin introduced the state sanctioned program of the New Economic Policy (NEP) to revive economic stability and refurbish markets across the country, but also, restore credibility for the Bolshevik regime in Moscow. Consequently, for the Comintern, the Third International Congress in 1921 acknowledged in the context of economic instability and social crisis how the direction of world communism's "revolutionary mission" had radically changed. Instead, and trying to predict the future, the Comintern admitted that it was not known whether the

“revolutionary movement” would advance “more rapidly or slow down” for the moment being. The Comintern’s view on imperialism in 1921 emphasized that global imperial structures had confirmed “new frontiers, new tariffs, and new armies.”<sup>22</sup> By relating to a broader understanding of imperialism, the Comintern focused its political agenda on two specific issues: first, the continued agitation against the imperialist character of different imperial nations (e.g., the British, French, or Japanese), and second, the creation of an administrative structure capable of broadcasting an anti-imperialist agenda in committees, associations, and organizations, and finally, establish contact with distinguished characters known of supporting the left-wing political and cultural movement. Hence, the framework of these two issues are, above all, significant in explaining why and how the Comintern developed its relation to imperialism between the wars. From 1921 to the beginning of 1925, a brief period where the Comintern relied extensively on publishing resolutions or trying to organize clandestine activities, for example, by protesting against French imperialism in Syria as “a long and sad history,” or the failed attempt of Roy in establishing the “International Colonial Bureau” in Paris 1924,<sup>23</sup> the Comintern’s message of imperialism and anti-imperialism barely found any resonance outside of the international communist movement. However, the launching of protest campaigns in Western Europe throughout 1925, organized by the proletarian communist mass organization the Workers’ International Relief (WIR, 1921–35) and its center in Berlin, highlighted and succeeded in gaining attention among socialist, pacifist and radical circles in Germany and France about colonial and imperialist oppression in China and Syria. For the Comintern at this stage, it had been “the struggle against imperialism” and the interventions of “imperialist governments” that shaped the internal discussions at Comintern headquarters, however, to gain foothold for a viable imperialist agenda, it remained a question of establishing intermediaries capable of framing and broadcasting the “world party’s” distinct antagonism vis-a-vis imperialism.<sup>24</sup>

### **Framing Imperialism, 1926–35**

The Comintern addressed imperialism in the form of “questions,” “situations,” “problems,” “tactical orientations,” or plausible “revolutions” located in different places and contexts. In March 1926, at the session of the Sixth Plenum of the ECCI in Moscow, it was declared that the crucial challenge facing international communism was to avoid being part of or involved in a “new imperialist war.” Only through a proletarian revolution could this be avoided, and, therefore, international communism should continue defending the Soviet Union by addressing plausible “predatory wars” of the imperialist nations. The Sixth ECCI plenum is significant from the point of view that it witnessed the organizational consolidation on the question of imperialism and anti-imperialism. Accordingly, the Comintern had defined the enemies of imperialism, that is, the League of Nations and the imperial nations of the U.S., Great Britain and France, however, the plenum signified how the moment had arrived

in organizing a united front against colonialism and imperialism, and for it to be shaped along concept of the communist "Solar System,"<sup>25</sup> having sympathizing organizations and committees against "imperialist oppression of Eastern peoples" constitute one of several foci of international communism.<sup>26</sup> While the organizational results of the Sixth ECCI plenum are connected to first, the origins of the LAI and its forerunner, the League against Colonial Oppression (LACO; established in Berlin on February 10, 1926), and second, it represents a point of reference for what later resulted in the Brussels Congress in 1927, and finally, it is from this point the Comintern's internal debate on imperialism gains pace.

After the establishment of the LACO and the Sixth ECCI Plenum, the Comintern examined the prospects of the colonial work and the chances of organizing an international congress against colonialism and imperialism. This included convincing national communist parties to add the colonial question on the agenda, for example, the ECCI instructed the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Holland to discuss colonialism and imperialism at its coming congress in 1926.<sup>27</sup> While much focused on organizational questions, however, Roy had assumed a leading position in Moscow to coordinate the preparations for an international congress against colonialism and imperialism, and he stated that it was desirable to hold the congress for the purpose of mobilizing the "struggles of the oppressed colonial peoples" and connecting the European labor movement to support the struggle.<sup>28</sup>

It was indeed desirable to hold the congress from the Comintern's point of view, something that is evident in a letter from Roy to the German communist Willi Münzenberg (1889–1940), the principal organizer of the congress and general secretary of the WIR. According to Roy, Münzenberg had to understand that it was "expected that agents of imperialism" would try to penetrate the LACO, and the future trajectory of the organization after its establishment would be "to act as a neutral intermediary between the Communist International and nationalist movements in the colonies."<sup>29</sup> Aside from organizational tension and fear of infiltration, the congress and future establishment of the LAI was crucial as it represented an opportunity to "report on imperialist oppression in the colonies," the Comintern stated.<sup>30</sup> It needs to be established here that a majority of the publications connected to the Brussels Congress and issued by the LACO were, in fact, conceived and written at Comintern headquarters in Moscow before being sent to Berlin. The official message of imperialism and anti-imperialism, as disseminated through the LACO, expose in hindsight the Comintern's political ambitions. For example, this is evident in the final version of the invitation to the Brussels Congress on December 15, 1926, which declared that the event would produce "a full inquiry into the working-conditions in the colonial lands" and initiate "an international protest movement against the cruelties and oppression . . . committed [by] the military forces of the imperialist powers."<sup>31</sup>

On February 10, 1927, the Brussels Congress convened and was attended by 174 delegates representing 134 organizations, associations, committees, and individually accredited delegates. It was, as Vijay Prashad eloquently describes it

in *The Darker Nations*, “an experiment in intra-planetary solidarity.”<sup>32</sup> As the event turned into a euphoric success for the organizers, Münzenberg, the WIR, LACO, and acting in the background, the Comintern, it offered fierce criticism against imperialism. According to the congress “Manifesto to every oppressed people and classes,” which had been prepared in advance in Berlin prior to the event, the LAI declared in line with Lenin’s observation from 1916 that “Imperialism is not an accidental phenomena . . . it is the logical sequence of a historical development,” concluding that “the working class” of imperialist nations had to begin questioning the “unlimited exploitation of colonial territories.”<sup>33</sup>

In the aftermath of the Brussels Congress, one of the observers and delegate of the ECCI delegation at the congress, the Japanese communist Sen Katayama, concluded that the event had brought unity among the delegates in the “fight against Imperialism.”<sup>34</sup> Katayama developed this framework further in the unpublished manuscript “Brussels Congress of Oppressed Peoples,” stating that “all the color and shade of peoples were represented” in Brussels, and he delineated the characteristics of oppressive French imperialism in Syria and the bombardment of Damascus; the exploitation of “African natives . . . by the imperialist invaders;” and global imperialism “was trying to keep its foothold in the oppressed nations.”<sup>35</sup> Yet this partly mirrors the short-term effect of the Brussels Congress and how the LAI infused new energy on the discussion about anti-imperialism at Comintern headquarters in Moscow.

Moving beyond the LAI and its impact on the Comintern’s framing of imperialism, the internal discussion on imperialism assumed different trajectories from 1927 to 1935. By returning to Katayama, who should be perceived as one of the symbolic figureheads of the Japanese communist movement between the wars, for him imperialism was a clear-cut case. In another of his unpublished manuscripts, intended perhaps for a speech or an article, he observed how “Imperialism is busy with [the] dirty work of suppressing the communist movement everywhere.” This needs to be, however, clarified. Katayama wrote the manuscript in the context of the Chinese nationalist Kuomintang’s violent suppression of the Chinese communist movement in Shanghai in April, pinpointing, for example, the leader of the Kuomintang Chiang Kai-shek as “a puppet of imperialism.”<sup>36</sup> Regardless of Katayama’s hostility toward the Kuomintang and its betrayal of the communist movement in China, his statement broadly encapsulated an understanding of “imperialism” as a concept that plausibly could forge the Comintern’s message of internationalism on a global scale. This would continue throughout 1927–28, for example, the “Anti-Imperialist Commission,” which had been established at Comintern headquarters in June to adjust the purpose and aim of the LAI’s political agenda, argued that LAI’s “the central task” was to mobilize “every proletarian force, as well as other layers and groups of people” in gathering “effective support for the Chinese revolution and in the struggle against the war threat” on the Soviet Union.<sup>37</sup> Comintern headquarters in Moscow likewise assessed other issues connected to the anti-imperialist movement. At a meeting of the Political Secretariat of the ECCI in Moscow on

August 6, 1927, Nikolai Bukharin described how “the Indian question” would have a decisive role in deciding the future direction of global imperialist politics. Yet for the Comintern, Bukharin observed, it was essential to thoroughly study the “Chinese problem” and find suitable “tactical orientations” in order to avoid similar destructive patterns as the ones that had emerged in China with the Kuo-mintang putsch in April 1927.<sup>38</sup>

Notwithstanding the impact of the LAI’s establishment, the momentum of the international organization provided the Comintern with a chance of enhancing the anti-imperialist propaganda. On December 9–11, 1927, the LAI General Council held its first meeting (and only) in Brussels. At one of the sessions, Münzenberg admitted that the LAI’s primary challenge resided in moving the anti-imperialist movement “from demonstration to organization,” and according to a draft resolution on the future tasks of the LAI, this involved advancing the struggle against American imperialism on the American continent; of forging links to the Arab countries; and of reinforcing support to the national revolutions in India and China.<sup>39</sup> Yet, the “Anti-Imperialist Commission” in Moscow advocated an even more radical direction. The commission urged the LAI to bring the “toiling masses in the imperialist countries in the struggle against imperialism,” and of getting the anti-imperialist movement to distinguish between friend and foe, meaning, expose the social democratic conception of the colonial question as nothing more as being the “direct support of imperialism.”<sup>40</sup> What the rhetoric of the commission disclosed in 1927, was nonetheless the introductory stages of what was about to emerge in the Comintern, namely, the radical shift from the “United Front” strategy to the “Third Period” at the Sixth International Comintern congress in Moscow on July 17–September 1 1928.

The “Third Period” of the Comintern is historically known as the doctrine of “class against class,” an ideological shift of direction that implied the inherent strength of communism to act as an independent international political actor. Hence, this suggested breaking with the Comintern’s former ties to political or social actors outside of the communist movement, or rebuking former antagonists in even harsher terms. Particularly were representatives of social democratic and nationalist movements castigated as “social fascists” or “agents of imperialism,” and while doing so, the Comintern connected these categories to the issue of the class struggle versus race, or for that matter, social democracy as a crude form of fascism (social fascism).<sup>41</sup>

The Sixth Comintern congress and the issue of imperialism permeated the agenda, which, according to Bukharin’s report on the international situation, charted how the “third period” witnessed a contradiction between “the productive forces and the contraction of markets.” All of this would lead to “a fresh era of imperialist wars among the imperialist States” and “wars of the imperialist States against the USSR,” Bukharin stated, however, all hopes were set on the emergence of national liberation wars against imperialism. In conclusion, the congress verified the correctness of Lenin’s definition on imperialism as of being intimately connected to “the productive forces of world capitalism.”<sup>42</sup>

While the militancy of the Comintern's anti-imperialist agenda drifted toward being more conflated with the war threat against the Soviet Union, it was nevertheless the "Theses on the Revolutionary Movement in Colonial and Semi-Colonial Countries" that spurred a deeper discussion on the characteristics of imperialism and the anti-imperialist movement. First, the "Theses. . ." of 1928 was a continual building of Lenin's colonial theses from 1920, however, for the responsible author of the theses in 1928, Otto W. Kuusinen, the process of writing the material had not been easy. Relying extensively on Stalin's advice and consent, Kuusinen sent the drafts of the theses to him on July 12, only to receive them back with corrections on August 21. According to Stalin, the theses had to differentiate between "typical colonies" (India, Indonesia), semi-colonies (China, Egypt), and dependent states (Mexico and Persia), and most crucially, include a clear class perspective.<sup>43</sup> A closer reading of Kuusinen's "Theses. . ." disclose a tendency of the Comintern vis-a-vis imperialism, and which would remain throughout the 1930s. By positing assorted forms of imperialism, for example, British imperialism and the collapse of the national revolutionary movement in India, Kuusinen explicated how imperialism contributed in increasing the economic and military expansion of structural oppression across the world. Hence, what imperialism had succeeded in achieving was the active suppression of liberation movements in the colonies as well as in imperial centers in Europe and the U.S. Therefore, Kuusinen implied that the "Theses. . ." confirmed how the world faced a "great epoch-making struggle between the capitalist and socialist systems," having the Soviet Union represent a bulwark against imperialism but facing a pending threat of war on a global scale.<sup>44</sup>

However, what the "Theses. . ." accomplished to do in the end was in fractionalizing the international communist movement, and by this, I mean that the message was like a fork in the road for on the one hand, the sympathizing organizations connected to the Comintern (LAI, e.g.) who depended on support coming from outside of the communist movement, and on the other hand, the national communist parties that had to adapt and posit themselves to a new anti-imperialist agenda. The radical message of the Sixth Comintern congress and ensuing Stalinization of the "world party" explicitly resulted in a qualitative change of the Comintern's perception of imperialism and the anti-imperialist movement, that is, focus was from now on how to connect imperialism with the emergence of fascism and the war threat.

Symptomatic of the development taking place after the Sixth Comintern congress was the political preparations for the "Second International Congress against Colonialism and Imperialism," which convened in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, July 21–27, 1929, a process meticulously carried out from and at Comintern headquarters in Moscow. Yet it had been a gradual process that began in the beginning of 1929, and which over time abundantly indicated the radical turn to the left of the anti-imperialist movement. In January 1929, the LAI declared in a resolution on the trade unions how imperialism had brought about "the loss of all political and economic rights" in the colonies, a structural system maintained and enforced by "the army, the fleet, and the police, with

open and brutal violence.”<sup>45</sup> And in February, the Comintern outlined the primary guiding principle for the LAI’s second international congress: it should emphasize “the struggle against imperialism and war.”<sup>46</sup> While the congress indicated an ensuing crisis of the LAI, caused essentially by the fractional behavior and callous allegations from communist delegates, who accused non-communist delegates of being “agents of imperialism” or nationalist reformists rather than national revolutionaries,<sup>47</sup> this signified the increasingly militant disposition of the Comintern’s anti-imperialist agenda in the 1930s. In the aftermath of the Frankfurt Congress this confirmed itself within the Comintern hierarchy. Alexander Bittelman, a communist from the U.S. and functionary connected to the Anglo-American Secretariat at Comintern headquarters in Moscow 1929, had for a shorter period been connected to the anti-imperialist work, being in charge of coordinating the preparations for LAI congress in Frankfurt am Main. In his report on the event, Bittelman conceded that it was “essential to strive to free the League” from these “agents of imperialism” and “national reformist elements.”<sup>48</sup> Numerous observations of a similar character emerged around this point, for example, the British communist Tom Mann claimed that it was valuable to expose the nature of “imperialist rule,” a statement written in the context of the Meerut trial in India and the Comintern’s campaign to support the defendants (the campaign was primarily directed from London by the LAI’s British section, ending in 1933).<sup>49</sup> Further, the conception of imperialism was by now chiefly shaped along the Comintern’s implementation of class against class, for example, the Communist Party of Great Britain was instructed to constantly link up “the struggles of the British proletariat and the battles of the oppressed colonial peoples with the fights of the workers in the Dominions.” By doing so, all hope was set on getting the communist movement to deliver “a decisive blow to social-imperialism.”<sup>50</sup>

It was all about framing imperialism as an issue strong enough to create factions with other political groups. On March 1, 1930, the Comintern concluded that it was essential for the LAI and the anti-imperialist movement to break with the “block of ‘leftist’ reformists,”<sup>51</sup> and later in September, the Czechoslovakian communist and LAI secretary Bohûmil Smeral stated:

With the development of the world revolution in the next few years, the liberation struggles of the colonial and dependent countries will play an important role [...]. In almost all colonies and dependent countries, the social structure of the population is a very important part of the active revolutionary movement [...]. In this situation, the work, the means, and the Comintern apparatus should devote more energy to the colonies and the dependent countries than before.<sup>52</sup>

Smeral’s observation had been grounded in the context of the LAI’s crisis after the Frankfurt Congress, however, it captured the wider framework of the Comintern’s use and understanding of imperialism and anti-imperialism, meaning, the two represented a means on how to interpret and radically alter the world along the Comintern’s doctrine of class against class. Leading authorities

at Comintern headquarters had listened to and included Smeral's advice in a discussion on imperialism on September 16, 1930, concluding that imperialism could only disappear if "complete independence" for every colony and dependent country was granted. But this could only come true via the continued struggle against militarization; confiscation of large estate owners and their fiscal possessions and the equal distribution of land to peasants; confiscation of foreign ownership; the struggle of revolutionary workers and peasants' organizations.<sup>53</sup>

The examples and occasions where imperialism and anti-imperialism were discussed at Comintern headquarters are numerous, and as suggested above, imperialism had an interconnected relation to the campaigns against fascism and the war threat in the first years of the 1930s. On June 3, 1932, the Comintern demanded of "all sections" to carry out a campaign in celebration of the "Fifth Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution" which, more than ever, should emphasize "the struggle against imperialist war." Accordingly, the campaign should highlight the "preparations for intervention and in defense of the USSR which has entered the period of socialism and is commencing in the second Five-Year Plan to construct classless socialist society."<sup>54</sup> In France, for example, the LAI section regularly organized protest meetings together with anti-war and anti-fascist movements, campaigns which in a second step had a close connection to the Amsterdam Anti-War Congress on August 27-29, 1932. The anti-war congress in Amsterdam had been a joint adventure, organized first through Münzenberg's networks in Europe, and then supervised by the Comintern's West European Bureau in Berlin, while having the French authors Henri Barbusse and Romain Rolland act the role as official initiators of the congress.<sup>55</sup> According to Sen Katayama, who attended the congress as representative of the Japanese anti-war movement, the event had "brought out most clearly the impending danger of new imperialist war in all its dreadful reality," and the reason for the congress' success was that it had taken place at the right moment.<sup>56</sup>

From 1931 to 1935, however, the Comintern had been forced to take into consideration the growth of several political developments which seriously put the relations of the global community at test: the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931; the Nazi regime's ascendancy to power in Germany and literal end of the Weimar republic, German communism and socialism in 1933; and finally, the emergence of a military crisis after years of accumulated political tension between Ethiopia and Italy, which emanated in the Abyssinian crisis in 1935. It was nearly as if the Comintern's prediction in 1929 of waging a "war against imperialist war" was about to come true.<sup>57</sup>

### **The Turning Point of Imperialism (Again): Abyssinia and "The Anti-Imperialist People's Front" 1935-39**

The Abyssinian crisis suggested a new level of anti-imperialist activism for the Comintern. With the Italian aggression at the border clash at Walwal in the Ogaden in early December 1934, and the ensuing Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, ending in May 1936 with the Italian's assuming control, the Abyssinian

crisis and deeds committed by Mussolini's fascist regime confirmed the Comintern's slogan of "war against imperialist war," but also, the fallacy of the League of Nations to protect and offer a practical solution to the dilemma. Moreover, the crisis and Italian aggression was decisive in the mobilization of political campaigns and solidarity movements throughout the African Atlantic.<sup>58</sup> At the LAI's International Secretariat in London (which had been transferred first, from Berlin to Paris in 1933, and same year, from Paris to London), it was decided to portray the ongoing conflict as one originating in the "imperialist interests" in Africa, and it, therefore, required an organized response in the shape of holding public protest meetings, and the publication of articles and resolutions.<sup>59</sup> Declarations of the LAI in London stated that it was only the "great national and international organizations which are defending peace" that could assist in framing "human consciousness in condemnation of colonial conquest."<sup>60</sup> In Moscow, a different method was advocated as the Comintern instructed the communist parties to disseminate propaganda against this "colonial imperialist war of plunder." One way of doing so was the idea of sending a delegation of enquiry to Abyssinia, organized by the *World Committee Against War and Fascism*, which had Paris as its operative center.<sup>61</sup>

However, the magnitude and political scope of the Comintern's Seventh (and last) International Congress in Moscow on July 25–August 2, 1935, decisively assisted in framing the international communist movement's perception and use of imperialism as a political concept at this point. With the rise of the "Popular Front" policy in response to the growth of Italian fascism and Nazism in Germany, but also, across Europe in general, this decreased interest in anti-imperialism in favor of the anti-fascist rhetoric's of the Comintern. Further, and as the general secretary of the Comintern, Georgi Dimitrov, declared in his closing statement on the united front and the struggle against fascism and war at the congress, it had changed the international situation and altered the preconditions and functions of the anti-imperialist movement. Thus, to reinforce the anti-imperialist movement it required the establishment of first, "The Anti-Imperialist People's Front," and for it to be related explicitly to the struggle against fascism and war. The later inferred a focus on exposing different imperialist developments across the world, and putting emphasis on the work of "national-liberation movement against growing imperialist exploitation, against cruel enslavement, [and] for the driving out of the imperialists."<sup>62</sup> From a longer perspective, and if we return to other anti-imperialist incentives, Dimitrov's statement resembled a return to the Comintern's political objectives with anti-imperialism at the inaugurating congress of the LAI in Brussels in 1927. However, the crucial difference was the radicalized trajectory of anti-imperialism as it had taken between the Brussels Congress and the Comintern congress in 1935.

The Comintern nonetheless seemed to have full confidence in the inherent strength of developing "The Anti-Imperialist People's Front" as a strong movement, and most crucially, for it to be connected to the anti-war and anti-fascist movement. In a circular letter from the *World Committee Against War and*

*Fascism*, it was explained how the expansion of Japanese imperialism, the rearmament of Hitler's Germany, and Mussolini's violent conduct in Abyssinia required a swift response from a strong mass movement.<sup>63</sup> Part of this solution, if we analyze what the files in the Comintern Archive disclose, was the incentive of the Comintern in launching a "Scientific Research Institute of National Colonial Problems" in Moscow 1936, devoted to study the Marxist-Leninist conception of imperialism, assigned with task of composing historical surveys of national and colonial problems from the beginning of the 1900th century to the present day conditions of the 1930s.<sup>64</sup>

After 1936, the Comintern's use of imperialism became an elusive topic, meaning, it had been usurped and interlocked with the success of the anti-fascist movement and the Popular Front in Paris. In 1937, the LAI was dissolved in London and replaced with the *Colonial Information Bureau* under the auspice of transferring the struggle against imperialism to the trade unions and labor movements,<sup>65</sup> a fate that also had been subjected to other anti-imperialist associations, for example, the ITUCNW, which was dissolved quietly on the instructions of the Comintern in 1936. For the Comintern, imperiled to the repulsions of the Great Terror in 1937–38, and having to confront the ideological breaking-point of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact on August 23, 1939, imperialism thus explicitly represented an ideological position of the Soviet Union vis-a-vis the rest of the world.<sup>66</sup> Prior to the Nazi government declared war against the Soviet Union in 1941, the Comintern's position on imperialism remained intact. According to the "May Day Manifesto of the ECCI" in 1940, the Comintern accused British and Japanese imperialism of harboring national and social oppression.<sup>67</sup> The great irony of it all was that with the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943, and with the ending of the Second World War in 1945, the Soviet Union emerged as an empire in juxtaposition to capitalist society and the developing world in the postwar era. The patterns and attitudes of communism on imperialism, as it was embodied and positioned by the Comintern already in 1919, and in a broader perspective, the Bolshevik regime, were developed and subsisted throughout the entire existence of the Soviet Union until the collapse of communism in Russia 1991. The framing of imperialism seemed to have been all about positioning a communist world view where the "fatherland of socialist construction" (the Soviet Union), figuratively speaking, existed to counteract imperialism as an oppressive system. In all of this, the centrality and historical role of the Comintern had been to broadcast, foster, and develop the Marxist-Leninist concept of imperialism on a global scale.

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### Notes

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