

# One hundred years since the formation of the Communist International

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One hundred years ago this month, from March 2 to March 6, 1919, the founding congress of the Third, Communist International took place in Moscow. Although the journey was difficult due to the raging civil war and imperialist blockade, 51 delegates took part in the congress, 35 with full voting rights representing 17 organisations, and 16 with consultative votes representing a further 16 organisations. Over subsequent years, millions of revolutionary-minded workers around the world would join the communist parties of the Third International.

## The Collapse of the Second International

The founding of the Third International was the response to the collapse of the Second International at the beginning of World War I. On 4 August 1914, its most powerful and influential section, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD), voted for war credits in the Reichstag and thereby lent its support to German imperialist war aims. With the exception of the Russian and Serbian sections, all of the other sections followed the SPD's example and backed the imperialist bloodbath.

With their support for war credits, the Social Democratic leaders betrayed the most elementary principles of socialist internationalism. Just a few weeks earlier they had condemned the war and pledged in ceremonial speeches to mobilise the working class against it. Then they joined the imperialist camp, concluding a labour truce with their own bourgeoisies, suppressed the class struggle, and drove their members into the trenches, where they slaughtered each other.

A political betrayal on such an historical scale could not be explained by subjective motives. It had deep-going objective roots. The various internationals did not appear by accident, but their emergence, politics, and methods of work were closely bound up with specific stages of social development.

The First International, which emerged with the active participation of Marx and Engels in 1864, was of a preparatory character. It anticipated future developments and prepared them politically and theoretically. Following the suppression of the Paris Commune, the first heroic attempt by the working class to seize power, it was dissolved in the course of the 1870s.

The Second International was founded in 1889 and corresponded to a different epoch. Under conditions of a rapid economic expansion, powerful workers' organisations developed and consolidated themselves. Although they declared their support for internationalism, objective conditions imposed a national character on their political views and practical activities. Their praxis was focused on the struggle for democratic and social reform, and the organisational strengthening of parties and trade unions.

It was a period of gradual, organic development, which did not provide

the social democratic parties with an opportunity for a revolutionary struggle against the state power. Karl Kautsky's famous sentence, "The Socialist party is a revolutionary, but not a revolution-making party," which he formulated in *Die Neue Zeit* in 1893, undoubtedly reflected the relationship between the subjective and objective factors of the time.

The tension between revolutionary perspective and reformist practice created fertile ground for opportunist tendencies opposed to a revolutionary perspective. They found support among privileged party functionaries, trade union bureaucrats, and better-off sections of workers. As Lenin explained, the bourgeoisie, in a period of relatively peaceful expansion gave them "crumbs from the profits of national capital," which "tore them away from the misery, suffering, and revolutionary temper of the ruined masses."

This "workers' aristocracy" increasingly identified its interests, in peacetime and at war, with the economic and political successes of their "own" imperialism. At SPD congresses, they remained, together with their most prominent spokesperson Eduard Bernstein, in the minority. However, they were tolerated as a legitimate part of the SPD and won greater influence in the party apparatus and trade unions.

The outbreak of the First World War in the summer of 1914 marked the beginning of a new stage of capitalist development, the epoch of imperialism, an epoch of wars and revolutions. World politics dominated national politics; it became impossible to maintain a revolutionary orientation within the framework of the nation state. This was the reason for the collapse of the Second International. Opportunism, which confronted by the war advocated reformism and class collaboration, now showed its true colours, embraced chauvinism and pro-war enthusiasm, and captured all of the indecisive and half-hearted elements.

"The real, objective significance of the War is the breakdown of the present national economic centres, and the substitution of a world economy in its stead," wrote Trotsky in summing up the significance of the war several weeks after its outbreak. "The Socialist parties of the epoch now concluded were national parties. They had become ingrained in the national states with all the different branches of their organizations, with all their activities and with their psychology. In the face of the solemn declarations at their congresses they rose to the defence of the conservative state, when imperialism, grown big on the national soil, began to demolish the antiquated national barriers. And in their historic crash the national states have pulled down with them the national Socialist parties also."

## Tasks of the Third International

Lenin and Trotsky were therefore convinced that it was not a question of reviving the Second International following its collapse. The most urgent

political task was the construction of a Third International, whose tasks and methods would be fundamentally different from those of its predecessor.

*Firstly*, it was no longer possible to work in the same organisation as the opportunists. Although the Marxists inside the Second International combatted the opportunists for years, revisionism “was nevertheless regarded as a legitimate part” of the Social Democracy. Lenin stressed that this could not continue, writing, “Unity with the opportunists actually means today, subordinating the working class to “its” national bourgeoisie, alliance with it for the purpose of oppressing other nations and of fighting for great-power privileges; it means splitting the revolutionary proletariat in all countries.”

*Secondly*, the relationship between the objective and subjective factors had radically changed. While the Second International merely posed the question of the conquest of power theoretically, the socialist revolution was for the Third International a practical task, not a general goal for the distant future. Kautsky’s dictum that the Social Democrats were “not a revolution-making” party, and that “It is not part of our work to instigate a revolution or to prepare the way for it,” which had a certain justification in the 1890s, was now an obstacle to the revolution and an entirely false assessment.

The Third International stood for a different conception of revolutionary leadership. Its tasks consisted not merely in predicting the inevitability of revolution, but to prepare and lead it. This arose out of the character of the imperialist epoch, in which all of the economic prerequisites for the socialist revolution were ripe. The conflict between private property and socialised production, between world economy and the nation state produced sharp social tensions. But their inevitable explosion could only result in a socialist revolution if a revolutionary Marxist party consciously intervened.

“If the First International presaged the future course of development and indicated its paths; if the Second International gathered and organized millions of workers; then the Third International is the International of open mass action, the International of revolutionary realization, the International of the deed,” declared the manifesto of the Third International’s founding congress, which Trotsky authored.

And *thirdly*, the Third International was not a federation of national sections, but a world party pursuing a global strategy. This did not mean that conditions in every country were the same, that the revolution would take place everywhere at the same time, or that no specific tactics for a given country were necessary. It meant that a correct national policy could be developed only on the basis of a global analysis, that each section “must proceed directly from an analysis of the conditions and tendencies of world economy and of the world political system taken as a whole,” as noted by Trotsky, who wrote in 1928, “In the present epoch, to a much larger extent than in the past, the national orientation of the proletariat must and can flow only from a world orientation and not vice versa. Herein lies the basic and primary difference between communist internationalism and all varieties of national socialism.”

This accounts for the incredible political and theoretical richness of the Third International’s work in the first years of its existence. It was a school of international strategy concentrating on the problems and tasks of communist parties around the world. Through it, the working class could follow the theory and practice of the international workers’ movement as a whole, engage with its complex political problems, and learn from them. The resolutions and protocols of the first four congresses, which fill several volumes, provide an inexhaustible guide to revolutionary strategy and tactics.

## The 1917 October Revolution

The construction of the Third International was the most important conclusion drawn by Lenin from the betrayal of 1914. This was not an abstract, academic question. It determined the perspective and programme of the Bolshevik Party in the revolutionary year of 1917. Together with Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution, it formed the basis for the victory of the October Revolution.

Since the outbreak of the war, Lenin advocated a complete break from the opportunists, and called for the transformation of the war into a civil war, i.e. into a socialist revolution. But even at the first international anti-war conference, which met in the Swiss village of Zimmerwald in September 1915, he remained with this position in the minority. The majority of the anti-war socialists demanded peace without annexations, i.e. a return to the status quo prior to the war. But Lenin’s perspective was to receive dramatic confirmation just two years later.

The Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, who came to power in Russia in February 1917 following a revolutionary mass uprising against the Tsarist regime, refused to fulfil a single one of the masses’ revolutionary demands, proving thereby that there was no way out of the war on a capitalist basis. They continued the imperialist war, opposed land reform, and launched a ruthless crackdown against revolutionary workers. The working class moved leftwards and turned to the Bolsheviks. Under the leadership of Lenin and Trotsky, they seized power in October 1917, and established the first workers’ state in history.

Lenin and Trotsky firmly believed that workers’ power in economically backward Russia could only be consolidated over the long term if it served as the prelude to world socialist revolution. This perspective was realistic. The subsequent years were dominated by mass working-class struggles throughout Europe, and anticolonial struggles in China, India, and other countries. These movements failed to produce victorious revolutions solely due to the lack of experienced revolutionary leadership, or its inadequate connection to the masses.

In November 1918, the German revolution spread like wildfire throughout the entire country, forcing the Kaiser to abdicate and leading to the emergence of workers’ and soldiers’ councils everywhere. The Social Democrats came to power and suppressed the revolution by forming an alliance with the army’s high command and murdering the revolutionary leaders Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Soviet republics existed in Bavaria for several days, and in Hungary for several months, but they were both brutally put down by counterrevolutionary troops. Against this backdrop, the Communist International emerged rapidly as the centre of world revolution.

## Stalinist degeneration

The central role of the subjective factor in the imperialist epoch was also the chief problem that the Third International had to resolve. It had to bridge the gulf between the maturity of the political situation and the immaturity of the revolutionary leadership. This problem, which was the legacy of previous developments, could have been overcome with time. However, a process of political degeneration within the Russian Communist Party increasingly counteracted such efforts.

By the time the fourth congress of the Communist International met in November 1922, Lenin had already suffered his first stroke. Shortly thereafter, in March 1923, a further stroke prevented him from undertaking further political work. Trotsky, the leading theoretician of the world socialist revolution, came under pressure from a nationally oriented party and state bureaucracy under the leadership of Stalin.

In 1924, Stalin proclaimed the theory of “socialism in one country,” which claimed it was possible to construct socialism independently of the

world economy and within the national framework of the Soviet Union. It became the state doctrine of the Stalinist regime. Theoretically, this meant a return to the national socialism of the right wing of the Social Democrats, and politically the subordination of the Communist International to the national interests of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Trotsky and the Left Opposition waged a years-long struggle against this degeneration. In 1928, Trotsky, who had been expelled from the Communist International a year earlier, authored a devastating critique of its draft programme. He demonstrated that the theory of “socialism in one country” had horrendous implications for economic policy in the Soviet Union. The seizure of power by the proletariat “has not at all excluded the Soviet republic from the system of the international division of labour,” wrote Trotsky. He also stressed that “socialism in one country” was the cause of disastrous defeats for the international working class, culminating in the destruction of the Chinese Communist Party in 1927.

Trotsky and everyone else who defended the perspective of world socialist revolution were first excluded from the communist parties, then imprisoned, sent into exile, and finally murdered in the tens of thousands during the Great Terror of 1937-38. Trotsky was assassinated in August 1940 by an agent of the Stalinist secret police.

## The Fourth International

Until 1933, Trotsky and the International Left Opposition sought to correct the Communist International's policies. But after the German Communist Party, under the influence of Stalin, refused to form a united front with the Social Democrats against the Nazis and thereby paved the way for Hitler to take power without a fight, and after no section of the Communist International protested against this, Trotsky called for the building of the Fourth International.

The Fourth International based itself on the first four congresses of the Third International. During a period in which the world sank into barbarism, fascism, and war, the Fourth International maintained the continuity of Marxism and prepared a new epoch of revolutionary struggles. But it did not merely continue the work of its predecessor. For one thing, social contradictions had sharpened further since the Third International's founding. The world stood on the brink of World War II. Trotsky spoke of the “death agony of capitalism.” On the other hand, the resolution of the crisis of proletarian leadership was complicated by the rise of Stalinism.

After the German catastrophe, the Communist International emerged as an openly counterrevolutionary force. In the name of the “popular front,” it formed alliances with bourgeois parties and suppressed every revolutionary striving of the working class that sought to challenge bourgeois rule. In France, the popular front suppressed the 1936 general strike, paving the way for Marshall Petain, who established a pro-Nazi, authoritarian regime four years later. In Spain, the Soviet secret police murdered revolutionary fighters behind the front lines of the civil war, making possible the victory of the fascist Franco. In the Soviet Union, the Stalinist regime exterminated virtually the entire leadership of the October Revolution within the framework of the Moscow Trials. Stalin finally dissolved the Communist International in 1943 because it had become an obstacle to his alliance with American and British imperialism.

Since 1939, the Fourth International has also had to combat opportunist tendencies in its own ranks which, under the pressure of war and fascism, adapted to the “democratic imperialist” or Stalinist camps. This pressure intensified following the Second World War, when the counterrevolutionary role of Stalinism and the vast economic power of US imperialism secured breathing space for capitalism.

The International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) was founded in 1953 to prevent the dissolution of the Fourth International into the Stalinist bureaucracy and various bourgeois nationalist liberation movements by a revisionist tendency led by Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel. Ever since, it has relentlessly upheld the perspective of world socialist revolution under extremely difficult conditions against various opportunist tendencies that dishonestly sought to portray themselves as Trotskyists in the post-war period.

This struggle reached its high point in 1985. In the conflict with the renegades of the British Workers Revolutionary Party, the ICFI confirmed its continuity with the entire history of the Fourth International, and the struggles waged against Stalinism, bourgeois nationalism, and petty-bourgeois opportunism.

In a 1988 perspectives document that recapitulated the significance of its history, the International Committee pointed to the globalisation of production, the emergence of transnational corporations, and the impact this would have on the socialist revolution. It predicted that the next stage of the class struggle would be characterised by an unprecedented internationalisation, making the class struggle not merely international in its content, but also in form. Based on this assessment, the ICFI constituted its sections as Socialist Equality parties, and developed the *World Socialist Web Site*, an international organ that is published in 20 languages, is read around the globe, and provides workers with political orientation on a daily basis.

While the numerous pseudo-left tendencies have all integrated themselves into the bureaucracies and state apparatus, supported bourgeois governments, and backed imperialist wars, the ICFI is the only tendency today that stands for a socialist and internationalist programme based on the traditions of the first four congresses of the Third International, and the Fourth International.

One hundred years after the founding of the Third International, none of the contradictions that made the 20th century the most violent in human history have been resolved. Glaring social inequality, sharp global economic crises, the subordination of entire countries to the imperialist powers, the collapse of parliamentary democracy, the rise of fascist movements, the bitter conflicts between the major powers, and the immediate danger of world war threaten humanity once again.

Following decades in which the class struggle was suppressed by the bureaucratic organisations, the working class is once again entering into struggle and raising its own independent demands. The eruption of mass social struggles in France, Algeria, the US, and numerous other countries marks the beginning of a new revolutionary period.

The working class confronts the same tasks which the Third International sought to resolve a century ago: the overthrow of capitalism, the overcoming of the nation state, and the reorganisation of the vast resources of the world economy in the interests of society as a whole, rather than the profit drive of a tiny, wealthy few. The objective prerequisites for the resolution of these tasks exist. The ranks of the working class are many times greater, the world economy much more integrated, and technical resources far more developed than they were a century ago.

Everything now depends on the building of a revolutionary leadership capable of mastering these tasks. Due to its history, traditions, and programme, this can only be the International Committee of the Fourth International and its sections, the Socialist Equality parties.



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