Hakim Adi's "Pan-Africanism and Communism": A pro-Stalinist attempt to erase the Trotskyist alternative — Part Two

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This is the second part of a 10-part series responding to British-based historian Hakim Adi's recently republished book, Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa, and the Diaspora, 1919–1939. Part One was published on November 2, 2026

The revolutionary Comintern, Trotsky and the colonial question

Adi's first chapter, "Communism and the Negro Question," contains important historical material. He traces the prehistory of communist work among Africans and the African diaspora, points to Marx and Engels's denunciations of slavery and colonialism, and contrasts the Russian Revolution with the political bankruptcy of the Second International on racial and colonial questions, recounting the immense attraction and influence exercised by Bolshevism upon a generation of African and African American revolutionaries.

Yet Adi's account of the founding of the Communist International reaffirms the tradition of Stalinist falsification. Adi writes:

> It was Lenin, and the Third Communist International (Comintern or CI) formed in 1919, that sought to clarify Marxism's approach to the Negro Question and to begin to establish a general political orientation for the liberation of Africa and the African Diaspora and for the new international communist movement. The CI was formed as an organisation uniting the new communist parties that were being formed throughout the world inspired by the revolutionary events in Russia. In effect the CI became 'a single universal communist party of which the parties operating in every country form individual sections, with the aim of liberating the working people of the entire world.[1]

Absent from this account is the central role played by Leon Trotsky in the October Revolution and the founding of the Communist International. Equally significant is Adi's omission of Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution, which provided the strategic foundation for the Bolshevik seizure of power.

Drawing the lessons of the 1905 Russian Revolution, Trotsky rejected the Menshevik conception that economically backward countries had first to pass through a prolonged period of bourgeois-democratic development under the leadership of the national bourgeoisie. He established that the bourgeoisie, tied to imperialism and fearful of the revolutionary mobilisation of the masses, was incapable of consistently carrying through the democratic and agrarian revolution. These tasks fell to the working class, which, taking power at the head of the peasantry, would be compelled to proceed from democratic to socialist measures. The revolution, moreover, could not be completed within national boundaries. The construction of socialism depended upon the extension of socialist revolution internationally.

This perspective was vindicated in October 1917. Lenin, in his *April Theses*, opposed those Bolsheviks, including Stalin, who adapted themselves to the bourgeois Provisional Government, and fought for the transfer of power to the working class. The political convergence of Lenin and Trotsky provided the strategic foundation for the October victory and the Communist International established in 1919. Its significance for the colonial world was immense: the oppressed masses did not have to subordinate their struggle to a supposedly progressive national bourgeoisie or await the completion of a separate capitalist stage before fighting for power.

Trotsky later formulated its implications for the colonial and semi-colonial world: "With regard to countries with a belated bourgeois development, especially the colonial and semi-colonial countries," the "complete and genuine solution" of the tasks of democracy and national emancipation was possible only through "the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses."[2]

Trotsky occupied a central position in the Communist International from its founding, even while leading the Red Army through the Civil War (1918-1921) against the intervention of the imperialist powers that invaded Soviet Russia. He drafted the Comintern's founding manifesto in 1919 and another major manifesto for its Second Congress. At the Third Congress in 1921, alongside Lenin, he fought the ultra-left "theory of the offensive" and helped reorient the International towards winning the majority of the working class. At the Fourth Congress in 1922, with Lenin increasingly incapacitated, Trotsky emerged, in the words of Isaac Deutscher, as the "chief expounder of the International's strategy and tactics"[3]

Trotsky's interventions extended directly to the colonial question. At the Fourth Congress in 1922, he attacked the settler-dominated Communist section in Sidi-Bel-Abbès, Algeria, which opposed an uprising of the indigenous population before the victory of the French proletariat. The resolution on the French question, drafted by Trotsky, sharply rebuked the section for employing "pseudo-Marxist phraseology to cover up a purely slaveholder's point of view" and for lending political support to French imperial rule in Algeria.[4]

Against this colonial chauvinism, the resolution insisted that Communist work in the colonies must be based on the indigenous population, above

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all its proletarian youth. It demanded an "irreconcilable struggle against colonial slavery" by the Communist Party in France, combined with systematic revolutionary work in the colonies. The French party's central committee was instructed to devote "incomparably more attention, resources, and means than before to the colonial question and to propaganda in the colonies." It called on the "Central Committee itself to establish a permanent bureau for work in the colonies, drawing into this representatives of indigenous Communist organisations."[5]

Yet throughout this chapter, Adi mentions Trotsky only once, as "the Soviet Commissar for War," in connection with fears that African colonial troops might be employed as a counter-revolutionary force in Europe or against Soviet Russia.[6] Even here Adi does not explain Trotsky's position.

In his 1923 reply to Claude McKay, the Jamaican-born revolutionary socialist who had participated in the Comintern's debates on the "Negro Question," Trotsky warned that British and French imperialism sought to maintain armed colonial forces that could be deployed "against the revolutionary masses of Europe." More than a million Africans had been mobilised into colonial armies during the First World War, while Trotsky had spent much of the war in France as a revolutionary journalist and observed the use of colonial subjects in the trenches.

Trotsky's reply to McKay made clear this was not simply a military question, but part of the struggle against imperialism itself. He argued that black colonial troops had to resist being used as instruments of French imperialism, while the European working class had a direct responsibility to fight the colonial system of its own ruling classes. Trotsky stated, "The working class of Europe and particularly of France and Germany, must realise that their own most vital interests are involved in this work". "The day of general resolutions" on self-determination and racial equality, he wrote, "is over": instead, "direct and practical action" was needed. A Communist Party content with "platonic resolutions" while failing to organise black workers, he insisted, "would not be worthy of the name of Communist Party". Trotsky treated the mobilisation of colonial peoples as an integral part of the European and world revolution.[7]

Adi's falsification becomes especially glaring in his treatment of the Communist International's founding manifesto, which Trotsky wrote. Adi presents Lenin as having extended the national question beyond the oppressed peoples of the former Tsarist Empire to the colonial world as a whole. He stresses that Lenin regarded the oppressed peoples of Africa and Asia as an active revolutionary force in the struggle against imperialism, and that the revolutionary movement in the colonies was "vital" because imperialism might be breached there "at its weakest link".

Within these passages on Lenin, Adi introduces the 1919 *Manifesto of the Communist International to the Proletariat of the Entire World*, without identifying its author. Adi notes the manifesto's call to the "Colonial Slaves of Africa and Asia" to rise against colonial rule, before citing its conclusion:

> The emancipation of the colonies is possible only in conjunction with the emancipation of the metropolitan working class... The hour of proletarian dictatorship in Europe will also be the hour of your own liberation.

Adi then offers the following conclusion:

> This formulation suggested that not all the Bolsheviks understood or shared Lenin's views on the colonial question and the full significance and nature of the anti-colonial struggles.[8]

Which Bolsheviks did not share "Lenin's views"? Trotsky wrote the Manifesto, the founding Congress of the Communist International adopted it unanimously, and Lenin endorsed it. This foundational programmatic statement of the Third International demonstrated that Trotsky's views were "shared" entirely by Lenin.

Nor did the manifesto express indifference to colonial liberation, as Adi implies. It stated that imperialism's overthrow in the advanced capitalist countries and the liberation of the colonial masses were inseparable fronts of the world socialist revolution. Colonial emancipation was not conceived as a separate national process, still less carried out under bourgeois leadership.

Having removed Trotsky and Permanent Revolution from the foundations of the Communist International, Adi can proceed to present its revolutionary programme as an "essentially Pan-Africanist approach".

To be continued.

Hakim Adi, Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa, and the Diaspora, 1919–1939, 2nd ed. (2026), p.6.

Leon Trotsky, The Permanent Revolution (1930), chap. 10, "What Is the Permanent Revolution? Basic Postulates," point 2. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/pr10.htm?utm

Isaac Deutscher, "The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921–1929" (London: Verso) 2003, pp. 53-54.

Leon Trotsky, "Political Resolution on the French Question," 1922, Marxists Internet Archive. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1922/trotsky04.htm

Ibid.

Hakim Adi, op cit., p .19.

Leon Trotsky, "On the Negro Question," 13 March 1923, Marxists Internet Archive: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/03/negroq.htm

Op cit., p. 9

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[1] Hakim Adi, Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa, and the Diaspora, 1919–1939, 2nd ed. (2026), p.6.

[2] Leon Trotsky, The Permanent Revolution (1930), chap. 10, "What Is the Permanent Revolution? Basic Postulates," point 2. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/pr10.htm?utm

[3] Isaac Deutscher, "The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921–1929" (London: Verso) 2003, pp. 53-54.

[4] Leon Trotsky, "Political Resolution on the French Question," 1922, Marxists Internet Archive. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1922/trotsky04.htm

[5] Ibid.

[6] Hakim Adi, op cit., p .19.

[7] Leon Trotsky, "On the Negro Question," 13 March 1923, Marxists Internet Archive: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1923/03/negroq.htm

[8] Op cit., p. 9

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