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

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This is the fifth 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.

Between its Fourth Congress in 1922 and its Sixth Congress in 1928, the Communist International, founded by Lenin and Trotsky, underwent a profound political transformation. The internationalist programme on which it was founded was repudiated in favour of the nationalist doctrine of "socialism in one country", while the emerging Soviet bureaucracy consolidated its control over the Communist parties. Adi passes over the immense political struggles through which this transformation occurred.

Indeed, Stalin enters Adi's narrative as Lenin's "successor" to present the Stalinised Comintern's policies as a further development of those formulated by Lenin.[1] The description is deeply misleading. Lenin appointed no political heir, and when illness removed him from active political life, Trotsky, not Stalin, was widely regarded in the Soviet Union and internationally as the figure most likely to inherit Lenin's leading role. Lenin's final Letter to the Congress described Trotsky as the "most capable" member of the Central Committee, while warning that Stalin had concentrated "unlimited authority" in his hands, and proposed removing him as General Secretary.[2]

What took place was not a smooth transition between Lenin and Stalin, but a bitter struggle between the Soviet bureaucracy led by Stalin against the revolutionary internationalism defended by Trotsky and the Left Opposition from 1923 onwards, on which the Comintern had been founded.

The material foundations of the Stalinist bureaucracy lay in the isolation of the first workers' state. The Bolsheviks took power in an economically backward country devastated by the First World War. They understood that the ultimate fate of the revolution depended upon its extension internationally, above all into the advanced capitalist centres of Europe. Instead, Soviet Russia suffered imperialist intervention, civil war, famine and enormous economic destruction. Large sections of the revolutionary working class that had made October were killed, dispersed from the great industrial centres or absorbed into the expanding state and party apparatus. The defeats of the revolutionary upsurge that swept Europe between 1918 and 1923, culminating in the German catastrophe, left the Soviet Union isolated and the working class exhausted. A growing administrative bureaucracy acquired increasing weight within the state and party. Its outlook was conservative and nationalist, reflecting its role as administrator of an impoverished state and its material interest in preserving its stability and privileges.

The theory of "socialism in one country," advanced by Stalin and Nikolai Bukharin, gave this emerging bureaucratic layer its political programme. The enforced isolation of the Soviet Union, which the Bolshevik leadership had regarded as a grave danger to be overcome through the victory of the international socialist revolution, the Stalinists transformed into a program for constructing socialism within the borders of the USSR. This nationalist conception fundamentally repudiated the internationalist foundations of October. The struggle for world socialist revolution ceased to provide the strategic orientation for Soviet policy, and the international communist movement was increasingly subordinated to the national requirements of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Trotsky and the Left Opposition fought against this nationalist turn, insisting on the inseparable connection between the fate of the Soviet Union and the victory of the international socialist revolution. The Stalinist apparatus responded with systematic repression: supporters of the Left Opposition were removed from leading positions, denied access to the party press, subjected to administrative reprisals, and eventually expelled. Trotsky was expelled from the Communist Party in November 1927 and deported to Alma-Ata in January 1928.

The suppression of the Left Opposition was the necessary condition for the bureaucratic transformation of the Comintern. The emerging Soviet bureaucracy could not establish "socialism in one country" as the governing doctrine of the Soviet party and the International while permitting an organised Marxist opposition which fought for the programme of world socialist revolution.

For the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the nationalist transformation in the Comintern had fatal consequences. Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution rejected the conception that the democratic and national tasks of the revolution required the proletariat to submit to bourgeois leadership: in countries of belated capitalist development, the struggle against imperialism, landlordism and national oppression could be carried through only under the independent leadership of the working class, drawing the peasantry behind it and extending the revolution internationally. The Stalinist doctrine assigned to the national bourgeoisie in oppressed countries a potentially revolutionary role, in a separate democratic stage, opening the way for the political subordination of Communist parties to bourgeois nationalist organisations.

In China, this programme was put to a decisive test, an experience that Adi's book excludes.

The Chinese Revolution of 1925–27 developed amid an immense mobilisation of workers and peasants against imperialist domination, warlordism and capitalist exploitation. In May 1925, after British-commanded police opened fire on workers and students in Shanghai, killing demonstrators and wounding dozens, a strike wave swept the country. Approximately 400,000 workers participated in some 125 strikes, accompanied by mass protests and the Canton–Hong Kong general strike, in which around 100,000 workers left Hong Kong and organised a boycott

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of British goods.

By 1927, the revolutionary movement had reached enormous proportions. In Shanghai, hundreds of thousands of workers joined a general strike and armed insurrection, defeated the warlord forces and seized control of much of the city. Across Hunan, Hubei and other provinces, millions of peasants entered associations, challenged landlord power and began establishing organs of local authority.

The democratic tasks of national unification, liberation from imperialist domination and agrarian transformation were becoming bound up directly with questions of class power. The central issue was whether the working class would establish its own leadership over the revolutionary movement or remain politically subordinated to the bourgeois Kuomintang.

The Comintern leadership under Stalin and Bukharin insisted that the Chinese Communist Party be subordinated to the Kuomintang. The latter was presented as the political expression of a revolutionary "bloc of four classes"—workers, peasants, the petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie—united in a common anti-imperialist struggle.

Trotsky and the Left Opposition opposed this policy. They warned that the Chinese bourgeoisie feared the revolutionary movement of the workers and peasants more than it opposed imperialism, and that the independence of the Communist Party was indispensable to the victory of the revolution.

These warnings were confirmed catastrophically in April 1927, when Chiang Kai-shek turned against the Shanghai working class and carried out the mass repression of Communists and militant workers. The Stalinist leadership then transferred its political orientation to the supposedly left-wing Kuomintang government in Wuhan, which likewise turned against the Communist Party and the revolutionary workers' and peasants' movement.

The Chinese Revolution was the most important practical test of Comintern policy towards bourgeois nationalism in a colonial and semi-colonial country. Its defeat occurred barely a year before the Sixth Congress of 1928. But Adi excludes this experience from his discussion of the Congress and its colonial programme.

The omission becomes more glaring because the Kuomintang does appear in Adi's account. In his discussion of the International Congress against Colonial Oppression, held in Brussels in February 1927—barely two months before Chiang Kai-shek's massacre of the Shanghai working class—Adi presents it as an important achievement because it brought together an extraordinarily heterogeneous collection of political forces. These included communists, the Indian National Congress, representatives of the British Labour and Independent Labour parties, nationalist movements from Africa and Asia, and the Kuomintang. Among them were Jawaharlal Nehru of the Indian National Congress, later the first prime minister of independent India; Messali Hadj, who would become a central founder of modern Algerian nationalism; and J. T. Gumede of the African National Congress, the party that has ruled South Africa since 1994.

Adi writes:

> The great significance of the Brussels Congress was that it brought together those who were struggling for national independence in Asia and Africa, those in Latin America and elsewhere who were determined to safeguard their sovereignty, as well as representatives of organisations in the imperialist countries that had a critical attitude towards colonialism or were opposed to it. Both the Indian National Congress and the Guomintang [Kuomintang] government in China were represented, as were the British Labour Party and Independent Labour Party. Representatives from China, India and Britain, including British Communists, even signed a joint resolution against "suppression and intervention in the colonial countries."[3]

Thus, in February 1927, Kuomintang representatives joined Communists in declarations against imperialism. Barely two months later, in April, Chiang Kai-shek's forces massacred the revolutionary workers of Shanghai. This was a brutal demonstration of the Stalinised Comintern's role in providing revolutionary credentials to bourgeois nationalist tendencies that would turn savagely on the working class.

The principal outcome of the Brussels Congress was the establishment of the League Against Imperialism (LAI) which Trotsky would later denounce as a "second-line Kuomintang on the international scale".[4] Yet Adi moves from the broad anti-imperialist alliances of Brussels and the LAI to the Sixth Congress without confronting any of the practical consequences of this disastrous political line.

It was Trotsky, and the Trotskyist movement that would extract the central lesson from the Chinese catastrophe: the national bourgeoisie could come into conflict with imperialism while remaining violently hostile to the independent mobilisation of the working class. As Trotsky explained:

> The question of the nature and the policy of the bourgeoisie is settled by the entire internal class structure of a nation waging the revolutionary struggle; by the historical epoch in which that struggle develops; by the degree of economic, political, and military dependence of the national bourgeoisie upon world imperialism as a whole or a particular section of it; finally, and this is most important, by the degree of class activity of the native proletariat, and by the state of its connections with the international revolutionary movement."[5]

Trotsky's conclusion from the Chinese experience was categorical: "For fear of the masses the bourgeoisie subsequently deserts the revolution."[6]

To be continued

Op. cit., p. 7.

V. I. Lenin, "Letter to the Congress," 23–26 December 1922, with addition of 4 January 1923, Marxists Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/dec/testamnt/congress.htm

Op cit., p 29.

Leon Trotsky, "The Krestintern and the Anti-Imperialist League" (1930). Available at: https://wikirouge.net/texts/en/The_Krestintern_and_the_Anti-Imperialist_League

Ibid., p. 208.

Ibid., p. 213.

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[1] Op. cit., p. 7.

[2] V. I. Lenin, "Letter to the Congress," 23–26 December 1922, with addition of 4 January 1923, Marxists Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/dec/testamnt/congress.htm

[3] Op cit., p 29.

[4] Leon Trotsky, "The Krestintern and the Anti-Imperialist League" (1930). Available at: https://wikirouge.net/texts/en/The_Krestintern_and_the_Anti-Imperialist_League

[5] Ibid., p. 208.

[6] Ibid., p. 213.

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