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

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This is the sixth 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.

The Sixth Congress of the Communist International, held in Moscow between July and September 1928, convened after the Chinese catastrophe and the expulsion of the Left Opposition from the Soviet Communist Party. It was a decisive stage in the transformation of the Comintern into an instrument of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Adi presents this Congress as a major advance in the struggle against colonial oppression and racism. He writes:

> Its main significance lies in the fact that it was the first occasion at which the CI was able to present a fully developed political programme that analysed the global political situation and provided practical guidelines for the work of all the communist parties. The congress accepted the view that the post-war years could be divided into three periods. The current "third period", it concluded, was one of overproduction in which the capitalist world would become increasingly unstable, leading to economic crises, "a fresh series of imperialist wars; among the imperialist states themselves; wars of the imperialist states against the USSR; wars of national liberation against imperialism and imperialist intervention, and to gigantic class battles." Based on this analysis and in these circumstances the Comintern advanced the slogan class against class, in order to guide all the communist parties in what were described as "maturing conditions for a new revolutionary upsurge." […] the economic and political events of the next decade, the Depression, rise of Nazism, fascist invasion of Ethiopia, labour rebellions throughout the Caribbean and eventual outbreak of World War Two, suggest that the CI was perhaps not so far off the mark.[1]

The historical significance of the Sixth Congress cannot be measured by whether its resolutions anticipated that world capitalism was approaching immense economic and political convulsions. The decisive question was what programme the Comintern advanced for the working class in response to these crises.

Six years separated it from the Fourth Congress of 1922. Lenin was dead. Trotsky, who alongside Lenin had played a leading role in the strategic work of the early Congresses, had been deported to internal exile in Alma-Ata. Grigori Zinoviev, who had chaired the Executive Committee of the Communist International throughout its formative period, had been removed from its leadership. Karl Radek and other prominent figures associated with the early International and subsequently with the Left Opposition had been expelled and exiled.

Historian Alexander Vatlin notes that a conspicuous feature of the Congress was "the absence of a large part of those leading ideologues of the Russian party who, in their time, belonged to the 'General Staff of the World Revolution', but who had supported Zinoviev and Trotsky in 1926-27". He notes, "The fact that for the first time the congress was not taking place in the Kremlin spoke for itself. The 'world revolution' was now no longer the cardinal point of the Bolsheviks' ideology and politics, which were more and more turning into Stalinism."[2]

Dmitry Manuilsky—a senior Stalinist Comintern official, member of the Presidium of its Executive Committee and, from 1928, one of its secretaries—delivered the principal report declaring that he would "sum up the results of the struggle against the Trotskyist Opposition." Trotskyism, he insisted, was "not merely a 'national' phenomenon", adding the struggle against it had been conducted "along the whole international front".[3]

Adi reviews the Congress without examining the programme of the opposition that the Stalinist bureaucracy sought to eliminate. He is particularly determined to minimise Stalin's role in shaping the policies of the Sixth Congress. He dismisses historians who identify the "invisible hand of Joseph Stalin, or the domination of Moscow" behind Comintern policy, and the evidence of Stalin's involvement as mere "anecdotal links."[4] Yet he records that Bukharin's principal theses underwent extensive revision by the "Russian Delegation", whose approximately twenty amendments, he acknowledges, "almost amounted to a new report and the first public criticism of Bukharin".[5]

Behind this "Russian Delegation" stood Stalin. As the Marxist historian Vadim Rogovin documents in *Bolsheviks Against Stalinism*, Stalin personally intervened in revising Bukharin's draft programme, replacing an appeal to "methods of inner-party democracy" with a demand for "iron discipline in the communist parties," and manipulating the composition of the Comintern leadership to ensure its political subordination. He intervened directly in the composition of the Political Secretariat of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, proposing it be constituted to create an "overwhelming counterweight" to tendencies he regarded as politically unreliable. Rogovin concluded that after the Sixth Congress "the apparatus of the Comintern was under Stalin's full control."[6]

Against this backdrop, the programme celebrated by Adi was adopted. For the first time, "socialism in one country" was incorporated into the official programme of the Communist International, binding its national sections to the nationalist doctrine of the Soviet bureaucracy. In the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the Congress simultaneously

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codified a stageist conception of revolution, defining the immediate struggle as bourgeois-democratic and treating socialist revolution as developing at a later historical stage. The Congress's colonial theses declared that "the principal task" of Communist parties in colonial and semi-colonial countries was:

> to organize the workers and the peasantry independently (to establish class Communist Parties of the proletariat, trade unions, peasant leagues and committees and, in a revolutionary situation, Soviets, etc.) and to free them from the influence of the national bourgeoisie, with whom *temporary agreements* may be made only on the condition that they, the bourgeoisie, do not hamper the revolutionary organization of the workers and peasants, and that they carry on a genuine struggle against imperialism [Emphasis added]."[7]

In *The Third International After Lenin*, the most important Marxist critique of the Congress, Trotsky did not reject temporary agreements with bourgeois nationalist organisations for specific practical objectives. Such agreements might be necessary "from one occasion to the next". What he opposed was conferring on the national bourgeoisie a revolutionary role in a common democratic stage, obscuring the irreconcilable class interests dividing it from the proletariat. He wrote, "the formula, taken as a whole, is a classic Menshevik noose for the proletariat of the Orient."[8] The Chinese Revolution had demonstrated the consequences of this policy in the blood of Shanghai's workers.

Adi covers for this betrayal by insisting on the militant anti-imperialist declarations of the Sixth Congress. He highlights its call for "much greater joint activity between the communist parties in the imperialist countries and anti-colonial movements in the colonies" and contrasts its policy with the pro-colonialism of the Second International.[9]

Adi reproduces the very same terminology used to justify the Stalinist transformation of the Comintern. It appears in his narrative as "bolshevisation," greater "discipline," the application of "democratic centralism," political "reorientation" and the elimination of "factionalism and other weaknesses"—the language of Manuilsky who told the Sixth Congress that the struggle against Trotskyism was "an essential element in the Bolshevisation of all our Communist Parties." [10]

In South Africa, Adi writes, the Communist Party was "not a highly disciplined organisation based on the Comintern's principle of democratic centralism" and therefore required "thorough 'bolshevisation' and, most importantly, a political reorientation."[11] He presents the Sixth Congress as demanding that the American Workers Party, predecessor of the Communist Party USA, become "organisationally and politically prepared" through the elimination of "factionalism and other weaknesses."[12]

Adi refuses to explain what political programme this discipline was intended to enforce. Nowhere is the answer clearer than in South Africa, where the imposition of the Stalinist two-stage programme continues to reverberate today.

The Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) suffered from grave weaknesses inherited from the predominantly white labour movement out of which it had developed. White chauvinism had to be fought ruthlessly, and the party had to orient itself decisively towards the oppressed black majority. But this did not settle the question of the programme upon which that turn was to be made.

Adi acknowledges that on the eve of the Sixth Congress, the CPSA was already "starting to make some headway amongst Africans both in urban and even rural areas," with hundreds joining the party. This radicalisation also influenced the African National Congress. Its president, J. T. Gumede, returned from Brussels and the Soviet Union sympathetic to the CPSA, while the Cape Town branch of the ANC described the Communist Party as "the only political party that champions the cause of the workers of South Africa irrespective of colour."[13]

The real question was what political perspective should guide the turn toward the oppressed black majority. The Stalinised Comintern instructed the CPSA to agitate for "an independent black South African Republic as a stage towards a Workers' and Peasants' Republic." Adi presents the policy approvingly and describes national self-determination and majority rule as "the first stage towards establishing socialism in South Africa."[14]

But did destroying white supremacy, national oppression and imperialist domination—securing democratic equality; addressing the land question; or mobilising the oppressed black majority—constitute a separate political stage through which the working class had to pass before the struggle for socialist power could be posed? Adi's is explicit: "Not the immediate building of socialism but the liberation of the country from the imperialist yoke."[15]

The same perspective that had subordinated the Chinese Communist Party to the bourgeois Kuomintang, answered in April 1927 by the massacre of the Shanghai working class, was codified as the official programme of the Communist International and imposed upon the Communist Party of South Africa.

The Sixth Congress resolution recognised the immense revolutionary weight of the black peasantry, declaring it the "basic moving force of the revolution" in alliance with and under the leadership of the working class. Yet it simultaneously instructed the Communist Party to strengthen the bourgeois-nationalist ANC and "transform it into a fighting nationalist revolutionary organisation." [16]

Here the issue of political leadership was posed with complete sharpness. Would the revolutionary movement of the peasantry be organised under the independent political leadership of the Communist Party and the working class, or channelled through a nationalist organisation representing other class interests?

Trotsky's criticism of Stalinist policy towards the colonial bourgeoisie centred on this question. In his April 1933 *Letter to South African Revolutionaries*, he declared that "from the point of the black majority, South Africa is a slave colony" and insisted that "the historical weapon of national liberation can be only the class struggle." He condemned the Comintern for transforming the programme of colonial liberation into "an empty democratic abstraction", in which antagonistic classes were presented as common "anti-imperialist" forces.

Against this Stalinist conception of a separate national-democratic stage, Trotsky insisted that the revolutionary party "can and must solve the national problem by its own methods." He defended the unconditional right of the oppressed black majority to independence and self-determination, but he rejected the political subordination of the working class to bourgeois nationalism.

While insisting that revolutionaries defend the ANC against white reaction, he exposed its inability to realise even its own demands because of its "superficial, conciliatory policy", counterposing to it "a program of revolutionary class struggle." Agreements with the ANC were permissible only for "strictly defined practical tasks", while retaining "full and complete independence" and freedom of political criticism. Endorsing the South African Bolshevik-Leninists' rejection of a national-democratic state in favour of a South African October, Trotsky insisted that the national and agrarian questions could be solved only through socialist revolution under the leadership of the working class, drawing behind it the oppressed peasantry. This, he declared, was "the cornerstone of the whole structure of the program."[17]

Building the Communist Party among the oppressed black majority did not require a two-stage conception of revolution. Nor did the struggle against white chauvinism require political support for a bourgeois

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nationalist organisation. These were distinct questions. But Adi merges them together, presenting the imposition of the Stalinist two-stage programme as the necessary consequence of the CPSA's turn towards the black majority.

The political significance of this defence becomes unmistakable when Adi retrospectively defends the Stalinist policy. Referring to the Sixth Congress's demand concerning the ANC, he writes: "looking back on more recent events in South Africa this does not appear to have been a very inappropriate demand to advance".[18]

What has been the outcome of the political perspective Adi defends? South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world, with enormous wealth concentrated at the top while mass unemployment, poverty, insecure housing and failing basic services dominate the lives of millions. The post-apartheid state has repeatedly deployed police to defend capitalist property and impose savage repression on the working class. The most terrible demonstration of this came at Marikana in 2012, when police shot dead striking mineworkers fighting one of the country's major mining corporations. More recently, the state has deployed soldiers into impoverished communities and presided over the catastrophe at Stilfontein where at least 78 informal miners were starved and dehydrated to death by the ANC's South African police when they blockaded the mines.

Whatever democratic changes 1994 brought, the promised passage from a national-democratic "first stage" to socialism has never happened. The "stage" has become a permanent political nightmare.

The Sixth Congress was a turning point, but not the revolutionary advance Adi claims. It convened after the catastrophic defeat of the Chinese Revolution, incorporated "socialism in one country" into the programme of the Comintern, consolidated the Stalinist bureaucracy's control over its apparatus, and imposed a stageist conception of revolution on colonial Communist parties. Its consequences would be measured not in the militant-sounding resolutions Adi cites, but in the defeats and betrayals of the anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century, whose reverberations are felt in the struggles of the African working class today.

To be continued

Op cit., pp 56-57.

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[1] Op cit., pp 56-57.

[2] Alexander Vatlin, "The Programme Discussion in the Communist International," Revolutionary History, vol. 8, no. 4, translated by Mike Jones from Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung (Berlin, 1998). Available at: https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/6th-congress/alexander-vatlin.htm.

[3] Dmitry Manuilsky, "The Situation and the Problems of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union," report to the Forty-Second Session of the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International, Moscow, 22 August 1928, International Press Correspondence, vol. 8, no. 63, 17 September 1928, pp. 1124–25. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/6th-congress/v08n63-sep-17-1928.pdf

[4] Adi, op cit. p. 69.

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[10] Dmitry Manuilsky, "The Situation and the Problems of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union," report to the Forty-Second Session of the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International, Moscow, 22 August 1928, International Press Correspondence, vol. 8, no. 63, 17 September 1928, pp. 1124–25. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/6th-congress/v08n63-sep-17-1928.pdf

[11] Op cit., p 48.

[12] Op cit., p. 44.

[13] Op cit., p. 50.

[14] Op cit., p. 49.

[15] Op cit., p. 50.

[16] Op cit., p. 67.

[17] Leon Trotsky (1933) 'Letter to South African Revolutionaries', 20 April. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1933/04/safrica.html

[18] Op cit., p. 49.

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