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

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This is the seventh 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.

From the German Catastrophe to the Popular Front: Stalinism, Fascism and the Fourth International

Adi's defence of the Sixth Congress rests in part on what followed. Discussing the "Third Period," he argues that the Comintern's analysis "seemed to have been confirmed" by the Great Depression, the rise of fascism and preparations for another world war. He concludes that the Comintern had been "perhaps not so far off the mark."[1]

Hitler's rise exposed the Sixth Congress's catastrophic consequences. Adi never examines Hitler's accession. This cannot be dismissed as falling outside the scope of a study devoted to the Comintern, Africa and Pan-Africanism. Germany posed the decisive test of the "Third Period" policy adopted after the Sixth Congress, and the 1933 catastrophe directly prepared the next major turn in Comintern policy: the counterrevolutionary Popular Front strategy, which Adi again defends.

The European events of 1933–38 are not a detour from the colonial question. They were the means through which the colonial struggles were subordinated to the diplomatic interests of the Soviet bureaucracy.

Examining Germany requires confronting the political consequences of the Sixth Congress, which enshrined the theory of "social fascism." The theory treated Social Democratic parties not simply as reformist organisations defending capitalism, but as a variant of fascism. Cooperation with it, even against the Nazis, amounted to political capitulation. In Germany, this meant rejecting a united front of Communist and Social Democratic workers against Hitler.

While denouncing the Social Democratic leadership's betrayals, Trotsky recognised that millions of workers still followed its organisations. They could not be won to revolutionary politics through denunciations alone. The Communist Party had to fight for a united front against fascism without surrendering its political independence. As Trotsky wrote in December 1931:

> No common platform with the Social Democracy, or with the leaders of the German trade unions, no common publications, banners, placards! March separately, but strike together! Agree only how to strike, whom to strike, and when to strike!"[2]

The united front was a means of mobilising the working class against Hitler while breaking the influence of Social Democracy over millions of workers. Trotsky insisted that Communists must demonstrate "by deeds a complete readiness to make a bloc with the Social Democrats against the fascists", explaining that "we must understand how to tear the workers away from their leaders in reality". The struggle for the united front would enable Social Democratic workers to test their own organisations and leaders in practice, while exposing the disastrous consequences of the Stalinist theory of "social fascism", which obstructed the unity of the working class in the face of the Nazi threat.[3]

Trotsky had already warned in September 1930, in *The Turn in the Communist International and the Situation in Germany*, that the Stalinist theory of "social fascism", which equated Social Democracy with fascism, had become a "positive menace". By obstructing common action between Communist and Social Democratic workers, this policy threatened to divide the working class in the face of Hitler's advancing movement. Far from conceding political ground to reformism, the struggle for the united front was essential to winning millions of Social Democratic workers away from their leadership and towards revolutionary Marxism.

The Stalinist leadership of the Comintern rejected Trotsky's course. Hitler's appointment as Chancellor in January 1933 became the decisive practical test of the Third Period. The Nazi victory had many causes, including the betrayals of Social Democracy and the backing of Hitler by the German ruling class. But the Comintern's refusal to fight for a united front divided the two great organised battalions of the German working class, at the very moment when their combined mobilisation was most urgently required.

Within months the Communist Party, the largest in the world outside the Soviet Union, was suppressed, the trade unions destroyed and tens of thousands of socialist and communist militants incarcerated. Yet the Stalinist Comintern leadership refused to allow any serious international discussion of how the German working class had been defeated.

For Trotsky, this was decisive. Until 1933 the Left Opposition had fought for the reform and regeneration of the Comintern. After Germany, Trotsky concluded that an organisation which had allowed Hitler to seize power without a fight, and which had responded to such a historic catastrophe without correcting its leadership or programme, could no longer be reformed. In July 1933 he called for the building of a new, Fourth International.

Adi discusses none of this. Presenting the rise of Nazism as retrospective confirmation that the Sixth Congress had been "not so far off the mark", he presents the Comintern's subsequent abandonment of the

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Third Period and its adoption of the Popular Front strategy as a necessary response to the fascist threat. The German catastrophe, which connected these two diametrically opposed policies, is deliberately ignored.

The Stalinist response to Hitler's victory was another abrupt turn. The Soviet bureaucracy sought diplomatic alliances against Nazi Germany, particularly with France and Britain, and the Communist International abandoned the rhetoric of "class against class". At the Seventh Congress in 1935, it embraced the Popular Front: political alliances with supposedly "democratic" sections of the bourgeoisie. In the colonies, this meant abandoning colonial struggles in the name of fighting fascism.

Adi presents the change in favourable terms. He writes:

> The demand for a united front of workers, and other sections of the people, against the growing threat of fascism, and therefore in practice a greater unity between Communists and a wide range of individuals and organisations was particularly evident in the popular front movements of Spain and in France...[4]

He continues:

> This 'new tactical orientation', and the need for the broadest unity against the danger of fascism and war, was the main theme of the deliberations and resolutions of the Comintern's Seventh Congress in 1935. In practice this resulted not only in a much greater emphasis on the need for a united front against fascism, but also on an anti-imperialist front in the colonial countries that could draw 'the widest masses' into a struggle not just for workers' rights but also 'against imperialist exploitation, against cruel enslavement, for the driving out of the imperialists, for the independence of the country.'[5]

Adi spells out approvingly the class implications of this change: "It meant that in all countries the Communists had to concern themselves not just with the interests of the working class but in addition with those of the whole people".[6]

France demonstrated what the Popular Front meant. The Popular Front's 1936 electoral victory—an alliance of the Communist Party (PCF) with Léon Blum's Socialists and the bourgeois Radical Party—was accompanied by an immense strike wave and widespread factory occupations. But the PCF worked to contain this movement within the framework of the Popular Front. The same logic was applied to the French colonies, where the PCF would soon instruct the colonial peoples that their liberation had to be postponed because French imperialism was now "democratic".

Spain provided an even more decisive test. Franco's military uprising in July 1936 against the Stalinist-backed Popular Front government unleashed a revolutionary mobilisation of workers and peasants, including factory seizures, land occupations and the formation of armed militias. The Stalinists insisted the struggle remain confined to defending the bourgeois Republic and opposed measures that threatened capitalist property or the alliance with republican bourgeois forces.

In service to this policy, Stalinists led the subsequent bloody suppression of revolutionary forces, killing revolutionaries and repressing opposition to the Popular Front. Stalinism had moved beyond policies that merely disoriented revolutionary struggles. In Spain, it became an active force in defending bourgeois state authority against them, including the murder of revolutionaries.

Trotsky's call for a new International after the German catastrophe culminated in September 1938 with the founding of the Fourth International, defending the revolutionary internationalist heritage of the early Comintern against both the nationalist programme of "socialism in one country" and the successive Stalinist policies that had produced the German catastrophe and the Popular Front betrayals.

Its founding programme, the Transitional Programme, defined the epoch's central problem as the crisis of revolutionary leadership. Germany, France and Spain showed the consequences of the counter-revolutionary programme imposed upon the working class by Stalinism.

The Transitional Programme rejected the Stalinist division of the revolution into distinct historical stages, in which national independence and bourgeois democracy had first to be completed under bourgeois leadership before the working class could fight for socialism. Trotsky insisted that "the struggle for the most elementary achievements of national independence and bourgeois democracy is combined with the socialist struggle against world imperialism", and that democratic demands and the tasks of socialist revolution "are not divided into separate historical epochs in this struggle, but stem directly from one another." The overthrow of the "imperialist yoke" and the agrarian revolution remained central tasks, but "it is imperative that in the struggle the masses outgrow" the democratic programme. The working class had to "oppose" itself "to the 'national' bourgeoisie", fight for the leadership of the peasantry and establish its own organs of power. As Trotsky concluded, "Only they [the soviets] are capable of bringing the democratic revolution to a conclusion and likewise opening an era of socialist revolution."[7]

The colonial consequences of the Stalinist turn were not long in coming. They were exposed in Ethiopia, where the Italian fascist invasion of 1935 — the event Adi cites as retrospective "confirmation" of the Third Period — radicalised a generation of African and Caribbean militants and revealed the full meaning of the Popular Front's "anti-fascism" for the colonial world.

To be continued.

Op cit., p 57.

Leon Trotsky, "For a Workers' United Front Against Fascism", 8 December 1931. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1931/311208.htm

Ibid.

Op cit., p 185-186.

Op cit., p. 186.

Op cit., p. 186.

Leon Trotsky, The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International (1938), Part II, Marxists Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/tp-text2.htm.

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[1] Op cit., p 57.

[2] Leon Trotsky, "For a Workers' United Front Against Fascism", 8 December 1931. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1931/311208.htm

[3] Ibid.

[4] Op cit., p 185-186.

[5] Op cit., p. 186.

[6] Op cit., p. 186.

[7] Leon Trotsky, The Transitional Program: The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International (1938), Part II, Marxists Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/tp/tp-text2.htm.

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