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

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This is the ninth 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 Popular Front and the betrayal of the colonial revolution

Adi partly records the impact of Popular Frontism on the anti-colonial policies of the European Communist parties. But, overtly and by omission, he minimises its political meaning.

The colonial peoples were told that their liberation had to be postponed because the imperialist powers ruling them, France, Spain, Portugal and Britain, were now "democratic," while their fascist rivals were the real enemy. The result was the anti-colonial movement's political disarming.

Discussing France, Adi defends Popular Frontism, while stating that it "led the PCF to regard the demand for total independence of the French colonies with some caution, since it was argued that if granted this would lead to their immediate occupation by Germany or other fascist powers."[1] Adi's description of the PCF's "caution" downplays the PCF's betrayal of the anti-colonial struggle.

Maurice Thorez, secretary-general of the French Communist Party, openly defended the right of French imperialism to its colonies. At the Ninth Congress of the PCF in Arles in December 1937, Thorez declared that victory over fascism was now the "decisive question" and that consequently, "the interest of the colonial peoples lies in their union with the people of France." He warned that colonial separation might deliver North Africa to Hitler or Mussolini and Indochina to Japanese militarism. He suggested that France's supposedly "free, confident and fraternal" association with its colonies helped to fulfil "the mission of France throughout the world."[2]

Thorez carried this logic still further in Algeria in February 1939. While formally repeating the right of separation, he argued that concrete historical circumstances imposed upon Algeria a duty to bind itself to French imperialism. His speech urged "a closer union of France and Algeria." The colonial people possessed the abstract "right" to leave the empire, while the Communist Party informed them that exercising that right would objectively assist fascism.[3]

Throughout the Stalinised Comintern, the unconditional defence of the colonial struggle and its revolutionary significance were denied. Its legitimacy depended on whether it strengthened or weakened the diplomatic position of the Soviet bureaucracy and of the imperialist powers with which Moscow sought an alliance.

Tunisia provided a devastating demonstration of Stalinism's impact. The Popular Front victory in France initially generated considerable expectations among the Tunisian nationalists. Political prisoners were released, trade-union activity was allowed, and negotiations opened with the Neo-Destour, the nationalist party becoming the principal organised force demanding an end to French colonial rule. The PCF and the Tunisian Communist Party reacted by treating the nationalist movement as a danger to the security of France and the Soviet Union against Germany.

In 1938, the Neo-Destour responded to mounting French colonial repression, including the killing of nationalist demonstrators and the arrest of party activists, by intensifying its campaign of mass agitation, demonstrations and calls for civil disobedience. On the eve of the great demonstrations of April, the Tunisian Communist Party issued a resolution denouncing Neo-Destour's policy as "support for fascism which threatens Tunisia with military occupation." It declared that agitation for civil disobedience, refusal of military service and a tax strike amounted to collusion with fascism.[4]

On 9 April, following earlier arrests and the summons of nationalist leader Ali Belhouane, thousands of Tunisians took to the streets demanding political rights, a Tunisian parliament and national government. The colonial police opened fire, leaving more than twenty dead, while the authorities proclaimed a state of siege, dissolved the Neo-Destour, suppressed its press and arrested hundreds of militants.[5]

The same counter-revolustionary policy was imposed in Madagascar. Paul Dussac, a veteran anti-colonial militant associated with *Le Prolétariat malgache* and the Communist movement in Madagascar, came under criticism from the colonial section of the PCF for positions considered excessively "nationalist", that is, for pressing the question of Malagasy independence. Robert Deloche, one of the leading officials of the PCF's colonial apparatus, instructed Dussac that "it would be absolutely ill-advised to demand independence from this government."[6] Deloche warned against "noisy and sterile agitation," demanded the "greatest concern for respect for order and legality," and insisted that the Communist Party must under no circumstances appear "anti-French."[7]

The Communist Party made clear that French imperialism must not be deprived of the colonial territories, military manpower, and economic resources on which its strength in a future war with Germany rested. The Franco-Soviet pact of 1935 acquired a direct colonialist content. The interests of oppressed peoples were subordinated to preserving the strategic resources of French imperialism.

The Spanish Civil War proved an even more devastating test, and one Adi refuses to confront seriously. Franco's military rebellion began in Spanish Morocco in July 1936. His Army of Africa, including 70,000

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Moroccan colonial troops, was one of the counter-revolution's principal military forces. A declaration of Moroccan independence, combined with an appeal to the colonial population to rise against Franco, could have strutunick directly at the social and military base from which the rebellion had been launched. Moroccan nationalists themselves approached Republican Spain seeking assistance.

But the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), under instructions from the Soviet bureaucracy, refused to heed this call so as not to upset French imperialism, the other colonial power in Morocco. The Stalinist bureaucracy was above all terrified that a victorious socialist revolution in Spain would transform the political situation throughout Europe, revive the revolutionary confidence of the Soviet working class, and precipitate opposition in the Soviet Union.

José Díaz, general secretary of the Spanish Communist Party, praised the Republican government, "Because it is a government that has no imperialist ambitions, but rather seeks to extend its democratic system to the colonial peoples, such as Morocco…"[8] The absurdity of the claim was self-evident: the Republic whose "democratic system" was to be extended to Morocco was simultaneously fighting for its life against an army recruited from Morocco, and refusing to appeal to the Moroccan people because doing so would threaten the French empire. The Stalinists preferred to fight Franco's colonial troops rather than call upon the colonial peoples to rise against their oppressors.

The Portuguese case also exposes Adi's portrayal of the Popular Front strategy as "anti-fascist". Salazar's Estado Novo dictatorship ruled Portugal. Yet the programme of the Portuguese Popular Front, adopted in August 1936 by the Communist Party alongside Socialists and Republicans, refused to demand independence for Portugal's African colonies. While declaring that it "formally condemns the policy of colonial imperialism", it described "our overseas provinces" as an "integral and inviolable part of the Portuguese Nation". It even proposed "the establishment, in territories favourable to white colonisation, of family homesteads" to be allocated to "our rural emigrants", supposedly "without prejudice to the interests of the indigenous population".[9] The Portuguese Communist Party thereby endorsed the brutalities of colonialism.

Britain presents a particularly revealing case. Adi stresses that the CPGB stepped up its colonial work after 1937, established a Colonial Information Bulletin, supported strikes in the Caribbean and continued, at least formally, to recognise the right of colonial peoples to freedom. In September 1938 the CPGB even declared that, for colonial peoples, there was "very little difference between Italian and German fascism and British imperialism," and reaffirmed "the right of complete independence".[10]

But Adi's presentation obscures the political retreat beneath these declarations. In June 1938, the CPGB issued *Peace and the Colonial Question*, which Adi cites. It declared that colonial peoples should be regarded as allies in the "struggle for peace", but instead of immediate independence proposed a "minimum Charter of Rights of Colonial Peoples": universal suffrage, free education, civil liberties and trade-union rights.[11]

Adi presents this as evidence of the party's renewed attention to the colonial question, when in fact independence survived only as an abstract principle, with the reality being the party's advocacy of democratic reform within the empire, subordinated to the struggle for "peace" and an alliance with sections of British imperialism against fascism.

In the United States, the Communist Party's subordination to the war effort of American imperialism produced equally disastrous results. After the US entered the Second World War, the Communist Party supported the no-strike pledge, opposing strikes by American workers on the grounds that they would undermine the war against fascism. The working class was told that its struggles had to be postponed because American imperialism was fighting a "democratic" war.

The Stalinists applied the same logic to the struggle against racial oppression. They opposed the March on Washington movement led by A. Philip Randolph, which demanded an end to discrimination in the war industries and the armed forces, on the grounds that the fight against segregation and Jim Crow would undermine the war effort. Black workers were told that their demand for equality had to be postponed because the "democratic" war against fascism came first.

The Stalinist counterrevolutionary strategy culminated in the liquidation of the IUTCNW in 1937. In its final statement, the ITUCNW declared that "everywhere Negro organisations must be linked with every movement, every expression of the democratic world against fascist reaction". In this unity, it now claimed, lay "the hope of a full and complete democracy for Africa".[12] The ITUCNW and *The Negro Worker* were to disappear into a broader committee, with their contacts and subscribers transferred to the new body. That committee was to operate under the French Communist Party's control. Nothing durable replaced it. Remarkably, Adi describes the closing down of the organisation to which he dedicates entire sections of his book as a "rather poignant finale", then apologises for the Stalinists, claiming it was done "for sound political reasons".[13]

Stalinism set itself against the anti-colonial and industrial struggles of the workers and oppressed masses. Between 1935 and 1939 African mineworkers struck on the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt, cocoa farmers organised a mass boycott in the Gold Coast, railway and urban workers fought in Senegal and Sierra Leone, and anti-colonial demonstrations shook Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco. Adi himself notes that the ITUCNW's dissolution coincided with the outbreak of major anti-colonial struggles in the Caribbean.

Six years later, the Stalinist bureaucracy declared the liquidation of the Comintern itself amid the Second World War. The politically significant even, on an organisation he dedicates 405 pages to, is reduced to a few passages. In a footnote in the Introduction, Adi writes "Largely due to wartime conditions, the Comintern dissolved itself in 1943". In the Epilogue, he then states, "The CI's concern with the Negro Question did not end with the dissolution of the ITUCNW [...] but the growing danger of fascism and world war impelled the Comintern to make this its main focus until it too was dissolved, partly as a consequence of war-time conditions, in 1943."[14]

Once again, Adi's account amounts to an apology for Stalinism. The dissolution of the Comintern was not simply a consequence of wartime conditions, but a deliberate political decision by the Stalinist bureaucracy. It was abolished in 1943 to facilitate the Soviet bureaucracy's wartime alliance with the imperialist powers, above all Britain and the United States. Its dissolution sent an unmistakable political signal to the imperialist powers: the Soviet bureaucracy had no interest in world socialist revolution and would not allow the revolutionary aspirations of the international working class to interfere with its diplomatic agreements.

By subordinating the working class to Soviet diplomacy and alliances with "democratic" imperialism, Stalinism's betrayal of the colonial struggles weakened the revolutionary internationalist opposition to imperialism and strengthened the appeal of bourgeois nationalism and Pan-Africanism. It helped direct a generation of anti-colonial militants to seek out national roads to liberation rather than a socialist alternative grounded in the international unity of the working class.

But the destruction of a revolutionary Marxist alternative to world imperialism was not accomplished by political betrayal alone. It was pursued by means of physical extermination. The Stalinist terror of the 1930s, which Adi dismisses, decapitated the cadres who would have carried the programme of world socialist revolution into the post-war struggles of the colonial world.

To be continued.

Op. cit., p. 402.

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Maurice Thorez, “La France du Front populaire,” report to the Ninth Congress of the French Communist Party, Arles, December 1937, reproduced in *Cahiers du mouvement ouvrier*, no. 69, January–March 2016, p. 115. Available at Marxists Internet Archive: marxists.org/francais/cmo/n69/cmo_069.pdf

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Op cit., p. 282.

Op cit., p. 281.

Op cit., p. 299.

Op cit., p. 400.

Op cit., p. 401.

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[1] Op. cit., p. 402.

[2] Maurice Thorez, “La France du Front populaire,” report to the Ninth Congress of the French Communist Party, Arles, December 1937, reproduced in *Cahiers du mouvement ouvrier*, no. 69, January–March 2016, p. 115. Available at Marxists Internet Archive: marxists.org/francais/cmo/n69/cmo_069.pdf

[3] Ibid., p. 117.

[4] “Résolution du bureau politique du Parti communiste tunisien,” L’Avenir social, 7 April 1938; quoted in “Le Dessous des Dates | 9 avril 1938. L’expression d’une colère anticoloniale,” Inkyfada: https://inkyfada.com/fr/2021/04/09/dessous-des-dates-9-avril-1938-colere-anticoloniale/

[5] “Le Dessous des Dates | 9 avril 1938. L’expression d’une colère anticoloniale,” Inkyfada, 9 April 2021: https://inkyfada.com/fr/2021/04/09/dessous-des-dates-9-avril-1938-colere-anticoloniale/

[6] Ludivine Bantigny, “Bonnes feuilles : le Front populaire face à la question coloniale,” Histoire coloniale et postcoloniale: https://histoirecoloniale.net/bonnes-feuilles-le-front-populaire-face-a-la-question-coloniale-par-ludivine-bantigny/

[7] Ibid.

[8] José Díaz, “Por la libertad de España y por la paz del mundo,” speech to the Cortes, Valencia, 1 December 1936. Available at: Marxists Internet Archive: https://www.marxists.org/espanol/diaz/1930s/tadl/27.htm

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[10] Op cit., p. 282.

[11] Op cit., p. 281.

[12] Op cit., p. 299.

[13] Op cit., p. 400.

[14] Op cit., p. 401.

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