

6. COMINTERN AND SOME QUESTIONS OF THE COMMUNIST AND NATIONAL LIBERATION MOVEMENT IN THE ARAB EAST AND AFRICA

Practically all the oppressed countries of Asia and Africa in which liberation movements developed during the 1920s and 1930s came within the purview of the Comintern. The scope and forms of these movements, the composition of their participants differed. They all, however, had an anti-colonial bias; the Comintern regarded them as important factor of the world anti-imperialist struggle.

In working out recommendations for Communists and national-revolutionary forces of a particular country and region, the Comintern relied on fundamental Leninist tactical and strategic principles and took full account of local conditions. "Diversity in unity" and "unity in diversity" were typical of Comintern policy. Confirmation of that are the theoretical conclusions of the Comintern in regard to the revolutionary process in such varying parts of the oppressed world as the Arab East, South Africa and Tropical Africa.

The anti-imperialist movement in the Arab countries considerably came to life in the first half of the 1930s. Spontaneous uprisings of the lower stations of society took place in Egypt in the period 1930-1931, aimed mainly against the British oppressors; in the mid-1930s the strike movement also acquires wide scope there. Forces opposing British rule consolidated themselves in Iraq. The democratic party, named Neo-Destour, advocating national independence and better conditions for the peasants, came into existence in Tunisia in the early 1930s. In Algeria the demand for independence was advanced by the North African Star national liberation organisation; and the Popular Front formed in France in 1935 had its organisations

here among Europeans and Algerians alike. These organisations fought against local fascists and opposed Italian aggression in Ethiopia. The anti-imperialist struggle came to life in Syria in the mid-1930s in which workers, peasants, students, petty bourgeoisie and national bourgeoisie all acted in a united front. A general strike of workers supported by peasant actions shook Damascus in January-March 1936.

In connection with the stepping up of the anti-imperialist struggle in Arab countries, the Comintern paid more attention to the development of the communist movement in the Arab East. The Executive Committee Secretariat under the chairmanship of Georgi Dimitrov gave careful and comprehensive consideration of the question on 29 February 1936.

The most important document adopted by the Secretariat as a result of the discussion was the detailed resolution "Tasks of Communist Parties of Arab Countries in the Fight for a Popular Anti-Imperialist Front".

The ECCI Secretariat noted that despite the growth in the national liberation and labour movement in Arab countries, the communist parties of those countries for a long time remained isolated groups divorced from the masses. That was due, the document said, above all to the fact that in their tactics the communist parties were "extremely sectarian" and "standing aloof from the Arab national liberation movement". The Comintern drew their attention to the need unswervingly to follow Lenin's propositions on backing the national liberation movement and national-revolutionary in particular. "The people have not seen in our parties organisations fighting above all for the national independence of Arab peoples," said the Comintern Executive's resolution. "They have regarded them as organisations striving for remote goals related to socialist revolution and expressed in abstract slogans which the people cannot understand. Our parties have tried to impose communist slogans on national-revolutionaries and, sharply attacking national-reformists, denying their influence among the people, precluding the possibility of joint action with them against the onslaught of imperialism have lumped them all together with the imperialists." The communist parties underestimated work among Arab working people. Only in Syria did Communists pursue a policy of "Arabisation" (i.e., winning the support of the mass of Arab working people) of the communist movement, took certain positions in the trade union and strike movement and played an active part in the popular struggle for national liberation.

"Communist parties of Arab countries," the resolution went

on to say, "must appreciate that the campaign against imperialist tyranny and for national independence is the dominant question in the whole of their activity and an indicator of their political standing in the country, and that the fate of the communist parties in Arab countries and the strengthening of their positions among the Arab working class depend on a proper approach to that question and activity in the struggle for national independence. Communists in the Arab countries must profoundly comprehend that they are responsible for the destiny of their people and their country, that they have a responsibility for the successful or unsuccessful outcome of the contention for national independence and social emancipation, that they are the inheritors and protectors of the best national and cultural traditions of their people."

The resolution also listed partial demands which parties were recommended to support: elementary political rights and freedoms, establishment of self-governing bodies, national schools, abolition of extraordinary laws for Arabs. The Comintern Executive counselled the parties vigorously to fight to draw the peasants into the national liberation movement.

The communist parties "must create all the conditions for organising an Arab popular front in each country. To do this they must radically change their attitude to national-revolutionary organisations and parties and their tactics and approach to national-reformists. Communists of Arab countries need to ensure close cooperation with national-revolutionaries and joint action with national-reformist organisations, to support demands of those organisations directed against imperialism, to penetrate those organisations and encourage movements for a popular anti-imperialist front within their ranks. Simultaneously they need to promote an ideological campaign against national-reformism as an ideology and practice of collaboration with imperialism, and a campaign against any manifestation of opportunist distortion of the popular-front tactics in the sense of collusion and conciliation with imperialism".

Referring to the resolution of its Seventh Congress on the report read by Georgi Dimitrov, the Comintern Executive advised Arab Communists to work within the existing reformist labour unions and to encourage their conversion into class organisations. Comintern recommendations orienting them on the anti-war struggle were of great importance to Arab Communists. The resolution noted that by opposing imperialist actions in converting Arab countries into their military strategic bases, into sources of cannon fodder, and consigning Arab peoples to starvation

and deprivation, the communist parties could and had to mobilise the widest united front against the imperialist war. At the same time, they had to mobilise the Arab peoples to back the struggle of the Abyssinian people for their independence against Italian fascist aggression.

The resolution contained recommendations for individual Arab countries as well. So, Syrian Communists were recommended to campaign for concerted action of all forces and parties opposed to imperialism, and to organise a broad non-partisan movement in the form of a far-flung network of organisations giving voice to the urgent demands of various sections of the working people. In Palestine the Communist Party was advised to conduct work also among Jewish working people as well as among the Arab population. The Comintern Executive saw the major objective in Iraq as setting up a mass national-revolutionary movement, uniting national-revolutionary elements into a mass legal party with a broad democratic programme. In the opinion of the Executive, the most salient condition for the Communist Party's successful work in Egypt was to have a correct, realistic policy in relation to the Wafd, the party led by the national bourgeoisie. The Wafd was very broad in its makeup and was "the most powerful national party in the country with an enormous impact on the people"; Communists were recommended to support the Wafd's anti-imperialist demands and be vigilant about attempts by leaders of the Wafd to compromise with imperialism at the expense of Egyptian people's interests.

French Communists were advised to follow the resolute line of Arabising the communist movement in Algeria and Tunisia. As the resolution put it, "French comrades must remember Lenin's words addressed to Russian Communists of the Transcaucasus, that they were helpmates, not leaders or nannies". The Comintern Executive felt that Algerian Communists should join the North African Star national-revolutionary organisation, which had "undisputed influence among the Arab people" and to unite the people around the slogans of that organisation. Through the North African Star the Communist Party was to work on establishing committees of a united Arab popular front embracing such Arab national parties as the Ulem Association, the Federation of Elected Muslims, League of Arab Schoolteachers, all student associations, etc.

In Tunisia, said the resolution of the ECCI Secretariat, Arab national personnel of the Communist Party should join the existing mass revolutionary national party Neo-Destour to work within it. Tunisian Communists were advised to encourage the

building of organisations of that party in town and country, actively to support left-wing elements in the organisation's leadership, mobilise the people on the basis of its slogans. By concentrating their activity within the Destour, Communists should at the same time retain the independence of their organisation, shoring up and extending their ranks, so that their prestige increased among Arab working people. The Comintern Executive stressed that attempts by Tunisian Communists to impose leftist slogans upon the national party, for understanding which the people following it were not yet ready, could only lead to strengthening the right and isolating left Destourists and Communists from the people.

The ECCI Secretariat adopted yet another resolution—"On Ties and Interrelations Between Communist Parties of Arab Countries". In the Secretariat's opinion, ethnic kinship, the common language and the solidarity of Arab peoples in the struggle against imperialism and for national independence presented communist parties in the area with the task of ensuring well-organised contacts for the purpose of mutual information, exchange of experience, mutual assistance, concerted campaigns, issuing of appeals and cooperation in publishing political literature and periodicals.

Speaking at a Secretariat meeting, Dimitrov stressed the importance of firm links between communist parties of Arab countries, but did not approve the idea of forming a united general Arab party organisation and spoke against premature advancement of the slogan of establishing a united Arab republic, against taking the tendency of Arab peoples towards unity for already established unity. He thought that this idea was mere wishful thinking. Dimitrov was supported by Eastern Secretariat leader Otto Kuusinen and by D. Z. Manuilsky.

Comintern documents referring to the liberation movement of Arab peoples were based on Lenin's idea of the need for every possible support by Communists to national-revolutionary movements in the East while retaining the independence of the communist movement. Another important thought—in relation to Arabisation of the communist movement—was most closely bound up with Lenin's notion of Communists working among the people. The Comintern Executive Committee Secretariat thought that a prerequisite of Arabisation was the communist parties' struggle for political rights for Arabs, for drawing them into the political liberation movement.

On 17 March 1936 the ECCI Secretariat discussed the question of the work of the Communist Party of South Africa and

basically approved its draft programme of action. The final text of the action programme "Tasks of Communist of South Africa" noted the "profound discontent" of the native peoples of South Africa. The programme was patently internationalist. Only the common struggle of all exploited, oppressed working people was capable of improving the unbearable position of the peoples of South Africa, the programme said. It called for unity of native peoples, of all workers without distinction by race and all White working people for a common struggle against imperialism. The document focused attention of South African Communists on everyday, urgent demands of the working people.

The first part of the programme was entitled "Bread and Work for All Workers, White and Coloured!". In particular it put forward demands of equal pay for equal work, without favour to race or sex, without reducing the existing level of wages of Whites; higher wages in line with depreciation of the pound; the right of the local population to obtain skilled work; the payment of unemployment benefit to all the unemployed. The second part contained slogans reflecting the demands of peasants and farm labourers. "Only confiscation without compensation of the land of the big land barons, ... the religious missions and crown possessions, and the transfer of that land together with state land to the free use of native peoples and poor White farmers could lead to a *fundamental and lasting* improvement in the position of the native population," the programme stated. At the same time, immediate demands were made: annulling the land law that infringed the interests of the local populace; immediately setting aside a special land fund from state, crown and big landowner lands for granting Africans a land area sufficient for "ensuring life"; during crisis and unemployment the free granting of bread by the state to starving farmers—both White and African; the return of all subsidies received by big farmers from the state; state aid to all poor farmers out of the profits of the finance magnates and landowners; state-provided irrigation facilities to poor and middle farmers.

The Comintern and the Communist Party of South Africa felt that "the very rich should pay". South African Communists demanded progressive taxation of the profits of the finance magnates, the big bourgeoisie and landowners; the annulling of crippling taxes imposed upon the local working people (passport taxes, poll taxes, tax on habitation, etc.); a fundamental change in tariffs policy by the government in the interests of working people.

The part of the document "Rights and Liberties for All!" was also extremely important. Communists demanded "Equal civil and political rights and liberties for all the adult population of South Africa without favour to race, nationality, sex, colour of skin and social status!". They also advanced the slogans: "Against the abolition of those modest political rights that some native peoples possess, and for the extension of those rights"; for the annulling of the "anti-native electoral law", the passport law and all similar constrictions; for freedom of movement; for freedom of residence for Africans and Whites; for the extension to Africans of existing liberties in establishing associations—trade union, cooperative, political, for granting freedom of the press, assembly, demonstrations and strikes. They demanded the urgent disbandment of fascist organisations whipping up national and racial hatred in the interests of capitalists and landowners. The campaign for equal political rights and liberties for natives, like the campaign for improving working and living conditions, for a higher cultural level, was assessed as the most powerful means of defending living conditions, wages, the rights and freedoms of White working people.

The document clearly spelled out the tasks of Communists in South Africa. The main one was to campaign for a united anti-imperialist popular front. The Communist Party was not only to support the liberation movement of African peoples, the strike movement of workers, the "movement of poor Whites" and the Boer republican movement, it was also to campaign for closer contact and agreement with existing mass organisations, and in particular with the reformist African National Congress "on the subject of organising joint action". It especially emphasised the task of uniting the entire South African proletariat.

The programme underlined that the slogan of an independent native republic advanced by the Sixth Comintern Congress was only a long-term objective of the national liberation struggle in South Africa, summing up all the specific economic and political slogans of the people. What sort of state organisation the peoples of South Africa would choose would depend on the specific internal and international conditions.

The Comintern ratified the draft "Programme of Action of the Popular League for Liberation of the Congo (PLLC)" on 27 April 1932. The programme stated that the PLLC was an organisation of Congolese revolutionary workers and peasants; it was leading workers and peasants in a fight against starvation, low wages, onerous labour, and full and complete indepen-

dence of the Congo. The programme called upon the Congolese people to support the struggle begun by workers on the plantations in Kwango and peasants in the villages who were rising against the Belgian colonialists, and to come to their assistance, to organise themselves, to refuse to load and transport weapons and troops: "Not a single boat, not a single train bearing death to freedom-fighters must leave the towns."

The PLLC programme proclaimed slogans of freedom of assembly, speech and organisation, the right to move from village to village and from province to province, free access to work and freedom to leave it. It also advanced demands to confiscate all lands and forests seized from the Congolese people, railways, mills, mines, plantations and for "their return to the people of the Congo". The programme contained a special appeal to the Congolese workers, saying that capitalist companies had been forcing Congolese workers to labour in stifling heat for many long hours, were keeping them on starvation rations and, besides, were feeding them rotten food. It was Congolese workers—because they were strong, because there were hundreds and thousands of them working in big centres, because they were fighting every day against oppression—that had to head the struggle of the Congolese people. Workers in the Congo were recommended to unite in trade unions. The Congolese people were not alone in their struggle, the programme said. Throughout the African continent, in India and China, in Germany, France and Belgium, across the world, millions of working people—"black, white, brown and yellow"—"joined in fraternal union, were waging the war of the poor against the rich, of workers against bosses, of the oppressed against the oppressors".

At the height of class battles within Europe, at a time when the most complex tasks associated with the mounting revolutionary movement in Asia were being decided, the Comintern was paying utmost attention, too, to the struggle of peoples of Africa, fully assessing its prospects and significance, and helping to form national-revolutionary organisations there.