

AWAKENING EAST

Pages from History



1917-1967

L. ANDRONOV

DU SK WAS settling over the island prison when the cannon at the gates sounded the alarm: a prisoner had escaped. He had got out, plunged into the sea and was quite a distance away before the alarm was given and the guards opened fire. Darkness and good luck saved him. He sighted a fishing vessel, called out for help, was picked up, hidden from the police and put ashore, where he changed his appearance and name, determined to continue the battle against the foe...

This is not an episode from "The Count of Monte Cristo." It took place in the autumn of 1917. The scene was the British prison in Singapore. The escaped prisoner, Abani Mukherji, was an Indian revolutionary. Under the name of Dr. Shaheer he travelled to Java, from there to Holland, then to Germany and, finally, in 1920, to Moscow. Here he met his future wife, Rosa Fitingof. Since his death she has been living in Leningrad with their daughter.

A member of the CPSU since 1918, in 1919-20 she was assistant to Lydia Fotieva, Lenin's private secretary. She handled Lenin's mail, saw him practically every day at the office or at home and retains fond memories of those distant times.

She also remembers many of her husband's comrades, the first Indian Communists who came to Soviet Russia shortly after the October Revolution. Champions of India's independence, they sought revolutionary Russia's aid in the fight to liberate their country from British rule.

Their paths to Communism, which they made the guiding principle of their patriotic struggle, differed. Mukherji,

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a native of Bengal, came into contact with Marxism during his many travels and arrived in Moscow a convinced Communist. Mohammed Shafiq, a native of Punjab, became a Communist under the influence of what he had seen and learned in Soviet Russia. Prativadi Acharya, a native of Kerala, was won over to Communism after his talks with Lenin whom he met, together with other Indian revolutionaries, in the spring of 1919. Another Indian to visit Lenin was Abdur Rab, who later helped Lenin select books on India for his library.

Mukherji and Acharya met Lenin again at the Second Congress of the Communist International in the summer of 1920, which they attended as delegates.

Lenin and India

By mid-1920 there was quite a group of Indian revolutionaries in Soviet Russia. They had come to draw the Soviet authorities' attention to their various plans of liberating India from British rule. And their plans were inspired by the mounting anti-colonial movement in India under the influence of the Russian Revolution. Spontaneous risings were reported in many parts of the country. The Indian exiles asked for arms, particularly for Indian soldiers in the British army (then invading Soviet Turkestan) who had gone over to the Red Army. There was a plan to form the core of a future Indian Liberation Army. One of the most ardent advocates of that was Manabendra Nath Roy, then in Moscow.

Roy, a native of Bengal, was an active terrorist in the years preceding World War I. His terror tactics against

the local colonial authorities proved a dismal failure and he was compelled to flee the country. In Mexico he made the acquaintance of Communists and was their delegate to the Second Comintern Congress in 1920.

He considered himself a Communist, but in reality was a petty-bourgeois extremist. For him the Communist International was not an organization aiming at the ideological unity of all the genuine revolutionary forces, but a "military centre," a "combat unit." In the debate on the national question, Roy expressed opinions that could only be described as infantile "Left-wing Communism."

Roy was never cured of that. In the end, at an advanced age, like many other petty-bourgeois extremists, he completely departed from Marxism. Indeed, there would be no need to recall this ill-starred politician, were it not that his discussions with Lenin nearly half a century ago retain all their historical validity.

In setting out his views at the Second Comintern Congress, Roy urged Communists in the colonial countries to dissociate themselves from the bourgeois-democratic nationalists with their slogans of a popular liberation movement and rely solely on what he described as "revolutionary parties," a term he applied to the small scattered terrorist groups in India. This was tantamount to self-isolation, and could lead only to defeat in colonial countries. Roy did not appreciate the vital need for a broad anti-imperialist front, apparently had no faith in the power of Marxism to change the world, did not want to wait for the maturing of the conditions needed to eliminate colonial rule. He banked entirely on the pistol and the rifle, on some stroke of luck.

How did Lenin react to this adventurism? Roy wrote many years later:

"Lenin's attitude was very kind and tolerant... I had the rare privilege of being treated as an equal by a great man who proved his greatness by doing so. He could have refused to waste his precious time in discussing with a young man of no importance."

Another Second Congress delegate, Alfred Rosmer of France, writes in his reminiscences:

"Patiently Lenin replied to him [Roy] explaining that for a longer or shorter period of time the Indian Communist Party would be a small party with but few members, having only weak resources, incapable of reaching on the basis of its programme and by means of its own activity a substantial number of peasants and workers. On the other hand, on the basis of demands for national independence, it would become possible to mobilize large masses—experience had already demonstrated that amply—and it was only in the course of this struggle that the Indian Communist Party would forge and develop its organization."

Lenin recommended that not only for India, but for all other imperialist-oppressed countries. Speaking at the Second Comintern Congress on the national and colonial question, he said:

"We have discussed whether it would be right or wrong, in principle and in theory, to state that the Communist International and the Communist parties must support the bourgeois-democratic movement in backward countries. As a result of our discussion, we have arrived at the unanimous decision to speak of the national-revolutionary movement rather than of the 'bourgeois-democratic' movement. It is beyond doubt that any national movement can only be a bourgeois-democratic movement, since the overwhelming mass of the population in the backward countries consist of peasants who represent bourgeois-capitalist relationships. It would be utopian to believe that proletarian parties in these backward countries, if indeed they can emerge in them, can pursue communist

tactics and a communist policy without establishing definite relations with the peasant movement and without giving it effective support."

Lenin's definition of the nature of the national-liberation movement and the place the Communist parties hold in it was a guide to Communist strategy and tactics in the colonial countries for many years to come.

The Second Congress unanimously approved Lenin's theses on the national and colonial question. The Fourth Comintern Congress (1922) expressly stated in its theses on the Eastern question: "The Communist International supports every national-revolutionary movement against imperialism.... The united anti-imperialist front slogan ought now to be advanced in the colonial East. The need for this is based on the prospect of a long and hard struggle against world imperialism which calls for the mobilization of all revolutionary elements."

Lenin's Second Congress theses on the national and colonial question exerted a powerful influence on the small Communist organizations which emerged in the twenties in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, Cawnpore and Lahore. Last year, on the fortieth anniversary of the Communist Party of India, its weekly, *New Age*, wrote in reference to the early Communist organizations: "The first co-ordinated action of these groups was to put forward a programme of demands and action for the national movement in the spirit of Lenin's theses."

In later years the Communist Party of India worked in concert with the bourgeois nationalists of the Indian National Congress in the battle for independence, and as a result won enormous popularity among the working people and became a major political force in liberated India.

Treating the "Infantile Disorder"

But to return to Moscow in the autumn of 1920, after the Second Congress, when its foreign delegates were returning home. The Indians left Mos-

cow in September and went to Tashkent, where they planned to begin the organization of their Indian Liberation Army.

Lenin, of course, knew of this. He also knew that the revolutionary storm in Russia had captured the imagination of many Indian patriots and had given rise to utopian dreams of duplicating the Russian events in India. Roy was not the only one to succumb to these Leftist sentiments.

A true internationalist, Lenin regarded the British rule of India as "violence" and "plunder." If the Indian people were to rise against Britain, he wrote in 1915, this would be a just war "irrespective of who would be the first to attack; any socialist would wish the oppressed, dependent and unequal states victory over the oppressor, slaveholding and predatory 'Great' Powers." In a letter written in the same year, Lenin remarked, in reference to national-liberation wars: "Would we not be for India against Britain, etc.?"

Shortly after the October Revolution, British troops invaded the Transcaucasus, Turkestan, the Far East and the Northern part of European Russia. Addressing a meeting of workers and government officials in Moscow on July 29, 1918, Lenin said:

"Counter-revolutionary revolts have broken out in a number of towns in Central Asia with the obvious complicity of the British entrenched in India, who, having brought Afghanistan completely under their sway, long ago created a base for extending their colonial possessions, strangling nations, and attacking Soviet Russia."

A group of exiles—Roy, Mohammed Shafiq, Mohammad Ali and others—went to Central Asia to begin an unequal struggle against the gigantic British military and colonial machine. They travelled in a special train accompanied by Rosa Fitingof as interpreter. Somewhat later they were joined by her husband, Abani Mukherji, Prativadi Acharya and Abdur Rab.

Rosa Fitingof recalls: "After a long and somewhat dangerous trip we arrived in Tashkent. The local authorities

allotted us one of the best buildings in the city, the mansion formerly occupied by the diplomatic representative of the Emir of Bukhara. True, there was practically no useful furniture like chairs and tables, but this was compensated by piles and piles of carpets of the most exquisite variety. They came in very handy in the winter. Dislocation of the transport system and raids by the Basmachi bands left the city practically without fuel. The local Soviet, however, supplied us with firewood for the huge stone kitchen stove. Though the Tashkent winter is mild, it was too cold for the Indians and in the evenings they would congregate in the basement to sit around the kitchen stove singing their songs or thinking aloud of the day when they would return to India as victors. They were building castles in the air. . . . They were mostly young men, tall, slim, with slender hands and burning black eyes. I was attached to them and wanted to help—they looked too weak and too unprepared for the venture they were planning."

Another group of more than 50 Indian revolutionaries arrived in Tashkent towards the end of 1920. They had fled from India to escape persecution by the colonial authorities. It was a long and arduous trek across the waterless plains of Afghanistan and over the Hindu Kush mountain passes. Finally they reached Soviet Turkestan but were taken prisoner by the Basma-

chi just when they were about to cross the Amu Darya.

The Soviet army commander in Turkestan, Mikhail Frunze, one of the outstanding Red Army leaders, sent a detachment to relieve them. The Basmachi were routed and the Indians freed. They were a sorry sight; many were sick, all were dressed in rags, some were too weak to walk. They were given clothes, food and medical treatment and brought to Tashkent. Their first request was to be allowed to join the other Indian groups and share in the armed struggle against the British.

The Indians' request for weapons and ammunition was discussed by the Revolutionary Military Council of the Turkestan Front. N. I. Favorsky, then a Deputy Member of the Council, was present at one of these discussions. A member of the Communist Party from July 1917, he was appointed to look after the Indians. This is his story:

"At one of the Council meetings Roy, speaking for the entire group, asked for food, military equipment and assistance in organizing military training. Of course, we knew what this entailed. When Roy left the meeting, after putting his case, there were such remarks as 'adventurism,' 'fantastic.' That was the first reaction and it was followed by more serious consideration. It was decided to give the Indian comrades all possible support without, however, being involved in their plan. That too, as far as I know, was the attitude of Moscow. The Indians were allotted a shooting range off the Chirchik highway near Tashkent and began their military training."

They were very enthusiastic, but it was not long before the whole plan had to be abandoned—the Afghan government categorically refused them permission to cross Afghanistan on the way to India. Roy's repeated and insistent appeals to the Afghan consulate in Tashkent were of no avail. In

the spring of 1921 military training stopped. Some of the Indians decided to return to India illegally, others stayed on in Tashkent, several joined the Red Army and 22 returned to Moscow to study at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East.

Forty years after these events Roy wrote in his reminiscences that before leaving Moscow for Tashkent he had an interview with Lenin. And Lenin warned him that the plan to attack the British in India via Afghanistan was doomed to certain failure because, faced with such a danger, London "would bombard Amanullah's citadel with silver and gold bullets." And Lenin, Roy writes, proved right.

Nehru and the Communist

For the Indian Communists the Tashkent experiment proved a grim but useful lesson. After Tashkent they re-directed their activities towards contacts with the Indian National Congress leadership. In 1921 they sent a message to its Ahmedabad session, in which the Congress is described as the "leader of the national-liberation movement." The message was secretly brought to India by Nalini Gupta, a Communist. Incidentally, in later years Sir Cecil Kaye, the head of the British Intelligence Service in India, maintained that Gupta had instructions to "contact Gandhi."

Mahatma Gandhi could not, in his own words, fully appreciate the meaning of Bolshevism, but nevertheless he believed that "an ideal that is sanctified by the sacrifices of such master spirits as Lenin cannot be in vain."

Lenin did not share Gandhi's views, but judging by some indications, he did not consider them "in vain." Roy recalls that when, in Lenin's presence, he described Gandhi's policy as "ineffectual" Lenin warned him against "wishful interpretation of facts." And People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs Chicherin described Roy's opinion of Gandhi as "too pessimistic." For Lenin Gandhi was, evidently, above all a



ABANI MUKHERJI and ROSA FITINGOF
(Photos of the 1920's)

champion of anti-imperialism. To quote Roy again: "Lenin believed that, as the inspirer and leader of a mass movement, he [Gandhi] was objectively a revolutionary." (This is interesting, considering that Gandhi is never once mentioned in Lenin's Collected Works.)

Abani Mukherji followed Gupta to India a year later. In December 1922 he attended the National Congress session at Gaya, where he had talks with prominent Congressmen who were anxious to co-operate with the Left. Shripad Amrit Dange, now Chairman of the Communist Party of India, took part in these talks. Judging from what Mukherji told his wife, Rosa Fitingof, he also met Jawaharlal Nehru.

Jawaharlal Nehru appreciated the influence the socialist revolution in Russia was exerting on the Indian liberation movement. There is the view that Nehru was opposed to the Communists and hostile to Leninism. That, however, is refuted by the record of Nehru's activities in the stormy 1920's.

In the spring of 1929 the British authorities arrested a group of Indian Communists on charges of "conspiring against His Majesty" to "deprive the King-Emperor of his sovereign power in India." They were tried in Meerut and one of their defence lawyers was Nehru, who gave his services free. At about the same time he met the Indian Communist Nissar, who was acting in accordance with directives from the Communist International. Nehru regarded the Indian Communists and the Comintern as the most resolute and consistent opponents of British imperialism and sought contact with them. In one of his articles of those years he wrote: "As between the labour worlds of the Second International and the Third International, my sympathies were with the latter," for it was "not imperialistic."

Nehru's political views were largely influenced by his 1926-27 European trip. In Brussels he represented his party at the Congress of Oppressed Peoples and made a statement which his English biographer, Brecher, described as "a

forthright attack on imperialism bristling with Marxist terminology."

Nehru was elected a member of the Anti-Imperialist League Executive and formed close relations with the Indian Communists in the League.

Shortly after the Brussels Congress Nehru made a short trip to Moscow. His father, Motilal Nehru, a prominent Congress leader, who accompanied him on his European tour, at first strongly objected to the Moscow visit. Nehru himself recalled later that just before leaving for the Soviet capital he was warned that "Russia is a land of anarchy and misery." But he made the trip in November 1927, and even persuaded his father to accompany him. Two years later he described what he had seen and learned in the book, "Soviet Russia."

In it Nehru speaks with admiration of the Soviet people's achievements in the ten years since the revolution, of what they had accomplished in the economic field, education, in building a democratic society where the working people of all nationalities enjoy equal

rights and opportunities. He met Mikhail Kalinin, and was greatly impressed by the modesty and kinship with people of the Soviet President and the other Soviet leaders.

One of the chapters is titled "Lenin." Essentially, it is a record of Nehru's reflections as he stood at the Lenin Mausoleum in Red Square. He had the greatest respect for Lenin, and, judging from this book, made a fairly detailed study of Leninism. Nehru urged his Congress colleagues to learn from Lenin fidelity to principle and sober realism, particularly on such matters as combining revolutionary theory with practice, party organization, the attitude towards the parliamentary system and political compromise. For the young Nehru Lenin, in his own words, was a political genius, an example to be emulated.

The Indian people, he believed, must live in friendship and co-operation with their powerful Soviet neighbour.

Lenin, too, wanted to see the future free India a friend of Soviet Russia. Today that is a reality.

Carlos Zapata Vela



Carlos Zapata Vela, new Mexican Ambassador to Moscow, was born in the little town of Cuiclahuac, Veracruz State, on July 20, 1906. He is a lawyer by profession. After graduating from

the Faculty of Law and Social Science of the National University of Mexico, he was in turn secretary to the Presiding Committee of the Institutional Revolutionary Party's Executive, head of the Senate's Press Section and the Legal Department of the Ministry of the Merchant Marine, deputy director of the Agricultural Credit Bank, land reclamation chief in the Mexico City district, and private secretary to the Minister of the Merchant Marine. He acted as counsel for peasant and worker organizations in a number of court cases.

In 1940-43 and 1961-64 Señor Zapata was a deputy of the National Congress. Politically, he belongs to the Left wing of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party. In the summer of 1962 he visited Moscow with a Mexican delegation to the World Peace Congress.

PEOPLE
IN THE NEWS