

DEFENSE OF THE SOVIET UNION

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I. Introduction

A study of Comintern policy shows that from its inception in 1919, support of the Soviet Union was always an important part of that policy. What follows is an examination of the kinds of support given the Soviet Union by the Comintern and how and why support for the Soviet Union developed in such a way that by 1935 the defense of the Soviet Union had become the main task of the Communist movement.

II. Appeals for the Defense of the Soviet Union while it was Under Attack or Faced Attack

The First Comintern Congress was held in Moscow, March 1919, while Soviet Russia was being blockaded and attacked by western governments who were also supporting counter-revolutionary armies in the Civil War. It was only natural and correct that the Comintern should issue an appeal to the workers of the world stating:

The honour, independence, and most elementary interests of the proletariat of all countries demand that they should immediately act and use all means at their disposal, if necessary revolutionary means, to give effect to the following demands...

Those demands included nonintervention by the Entente, recognition of the Soviet government as the legitimate government of Russia, cessation of the economic blockade, the resumption of trade relations, and the dispatch to Russia of "a few thousand" engineers, skilled workers and other specialists to aid in the restoration of industry and rail transport. (Jane Degras, The Communist International 1919-1943, V. I, pp. 30-31)

Other such demands were made in the course of the Civil War and intervention. Chicherin, Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs wrote in the October 1919 issue of 'Kimmunisticheskii Internatsional':

For the first time, after a long interval, the revolutionary proletariat is again confronted with positive tasks in the field of foreign policy. For the first time there are, among existing governments, some in whose support the revolutionary international proletariat has an interest. These governments are becoming the centre of the entire world struggle between the oppressed and the oppressing countries and groups. Revolutionary proletarian parties and groups have a new task, to fight for the security and consolidation of the international status of the revolutionary Soviet governments... (Degras, V. I. p. 59)

In July 1920, as part of its "Theses on the National and Colonial Question," the Second Comintern Congress said:

The world political situation has now placed the proletarian dicta-

torship on the order of the day, and all events in world politics are necessarily concentrated on one central point, the struggle of the world bourgeoisie against the Russian Soviet Republic, which is rallying round itself both the soviet movements of the advanced workers in all countries, and all the national liberation movements in the colonies and among oppressed peoples, convinced by bitter experience that there is no salvation for them except in union with the revolutionary proletariat and in the victory of the Soviet power over world imperialism. (Degras, V. I, p. 141)

After the Civil War, this kind of support for the Soviet Union by the Comintern, that is support for the Soviet Union while it faced attack, is not prominent in Comintern policy until the late 1920's. I will discuss the resumption of this kind of support later in this paper.

III. Comintern Support for Soviet Diplomatic Positions

Concomitant with its support of the defense of the Soviet Union was the Comintern's support for its diplomatic positions.

When, in September 1920, the Soviet Union made a peace proposal to Poland, with which it had been at war, the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) issued an appeal "To All Communist Parties, All Communist Youth Organizations, to All Unions Adhering to or Sympathizing with the Communist International, to the Workers and Peasants of the Whole World," which included the following:

Comrade workers of Poland, England, France, America, Germany, Italy... You must not allow this crime ('the destruction of the Russian Soviet Republic...the centre and light of the world revolution') to be committed. You must rise as one man and with all the means at your command insist on your governments using their influence on the Polish government to persuade it to cease shedding the blood of the Polish people for alien interests, to accept Soviet Russia's proposal. By protests, meetings, and strikes proclaim to the entire world the will of the working people - peace with Russia. The Polish Government and the Anglo-French imperialists must be made aware of your wishes, your will, your strength.

Do not delay. Hurry. On you depends the peace of Europe; on your decision depends the fate of the world revolution, your own emancipation.

Prove, comrades, not in words but in actions, your fraternal solidarity with the Russian workers and peasants who have for three years been fighting not only for their own but also for your liberation from the yoke of bloodthirsty capitalism. Act! (Degras, V. I, pp. 191-192)

The history of the Comintern is replete with support for the USSR's international position, including a conference of Central Committee and parliamentary members of several European Communist Parties called by the

Communist International in October 1925 to organize a campaign against the Locarno Pact¹ which was seen as leading to an anti-Soviet coalition. (Degras, V. II, pp. 235-236)

When diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union were broken off by Great Britain in May 1927, the Eighth ECCI Plenum issued a manifesto denouncing the action as a move toward war with the Soviet Union. It stated in part:

Comrades! This action by Great Britain reveals the great danger threatening the world working class; it requires it to mobilize all its forces against war and for the defence of the proletarian state...

But imperialism cannot arm for war without a fight against the working class and its organizations. War against the Soviet Union is a class war, a war against the proletariat. The great imperialist states know that the world proletariat stands guard over the Russian revolution, that it will fight against the war, that it will defend, not the fatherlands of its exploiters, but the fatherland of the working class and the exploited...

War is near. Only by mass action, by huge protest meetings, by powerful demonstrations and protest strikes, by energetic mass battle will you be able to break the capitalist offensive and force the imperialist jackals to retreat. (Degras, V. II, pp. 367-369)

IV. The Soviet Union as the Bulwark of the Proletariat and as the "Touchstone" by which Working Class Organizations are "Tested"

In December 1921, in an appeal for Russian famine relief, the ECCI stated:

Comrades! All of you, without distinction of party, must realize this. You must all understand that the only guarantee for your victory is your own strength, your own proletarian power. Who at the present time holds in check the insane plans of the capitalists? Who fills them with terror and fear?

Your Soviet Russia! For every capitalist government fears the armed Russian workers. For every capitalist government understands that Soviet Russia is today the chief instrument, the main weapon in the hands of the world proletariat. (Degras. V. I. p. 302)

There is no question that the USSR's being the bulwark of the world proletariat remained an important (and correct) premise of Comintern policy throughout its history. Concomitant with that premise was another that held that the question of Soviet Russia was the "touchstone" by which all workers (and other) organizations were "tested". Thus in August 1920, the Second Comintern Congress stated:

The struggle for Soviet Russia has merged with the struggle against world imperialism. The question of Soviet Russia has become

the touchstone by which all the organizations of the working class are tested. The German Social-Democrats committed their second most infamous treachery- the first was on 4 August 1914 - when, at the head of the German state, they sought the protection of western imperialism instead of seeking an alliance with the revolution in the East. A Soviet Germany united with Soviet Russia would have been stronger than all the capitalist states put together!

The Communist International has proclaimed the cause of Soviet Russia as its own. The world proletariat will not sheathe its sword until Soviet Russia is one member in the World Federation of Soviet Republics... (Degras, V. I, p. 177)

V. The Responsibility of the World Proletariat to the Soviet Union - and the Consequences of its Failure to Make Revolution

One of the foundations upon which support of the world Communist movement for the Soviet Union rested was the belief that the world proletariat had an obligation to support that nation. The ECCI "Theses on the Fight Against the War Danger," March 1922, refers to

The halting development of the proletarian world revolution after its first daring initiative, the Russian Revolution, (which) enables the bourgeoisie in the leading capitalist countries to make the attempt to restore the collapsing economy and the shaken State on a capitalist basis... (Degras, V. I, p. 330)

As has already been shown in an earlier paper in this publication. Zetkin, a leader of the German Party, who was prominent in the Comintern, stated in June 1923, as paraphrased by Degras, that fascism "was a punishment for the proletariat not having carried further the revolution begun in Russia." (Degras, V. II, p. 39)

Implied in these statements is the belief - and attitude - that the world proletariat, having failed its responsibility to have made successful revolution, had the responsibility to, at the very least, support the Russian proletariat who had fulfilled its obligation and that support, of course, included that of the Soviet state.

VI. How, by 1935, the Defense of the Soviet Union Became the Main Task of the Communist International

Earlier, I discussed how the defense of the Soviet Union had been a prominent part of Comintern policy during the Russian Civil War and intervention in Russia by the imperialist powers. Beginning in 1928, with the recognition of the growing danger of imperialist war and the belief that imperialist war precluded an attack on the Soviet Union, the defense of the Soviet Union again came to be designated as one of the principal tasks of the Comintern. (Please refer to the report entitled "The Danger of War and Communist Policy (1928-1935)".) The sixth Comintern Congress' "Theses on the International Question," August 1928, lists it as the second of the

three main tasks of the Comintern:

The struggle against the approaching imperialist war, defence of the Soviet Union, the fight against intervention in China and against the partition of China, defence of the Chinese revolution and colonial revolts -- these are now the main international tasks of the Communist movement...

A victory for imperialism in its struggle against the Soviet Union would be a defeat not only for the proletariat of the Soviet Union; it would be the most serious defeat the international proletariat had ever suffered. The labour movement would be set back for decades... (Degras, V. II, p. 460)

In February 1930, the ECCI, in a resolution regarding the USSR, stated:

The presidium of the ECCI again reminds all sections of the Communist International of the decisions passed concerning the organization of the defence of the country of the proletarian dictatorship -- the only fatherland of the toiling masses of all countries. (Degras, V. III, p, 111)

In April 1931, the eleventh ECCI Plenum stated:

The chief task is to win the majority of the working class as the indispensable condition for victory over the bourgeoisie...

The fight for the majority of the working class must be pursued along the following main lines; the first of those three main lines is "fight against the capitalist offensive...", the second, "fight against the bourgeois dictatorship in all its forms," and the third,

Fight against imperialist war and war of intervention against the Soviet Union...

The eleventh ECCI plenum, which emphasizes the inadequate work of the Communist parties in the fight against the direct danger of a war of intervention, imposes on all Comintern sections the duty of conducting the most active struggle in defence of the Soviet Union, against imperialist war, and for peace, and of tirelessly exposing the scoundrelly (sic) pacifist manoeuvres of the social-fascist Second International -- the most active instigator and organizer of counter-revolutionary war against the Soviet Union. (Degras, V. III, p. 163)

In September 1932, the task of defending the Soviet Union is still listed as the third of the three main tasks of the Comintern by the Twelfth ECCI Plenum. The order in which the task happens to fall is not terribly significant, and may not be significant at all. What is significant is the fact it is essential component of Comintern policy.

The general task of the Comintern and its sections in all capitalist countries at the present time is to wage a concrete struggle:
(1) against the capitalist offensive; (2) against fascism and reaction;

(3) against the impending imperialist war and intervention in the Soviet Union... (Degras, V. III, p. 228)

That same Twelfth Plenum, in a resolution on "The War in the Far East and the Tasks of Communists in the Struggle Against Imperialist War and Military Intervention Against the USSR," states:

The main task of all Communist Parties is to organize and lead the struggle of the workers, peasants and all the toilers for the defence of China and the Chinese revolution, for the defence of the fatherland of the workers of all countries, the USSR, against the closely approaching intervention and for the defence of the toilers of capitalist countries against a new imperialist war. (Degras, V. III, pp. 240-241)

It seems that the defense of China and the Chinese revolution, that of the USSR and that of the western proletariat against a new imperialist war are, at this point, considered equal parts of one main task.

Manuilsky, one of the secretariat of three that led the Comintern at the time, in December 1933, listed the defense of the Soviet Union as the first of the four main tasks of the Communist Parties. As paraphrased by Degras, they were:

(1) To do everything to prevent war against Russia; this was not a remote and abstract danger, but an immediate one from the Japanese side; this meant fighting Japanese imperialism in China; defence of China was equivalent to the defence of the Soviet Union. (2) The French, German, and Polish parties must do their utmost to prevent war between France and Germany, and between Poland and Germany. (3) The establishment of fascist dictatorships had to be prevented in those countries where the bourgeoisie had begun to give fascist forms to the state apparatus. (4) To overthrow fascist dictatorships where they existed. The idea that only the proletarian dictatorship could replace the fascist dictatorship was too schematic. It was true for Germany, but where communist parties were weak, where the working class was not under Communist leadership, the fascist dictatorship could be replaced by a bourgeois dictatorship, in the form of a republic, as in Spain. 'All these four tasks lead to the central slogan of our theses, the overthrow of bourgeois dictatorship and the establishment of Soviet power throughout the world...The way to realize this central slogan is the old one: to win the majority of the working class as the condition for re-establishing the unity of the proletariat in the revolutionary struggle and gaining revolutionary reserves for the proletariat. This presupposes the destruction of the agent of the class enemy in the working class -- international social-democracy. By advancing the slogan of Soviet power, we want to underline the importance of armed insurrection of the masses as the only means of overthrowing bourgeois dictatorship.' He ended with a warning that the parties must prepare thoroughly for illegality. If they were not illegal now, they would be when war broke out. (Thirteenth Plenum, ECCI) (Degras, V. III, pp. 288-289)

Again, it is (encouragingly) significant that the defense of China

and the Chinese revolution is equated with that of the Soviet Union. It is also significant that Manuilsky presents the possibility of fascism not being replaced by the dictatorship of the proletariat in those instances where the working class was not led by a communist party. His stressing the importance of the armed insurrection of the masses as 'the only means of overthrowing the bourgeois dictatorship' is certainly correct, as is his admonition that the parties prepare for illegality.

In November 1933, The ECCI proclaimed:

Revolutionary defense of the Soviet Union by the workers of the whole world is the best answer to fascism and to the Second International, which is becoming more and more fascist. (Degras, V. III, p. 278)

Finally, in August 1935, the Seventh Comintern Congress, under the heading "The Tasks of the Communist International in the Struggle for Peace and Against Imperialist War", lists the defense of the Soviet Union as the first of six tasks in the following manner:

(1) The struggle for peace and for the defence of the USSR. In face of the war provocations of the German fascists and Japanese militarists, and the speeding up of armaments by the war parties in the capitalist countries, in face of the immediate danger of a counter-revolutionary war breaking out against the Soviet Union, the central slogan of the Communist Parties must be: struggle for peace.

The other tasks are (2) The united people's front in the struggle for peace. (3) The combination of the struggle against imperialist war with the struggle against fascism. (4) The struggle against militarism and armaments. (5) The struggle against chauvinism ("In the struggle against chauvinism the task of the communists consists in educating the workers and the whole of the toiling population in the spirit of proletarian internationalism, which can be accomplished only in the struggle against the exploiters and oppressors for the vital class interests of the proletariat, as well as the struggle against the bestial chauvinism of the national-socialist parties and all other fascist parties. At the same time the communists must show that the working class carries on a consistent struggle in defence of the national freedom and independence of all the people against any oppression or exploitation, because only the communist policy defends to the very end the national freedom and independence of the people of one's country.") (6) The national liberation struggle and the support of wars of national liberation. (This was already cited in the report on "The Danger of War and Communist Policy", but there was an additional paragraph which was not cited and which I cite now as it is significant to the topic at hand.)

It is the duty of the communists actively to support the national liberation struggle of the oppressed peoples of the colonial and semicolonial countries, especially the Red Army of the Chinese Soviets, in their struggle against the Japanese and the other imperialists and the Kuomintang. The Communist Party of China must exert every effort to extend the front of the struggle for national liberation and to

draw into it all the national forces that are ready to repulse the robber campaign of the Japanese and other imperialists. (Degras, V. III, pp. 375-377)

In my report on Dimitroff's "United Front against Fascism," I discussed the abrupt transition of Comintern policy to the United Front and Popular Front characterized by little (open) discussion prior to the Seventh Congress and no self-criticism. Certainly the abrupt transition is evident here.

The defense of the Soviet Union is listed as the first of the six tasks. It is no longer linked with the task of defending China and the Chinese revolution, but rather with the "struggle for peace" which is now the "central slogan" of the CPs. The report "The Danger of War and Communist Policy (1928-1935)" has already discussed "The Role of the Soviet Union in the Struggle for Peace," (p.126), but there was a part of that section that was not cited and which I cite because I think it holds a special significance:

This (the "growing might" of the USSR and its "consistent policy of peace directed against all instigators of war") has made the Soviet Union the centre of attraction not only for class-conscious workers but for all the toiling people in the capitalist and colonial (!) countries who strive for peace.

So the Soviet Union is now not only the center of the world revolution but, by dint of its "consistent policy of peace," directed against "all instigators of war" (with its "growing might"), is now the center of the "struggle for peace!" The new and perhaps frantic emphasis on peace would indicate there is fear for the very existence of the USSR, and that that fear has compromised the revolutionary leadership of the USSR -- and consequently that of the Comintern.

The Chinese Red Army is given special prominence in the section (6) regarding national liberation struggles, and I can not help but wonder if it is because it is facing the Japanese Army which threatens the USSR.

VII. Conclusions

What conclusions can we draw from the development of Comintern policy as outlined above, a development which led to the defense of the Soviet Union as the first consideration of the Communist movement?

1. From its inception the Comintern considered the attitude of individuals and groups toward the Soviet Union as the touchstone of whether or not they were revolutionary. Was this correct? In my opinion, absolutely; for the USSR did represent the dictatorship of the proletariat; it was a "base area" for the exploited of the world; and socialism was being built -- in trust for those exploited.

2. The Comintern consistently supported the foreign policy of the Soviet state. Was it correct in doing so? If we accept that the Soviet Union

did represent the dictatorship of the proletariat, that its very existence was a terrible weapon in the hands of the world proletariat (I do), the answer has to be yes.

3. Were there contradictions between Soviet state policy and Soviet revolutionary policy? Was Soviet revolutionary policy -- and consequently Comintern policy -- sometimes "compromised" for Soviet state policy, which might be firstly concerned with the preservation and welfare of the Soviet state, as contraposed to that of the world revolution?

There is no question that the Soviet Union was a national state. There is also no question that its Party and leadership maintained an internationalist policy. The Soviet Union did support the world revolution. The fact that its Communist Party was part of the world Communist Party -- the Comintern -- kept it, in the main, on an internationalist tack.

However, it seems to me that the level of the parties, other than the Soviet Party, was not equal to the task of developing correct policy in a democratically central way. So the responsibility of organizational and ideological leadership fell more and more on the Soviet Party. Soviet state policy and that of the world Communist movement became, after a while, to be considered as one. (I have not examined this here, but there were open differences between those primarily responsible for Soviet state policy and those primarily responsible for Comintern policy in the early years.)

Probably it was easier, in a non-revolutionary situation, for the leadership of the western Communist Parties to hold up the example of the Soviet Union than to develop and promulgate revolutionary policy for their own countries. Nevertheless, it was correct for the parties to defend the Soviet Union and hold it up as an example of socialism.

There was a real danger of war -- and invasion of the USSR -- after 1928. Fascism's coming to power in Germany did pose a real threat to the very existence of the Soviet Union. And there is no question that it was the advent of fascist power in Germany that led the Soviet leadership -- and the Comintern -- which was led by Soviet leadership -- to formulate the United Front against Fascism.

4. Was it correct to uphold the defense of the Soviet Union (along with the preservation of peace) as the main task of the Comintern in 1935?

It seems to me the main task of any Communist Party at any time is to prepare for, and, if possible, make revolution. These tasks could have remained on the agenda, while the united front against fascism was being implemented. There is no question that the defense of the Soviet Union as the main task led to pacifism and opportunism within most of the world Communist parties. (Perhaps it would be more correct to say that it brought those features to the surface.) This is not to say that the defense of the Soviet Union should not have been an important task.

Finally, and it seems to me this must always be kept in mind -- no one, no party, had even remotely come close to making the uncharted passage both the Soviet Union and the Comintern had to make from their

inception to 1935. While we must criticize what they did badly, and what they did not do, we, in our splendid isolation, should also value and draw on their accomplishments.

VIII. Footnotes

¹The Locarno Pact was between Germany and her enemies of World War I, Great Britain, France and Italy, as well as Poland and Czechoslovakia. It "guaranteed" established frontiers (but not those of Poland and Czechoslovakia) and took the French occupation army out of the German Rhineland. It brought the German government closer to the anti-Soviet western governments and weakened its ties with the Soviet Government. Hostile actions of the western powers against the Soviet Union intensified after the signing of the Pact.

IX. Books Used

Degras, Jane, The Communist International: Documents, 3 vols. London: Frank Cass and Company, Ltd., 1956