Founding the Communist International

Peter Mason Wed, 30/03/1988 - 10:59
Peter Mason

Proceedings and documents of the First Congress March 1919. Edited by Riddell, Pathfinder 1987, Reviewed by Peter Mason

From 1919 to 1922 the Communist International (Comintern) set about the task of codifying the lessons of the revolutionary upsurge that had swept Europe. In the programmatic documents of its first four congresses the Comintern fused the practical lessons of revolutionary struggle with the gains of the theoretical struggle against reformism, waged by the Marxist left of the Second International since the 1890s. The Comintern effectively refocussed the Marxist programme for the imperialist epoch, laying down strategic and tactical foundations of every subsequent defence and development of revolutionary communism.

The basic documents of the first four of the Comintern’s congresses have been available in English since their original appearance in the Communist press of the early 1920s. However, a simple reading of the theses and manifestos is not enough to provide a complete picture of the Comintern as a revolutionary organisation. This book, the third in the Pathfinder series The Communist International in Lenin’s Time, is an invaluable companion to the documents of the First Congress, held in Moscow in March 1919.

The key question which dominated discussion at the Congress was not primarily one of programme. It was the dispute between the Russian and German Communist Parties over whether the International should be founded at all.

In August 1914 when social democracy (the Second International) decisively betrayed the workers each section siding with its own fatherland in the slaughter of a world war. Luxemburg wrote ‘Social Democracy is a stinking corpse’. ‘The Second International is dead; long live the Third International’ was Lenin’s response in November 1914. But the road from this declaration to founding a new international was full of obstacles.

At the various gatherings of the anti-war social democratic left it was the ‘centre’, designated ‘social pacifism’ by Lenin, which predominated. From 1914 through to the Russian Revolution of 1917 the tiny handful of revolutionary Marxists had to relate tactically to the amorphous social pacifist currents. The only unifying feature of the centre was its refusal to break organisationally, and in the last analysis politically, with the chauvinist right wing.

So, for example Lenin remained with the Zimmerwald Association despite its social pacifist majority. At Zimmerwald (1915) the Bolshevik delegation voted tactically for the resolution of the ‘Zimmerwald left’ (which included Luxemburg and Trotsky) despite criticising its lack of a clear revolutionary defeatist position.

In 1915, delegates arriving for the Zimmerwald Conference exchanged the grim joke that, fifty years after the founding of the First International ‘all internationalists can be fitted into one carriage of a train’. But within two years mass opposition to the war culminating in the Russian Revolution gave a new urgency to the practical task of founding a new international.

The formation of a new revolutionary international was a key element in the programme Lenin fought for from April to October 1917. Recognising the vital need to internationalise the revolution for the Russian Revolution to survive Lenin wrote into the April Theses and every subsequent programmatic document of 1917 the need for a Third, Communist International. As early as April 1917 Lenin penned the words ‘Our Party must not ?wait?, but must immediately found
a Third International. Yet it was not until January 1919 that the Bolsheviks took the first steps to convene a congress to found the Comintern.

This had nothing to do with complacency. The logistical problems of assembling delegates in Russia dogged the Comintern until the mid-1920s. In addition, the radicalisation of the masses, which created the possibility of a mass revolutionary international, also served to breath new life into the parties of the Second, throwing up more obstacles in the path of the Comintern.

Masses of unorganised workers and soldiers were creating workers' councils (soviets) across Europe. In Germany the Independent Social Democrats (USPD) — a centrist party led by Kautsky — were expelled from the SPD and grew rapidly. The Italian Socialist Party — which had been led by the centre since a split with the right wing in 1913 — increased in size and influence. The revolutionary aspirations of the workers and soldiers pushed many of the old centrist leaders, and even some of the social chauvinists to the left in this period. But for most this was a temporary, even a calculated move. And even the most left rhetoric could not hide the fact that the re-constituted social democratic parties remained electoral, undisciplined, broad-church and national centred organisations.

From the contributions of delegates to the Comintern Congress in 1919 it is clear that the same problem had dominated the activity of all the old ?Zimmerwald leftists? in the previous 18 months, namely, how to organise a disciplined cadre-party politically separate and organisationally the exact opposite of the socialist parties?

In many cases the old socialist youth organisations had functioned as cadre-parties during the war, though politically allied to the left-centrists at Zimmerwald rather than to Bolsheivism. By January 1919 ten communist parties existed outside Russia itself; in Austria, Hungary, Poland, Finland, the Ukraine, Latvia, Lithuania and Belorussia, Estonia, Armenia and most importantly, Germany. As well as this there were many communist opposition groups within the socialist parties.

In early 1919 however the task of organisationally unifying these groups was made urgent by the formation of a rival pole of attraction: the attempt at Bern in February 1919 to reconstruct the Second International.

The Russian Communist Party (RCP), together with the newly formed parties in states bordering Soviet Russia immediately answered the call for the Bern conference with a letter of invitation to the founding congress of the Comintern. Unlike Bern, this was not to be an open conference. The letter of invitation already contained within it the perspective that ?the present period is that of decomposition and collapse of the entire world capitalist system? together with the key programmatic theme ?The task of the proletariat is now to seize state power . . . the power of the workers? councils is its concrete form.? That would be ratified at the First Congress itself.

The letter of invitation was targeted specifically to the thirty-nine organisations considered to be within the ?revolutionary internationalist camp? that Lenin had written about in April 1917. Of these, eleven were newly formed Communist Parties, five were centrist socialist parties including the Italian and Norwegian Socialist Parties, both of which were growing mass parties but of the old social democratic type. In addition seven opposition groups within the right wing socialist parties were invited as well as eight syndicalist trade-union federations and the International Union of Socialist Youth Organisations.

As the minutes show, a total of 35 delegates arrived at the congress; not always from the organisation invited, and not always with a clear mandate. Some of the organisations invited to the Congress — the British Socialist Labour Party included — only learnt of its existence after the event.

The organisations with decisive votes were divided into big, medium and small categories and apportioned five, three and one vote each respectively. It is a mark of the Bolsheviks? internationalism that the RCP — which then numbered half a million and governed a workers? state — was apportioned only five votes along with the German Communist Party (KPD) and the Socialist Labour Party (USA).

An even clearer indication of the importance attached to the KPD can be seen in the record of the opening session. For
when the An even clearer indication of the importance attached to the KPD can be seen in the record of the opening session. For when the proceedings opened, in a draughty side-hall of the Kremlin the Bolsheviks had already agreed to the Germans? request to postpone the founding of the International.

In January 1919 the KPD was one month old. Founded over the Christmas holiday during the revolutionary events following the fall of the monarchy, it had lost its two most experienced and gifted leaders?Luxemburg and Liebknecht?murdered by the government troops of social democracy in January. But despite the newness and inexperience of the KPD it was not this which dictated the position of their delegate Hugo Eberlein (Albert). His insistence that the Comintern should not be founded in March 1919 flowed directly from Luxemburg?s response to the RCP?s initial proposal to found the International.

Luxemburg had argued for postponing the founding of the Comintern. Given her remaining political disagreements with the Bolsheviks it is not too uncharitable to think that the following remark, quoted by Brandler in 1948, summed up her thinking: ?[The International] will be a Russian Krämerei (shop) with which we shall be unable to cope. We shall perish with it.? Accordingly, in the five days of discussion before the congress opened Eberlein presented the German party?s objections and gave the impression that if the International were founded he had instructions to walk out.

Why did Lenin, who had urged the Bolsheviks ?not to wait? in April 1917 accede to Eberlein in March 1919? Zinoviev?s explanation to the RCP Congress three weeks later is quoted in John Riddell?s introduction to the volume: . . . with the posing of the question as an ultimatum, we could not permit even the slightest strain in our relations with the German Spartakists.? Only yesterday they had suffered severe losses?so we said; even though they are wrong, we will retreat on this question.? 4

But even this begs the question as to why the small KPD had a decisive say. The answer lies in the absolute importance the Russian party had attached to Germany and the German revolution. Russia?s economic backwardness had imparted into the Marxist movement the conviction that the revolution could not survive nor complete the socialist transformation without revolution in western Europe and especially Germany. The German Revolution of 9 November 1918, which established the republic and brought workers? and soldiers? councils into being gave the Bolsheviks every hope of this key precondition being fulfilled. And when the German proletariat was in power, Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev had no doubt that the German party would have as decisive a voice in the Comintern as its social democratic predecessor had in the pre-war Socialist International.

Karl Leibknecht had proclaimed ?The German revolution is the world revolution?. The attitude of the Bolsheviks to Eberlein?s demands demonstrated the concrete and scientific way in which they had grasped this truth.

This is not to say they gave an inch to Eberlein?s political arguments. The British Socialist Workers Party have peddled the same argument, which also found an echo in the Trotskyist movement in the 1930s. Great revolutionary events or pre-existing large national sections are the condition for establishing a new international, so the argument runs. Essentially it relies on two-faced national-centredness. As Trotsky pointed out in the 1930s the argument comes from those who did not think twice about establishing a new party or national organisation without either condition.

To make the establishment of an international conditional on revolutionary events and/or mass parties flies in the face of the actual experience of every revolutionary international. It was not the Russian Revolution, nor the existence of any mass revolutionary parties which prompted Lenin to call for a new international, but the outbreak of war and the betrayal of social democracy which left the masses leaderless and necessitated a political break by the few remaining internationalists. Likewise Trotsky berated those in the Movement for the Fourth International who demanded a ?great event? in order to found the Fourth International: what event could have more significance, he asked, than the triumph of bureaucratic counter-revolution in the only workers? state?

Two further arguments employed by Eberlein deserve to be dealt with. Firstly he reminded the Congress of the limited usefulness of founding an international in direct opposition to the Bern conference:
Some say that clarification is needed because otherwise all the undecided forces might go over to the Yellow International. I reply that the forces that are headed there even today will not be stopped by the Third International and if that is where they go nevertheless, then that is where they belong.\(^5\)

Against this the Comintern leadership was to display a considerably less conservative attitude to winning over the mass centrist formations. In the months before and after the Second Comintern Congress (June 1920)\(^?\)called by Victor Serge \textit{the real founding congress}? both the Italian and French socialist parties were won to affiliation to the Comintern, and the German USPD split over fusion with the KPD.

The story of the Comintern?s struggle to win the centrist parties cannot be dealt with here. Nevertheless, the fact that the key question that split and won over these mass forces was affiliation to the Comintern\(^?\)over and above a single programmatic question\(^?\)vindicates the urgency of Lenin and Zinoviev against Eberlein.

Eberlein?s best political argument was over the question of programmatic unity:

?But surely the most important question to be resolved in founding the Third International is to know what we want, on what basis unity between us is possible . . . we must first let the world know what we want; we must first explain what road lies ahead of us that we can agree and unite upon.?\(^6\)

The positive element of this objection was Eberlein?s desire to avoid the type of paper ?unity? of the Second International, which had fallen apart in action. It is clear that Eberlein, correctly in principle, wanted a watertight programmatic basis for the International, something which only began to emerge in a developed form in subsequent congresses and which was only completed in 1928 by which time the Comintern itself had collapsed into centrism.

It fell to Angelica Balabanoff, the former secretary of the Zimmerwald Association, to explain the exceptional circumstances which allowed for founding an international prior to the elaboration of a complete programme?namely, that soviet power had brought the Marxist programme to life:

?Although [Eberlein?s] remarks sound logical he misses the main point The conflict between word and deed was often sharply posed in the Second International too, especially in the final phase of its existence. But there are times in history when the word is the deed, and when the word not spoken obstructs the deed.

Nowadays not only the proletariat but all public opinion?everyone who thinks or feels politically?is aware that we face a showdown battle between the power of the bourgeoisie and that of the proletariat?\(^7\)

Soviet power in reality had been enough to drive the Mensheviks into the camp of the bourgeoisie, to make centrists like Kautsky opt decisively for bourgeois-democratic counter-revolution. Conversely it had raised the political sights of the best syndicalist and anarchist militants who had hitherto rejected both the party and state power, by embodying in deeds the revolutionary essence of these words.

In the event it was the arrival of authoritative delegates from central Europe, most importantly Rakovsky from the Balkans and Steinhardt from Austria, which swung the Congress against Eberlein and resolved the Bolsheviks to reconsider founding the International.

Those who wanted \textit{events}? in order to found the International could have wished for no event more dramatic than the arrival of Karl Steinhardt on the second day. The stenographic record of a fairly pedestrian discussion on the platform of the International is suddenly interrupted by the heading \textit{Report of German Austria}? Since the congress had decided previously to remainder the verbal reports which had dragged out the first day, the reader is at first struck by this sudden return to national reports. Two memoirs, quoted in the footnotes set the scene vividly. The first from Albert Thomas:

?We were listening to a boring speech when the door banged open and, preceded by an attendant, a man in Austrian uniform entered. His beard unkempt, his soldier?s great coat in tatters (the whole side was torn) he went right up to the
presiding committee. ?I am the delegate of the Austrian communists?. He immediately pulled out a knife with which he proceeded to cut open his coat and extract his credentials.? 8

Steinhardt himself recalled:

?When I reached the podium I dumped my bag on the floor and handed the invitation to comrade Lenin. Lenin rose, stepped up to me and standing on his tiptoes placed both hands on my shoulders and in Russian fashion kissed both my cheeks, which were bristling with stubble . . . ?Comrade delegate you will speak at once? he said.? 9

What Steinhardt told was how after participating in the Viennese uprising of November 1918 he had travelled 17 days on the buffers of trains through enemy lines to reach the Congress. He ended with a call to found the International immediately. This was an impossible act to follow and so the proceedings were adjourned. Overnight Steinhardt (called Gruber in the minutes) together with Rakovsky, Grimlund and Rudnyánszky drafted a resolution to found the Comintern. After another round of discussion this was passed with only Eberlein?s five votes in abstention. Eberlein then promised to Congress to return to the KPD as an advocate for affiliation.

On the major programmatic questions?embodied in Lenin?s Theses on Bourgeois Democracy and Soviet Power?there was little discussion due to a high degree of agreement. In the discussion on the Platform?which Steinhardt interrupted?there appeared already the seeds of the future debate on transitional demands. In addition to throwing light on the disputed question of founding the Comintern the book is a reminder of the humanity and fallibility of even the best cadres. Certain passages, such as when the national report on Switzerland erupts into a slanging match between Fritz Platten and Leonie Kascher, or when Joseph Fineberg?s ?interminable verbal report on Britain? prompts Lenin to move next business, will strike a chord with every revolutionary activist. So too will the following, which comes at the end of day four.

?Platform: ?Tomorrow we still have to cover the White Terror, the manifesto, election of bureau, and organisation. The bureau proposes beginning tomorrow?s session at 11.00 a.m. Comrade Lenin has just moved that we will begin at 11.00 a.m. whether the comrades are present or not.? 10

Fifth day of sessions: Lenin (opens session at 11.30 a.m.) 10

The American SWP has sponsored the publication of these volumes in the hope of finding political common ground with Castro and various ?left? Stalinist currents. Despite this the project will at least have yielded one worthwhile result if it continues long enough for the SWP to produce well researched background material like this for each of the four healthy Comintern congresses. Nobody who regularly uses or consults the Degras or Hessel volumes should be without this book.

End notes
1 They can be found in separate editions; J Degras, The Communist International: 1919-43 documents, Vol 1 1919-22 (London 1971) and B Hessil, Theses Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Communist International (London 1980)
2 Lenin, Between Two Revolutions, p106
3 Founding the Communist Internatinal, Edited by P Riddell, p318 (New York 1987)
4 Ibid, p13
5 Ibid, p168
6 Ibid, p161
7 Ibid, p171-72
8 Ibid, p344
9 Ibid
10 Ibid, p220-21