Anti-Racism and the Racial Question in Comintern Debates of the 1920s

Introduction

The intent of the Third International's global project of communism was to unite the world's exploited in a single revolutionary front, regardless of nationality, gender, or race. This radical universalism, however, had to confront the heterogeneity of the subjects it sought to engage. This challenge pertained not only to the varying levels of economic development, which corresponded to distinct social configurations, but also to the cultural frameworks within which political subjectivities were shaped. The dimension of "ethnological knowledge" therefore assumed central political relevance, as it was an indispensable prerequisite for constructing a global revolutionary subject. The term race was not frequently used in the Comintern's internal debates, yet alternative ways of designating "cultural otherness" in relation to the modern, industrial West were employed. Terms such as East, Black, Indigenous, and Muslim functioned, in different contexts, as markers of human groups for whom "special strategies" needed to be devised in relation to the revolutionary model developed for the Western proletariat.

In recent years, historiographical interest in the Comintern's activities in the Global South has grown considerably, leading to a wealth of significant studies that have examined its relationships with local revolutionary groups across various regions, with particular attention to the Afro-Atlantic world.[1] In this contribution, I aim to

[1] Among the most recent work see M. Kirasirova, *The Eastern International: Arabs, Central Asians, and Jews in the Soviet Union's Anticolonial Empire*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024; O. Drachewych, *The Communist International, Anti-imperialism and Racial Equality in British Dominions*, London: Routledge, 2019; O. Drachewych-I. McKay (eds.), *Left Transnationalism: The Communist International and the National, Colonial and Racial Question*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University

explore how the Comintern conceptualized "cultural otherness" and the interpretive frameworks through which it sought to integrate diverse subjects into a global political strategy. Given my focus on the conceptual structures that shaped this process of engagement and inclusion, I believe that the heterogeneity of the case studies I analyze can help illuminate broader patterns.

The first area of inquiry concerns the "East", an ambiguous and geographically fluid category that, in the early years of the Comintern, encompassed vast regions of Asia and Africa characterized by minimal or nonexistent industrialization, colonial or semi-colonial subjugation, and a cultural distinctiveness often associated with Islam. The second area addresses Jews and anti-Semitism – an issue deeply embedded in the history of socialist and Marxist thought, which re-emerged with remarkable intensity during the Russian Civil War. The third area examines the Comintern's "discovery" of Latin America in the late 1920s and the associated "indigenous question". Finally, I will consider the relationship between race and nation in the Afro-Atlantic context, particularly in relation to the "color line" and the discussions surrounding it at the Comintern's Sixth Congress in 1928.

The Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East

The Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East was a pivotal event, attended by nearly two thousand delegates, primarily from Turkey, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and Iran. Convened immediately after the conclusion of the Second Congress of the Comintern, it provided an opportunity for the Bolsheviks to demonstrate their solidarity with Muslim populations – both within and beyond Soviet borders – while simultaneously opposing all forms of socialist pan-Turanism

Press, 2019; H. Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic: African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers*, Leiden: Brill, 2013; D. Featherstone-C. Høgsbjerg (eds.), T*he Red and the Black: The Russian Revolution and the Black Atlantic*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021; A.G. Mahler-P. Capuzzo (eds.), *The Comintern and the Global South: Global Designs Local Encounters*, London: Routledge, 2023; M. Di Maggio-S. Usai, *La "questione nera" e l'antisemitismo. La genesi contraddittoria dell'analisi comunista del razzismo*, «Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica», 1, 2022, pp. 133-156.

and pan-Islamism. Although the "race question" was never explicitly addressed during the Baku Congress, the event marked an initial engagement of communists with racial inequities. John Reed's observations on the symbolic connection between the struggles of Eastern peoples and those of Black and Mexican farmworkers across the Atlantic illustrate how the Congress fostered transnational linkages between movements. At the same time, Western communists often tended to conflate diverse groups into a singular, racialized, and at times exoticized, mass. The recollections of Western communists who attended the Congress are permeated by a strong tendency toward exoticization in their descriptions of the various peoples they encountered.[2]

Two interrelated issues that occupied the congress and constituted a complex challenge in the internationalization of the Soviet revolution were prominently addressed in Baku: the Islamic question and the peasant question. The delegates in attendance primarily came from agrarian societies where the majority of the population was Muslim. For the Bolsheviks, this necessitated confronting a dual form of "otherness" in relation to their revolutionary framework. During the civil war, the Bolsheviks had, despite a contradictory and often tumultuous process, managed to secure the support of both the peasantry and a significant portion of the Muslim population of the Russian Empire. However, the transition from wartime propaganda to the concrete policies of Soviet governance marked the beginning of a new phase in this debate.

In his opening address, Zinoviev took care to distinguish the political vision of the Third International from that of the Second. He specifically recalled the discussions at the Stuttgart Congress of 1907 on the colonial question, in which the notion of a "progressive colonial policy" had been invoked.[3] The Third International, on the contrary,

[2] See, for instance, A. Rosmer, *Moscou sous Lénine: les origines du communism*, Paris: Horay, 1953; E.D. Stasova, *Genossin „Absolut": Erinnerungen*, Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1969; K. Steinhardt-M. Mugrauer, *Lebenserinnerungen eines Wiener Arbeiters*, Wien: Alfred-Klahr Gesellschaft, 2013.

[3] This position was mainly advocated by the Dutchman van Kol and the Germans Bernstein and David. However, the Stuttgart debate was marked by a lively internal dialectic, with several voices expressing strong criticism of colonialism. Among the most severe critics was Kautsky, who published a pamphlet shortly after the congress, K. Kautsky, *Sozialismus und Kolonialpolitik: Eine Auseinandersetzung*, Berlin: Buch-

carried an authentically universal message – said Zinoviev – and he further emphasized the race blindness of the communist revolution, which introduced a radical discontinuity from the more or less latent racism of the Second International: «… we want to free all peoples, all the toilers, regardless of the color of their skin, regardless of whether they are white, black or yellow».[4] The rejection of all forms of racial discrimination was thus framed as a fundamental pillar of the Bolshevik global revolutionary project. Zinoviev further argued that peasants in the colonies were often ignorant and illiterate, adhering to superstitions and magical beliefs. However, rather than being subjects of ridicule, he contended that these conditions should serve as a motivation for revolutionary efforts aimed at guiding them toward progress and transformation.

Tashpolad Narbutabekov challenged Zinoviev's theses, bringing to light several contradictions inherent in Bolshevik policy in Central Asia. Drawing from his direct experience in attempting to foster social revolution in Turkestan in preceding years, Narbutabekov underscored the complexities of this endeavor. Having emerged from Jadidist circles, he was one of only two non-Russians elected to the Tashkent Soviet in March 1917.[5] Narbutabekov faced a twofold struggle: on one side, he had to combat Great Russian chauvinism, which persisted in the shadow of the Soviet revolution; on the other, he had to confront the conservative ulema, who sought by all means to prevent young reformers from positioning themselves as the representatives of Tashkent's Islamic community within the revolutionary government.[6] The reason who pushed many Muslim to the

handel Vorwärts, 1907; on the debate on race and colonialism in the Second International, see L. Costaguta, *Before Baku: The Second International, Race and Colonialism*, in Mahler-Capuzzo, *The Comintern and the Global South*.

[4] J. Riddell (ed.), *To See the Dawn: Baku, 1920: First Congress of the Peoples of the East*, New York: Pathfinder, 1993, p. 67.

[5] S. Agzamkhodzhaev, *Politizatsiya dzhadidskogo dvizheniya i vyrabotka im programmnïkh proyektov budushchego ustroystva Turkestana: 1905-1917 gg.*", «Islam v sovremennom mire», 2, 2005. Accessed 1st July 2023, https://idmedina.ru/books/islamic/?442

[6] R.A Pierce, *Toward Soviet Power in Tashkent, February-October 1917*, «Canadian Slavonic Papers», 17/2-3, 1975, pp. 261-270; M. Buttino, *La Rivoluzione capovolta. L'Asia Centrale tra il crollo dell'impero zarista e la formazione dell'Urss*, Napoli: L'ancora del Mediterraneo, 2003.

side of Bolshevik – maintained Narbutabekov – was that in 1917 they advocated the immediate peace: «In the first days of the revolution, in opposition to Kerensky's capitalist slogan of "War until final victory", the Bolsheviks put forward the slogan of "Self-determination for the nationalities"».[7] Narbutabekov reminded the special appeal to the Muslims of Russia and the East signed by Lenin in November 1917 which stated: «Build your national life freely and without hindrance. It is your right. You yourselves must be the masters in your own land. You yourselves must build your life as you see fit».[8] However, a growing discrepancy emerged between the Bolsheviks' stated principles and their observed behavior. While Muslim masses had initially supported the Bolsheviks during the civil war, they now expected the revolutionary government to uphold the principles it had proclaimed at the outset. The new Russia had to act accordingly by recognizing the distinct characteristics of the Muslim borderlands of the former empire and adapting the revolution to local economic, cultural, and religious circumstances.

At this stage, the Bolsheviks needed to purge their own ranks, expelling counterrevolutionary elements who continued to pursue aggressive and discriminatory policies toward Muslim religion and customs, echoing the practices of the Tsarist regime. This was not only a matter of principle but also of strategic interest for the Bolsheviks: if they failed to secure decisive support from the working class in the West, they could instead seek it among the exploited masses of the East. This idea, which also surfaced in other expressions of Islamic political radicalism during this period, reflects a certain strategic foresight – raising doubts about whether the decisive revolutionary impetus would truly come from Western Europe.[9]

Despite these criticisms – voiced at the congress primarily by delegates registered as "not affiliated with any political party", many of whom were in fact representatives of various Islamic nationalist groups – the Bolsheviks could point to the recognition of the Bashkir (1919) and Tatar (1920) Socialist Republics as exemplary cases of collaboration between the revolution and the Muslim masses.

The Bolsheviks were able to capitalize on the "Baku effect", pre-

[7] J. Riddell, *To See the Dawn*, p. 104.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 108.

[9] See M. Sultan-Galiev, *The Social Revolution and the East*, «Review (Fernand Braudel Center)», Summer 1982, 6 (1): pp. 3-11.

senting themselves to the exploited and colonized masses worldwide as the only Western-based political force that had transcended the color line dividing the world. Just one month after the Baku Congress, Zinoviev addressed the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) Congress in Halle. In his four-hour speech advocating for the USPD's integration into the Third International, he repeatedly referenced the Baku conference. Responding to accusations from right-wing socialists, Zinoviev employed two simple but effective arguments: the Comintern was committed to promoting revolution on a global scale, and it stood firmly against racial discrimination.

He stated:

> The Second International was restricted to people with white skin; the Third International does not classify people according to the colour of their skin. If you want a world revolution, if you want to free the proletariat from the chains of capitalism, then you cannot simply think about Europe, you also have to turn your sights to Asia.[10]

Baku indeed represented a pivotal moment of encounter between the Bolsheviks and Muslim political movements. However, despite the revolutionary rhetoric of inclusivity, Zinoviev's fervent speech could not entirely mask his patronizing attitude toward his Muslim colleagues in Central Asia. As an Islamic current began to take shape within the socialist camp, the Bolsheviks took decisive measures to prevent, by any means necessary, the autonomous development of an Islamic socialist movement. Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, who quickly rose to the highest ranks of Soviet administration as a member of the People's Commissariat for Nationalities, argued that Muslim intellectuals should lead their peoples toward socialism, helping to reframe Muslim peasants' historical hostility toward Russians, who had long been their colonizers. He further advocated for the creation of a Muslim Communist International, driven by his deep skepticism toward the Western working class, which he viewed as complicit in the exploitation of colonized peoples. Sultan-Galiev was arrested and expelled from the party in 1923, subsequently enduring a series of arrests and deportations until his execution in 1940.[11]

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[10] J. Martov-G. Zinoviev, *Martov and Zinoviev: Head-to-Head in Halle*, London: November Publications, 2011, p. 137.

[11] A. Bennigsen-C. Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Sultan Galiev. Le père de la révolution tiers-mondiste*, Paris: Fayard, 1986.

What was unacceptable in the eyes of the Bolsheviks was not the demand for cultural autonomy itself, but rather the challenge to the centralization of political authority that Galiev's proposals implied. Baku had been a remarkable gathering, bringing together people from across the vast Eurasian space. The Congress was, in many ways, a continuous process of translation, with speeches delivered in a multitude of languages. However, instead of embracing translation as a generative process for fostering mutual understanding and shaping political subjectivities, the Bolsheviks in Baku employed it instrumentally, using it as a tool to manipulate the audience. They selectively omitted or reworked portions of speeches, a practice that did not go unnoticed by some participants and ultimately contributed to growing mistrust toward the organizers.[12] More than a meeting to discover an unfamiliar world aimed at understanding its peculiarities, in the Bolsheviks' intentions, the Congress of Baku was an attempt to domesticate the "cultural otherness" by bringing it back within its own language.[13] Anyway, the message of Baku resonated throughout the world and contributed to spread enthusiasm and fear for a Soviet revolution which thanks to its "race blindness" could challenge the international order overwhelming every attempt to reform it maintaining an imperial regime.[14]

[12] N. Menemencioğlu, *Congress of the Peoples of the East, Baku, September 1920*, in *XI. Türk Tarih Kongresi: Ankara, 5-9 Eylül 1990. Kongreye Sunulan Bildiriler*, vol. 6, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1994, pp. 2223-2233.

[13] Over the course of the 1920s, the Soviet Union pursued a fluctuating policy toward Muslim populations, combining episodes of violent repression with moments of compromise and the co-optation of local leaders into the state apparatus, see S. Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917-1941*, Westport CT: Praeger, 2001.

[14] The Peruvian marxist, Jose Carlos Mariátegui, saw in the Baku Congress the awakening of colonized peoples, J.C. Mariátegui, *Mariátegui: politica revolucionaria. Contribución a la critica socialista*, Vol. 1: *La escena contemporánea y otros escritos*, Caracas: Fundación Editorial El Perro y la Rana, 2010, p. 323; the congress was widely reported in the American press. For more details see P. Capuzzo-Ç. Oğuz, *The Baku Congress of the People of the East*, in A.G. Mahler-C. Lee, *The Oxford Handbook of the History of the Global South*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

The Jewish question

A particularly significant testing ground for examining the relationship between the Bolshevik Revolution and the question of race was the Jewish question, whose relevance extended beyond Russia itself. In a 1921 letter to W.E.B. Du Bois, Jamaican poet Claude McKay reproached him for his indifferent stance toward what he considered the greatest event in human history– the Soviet Revolution. He added:

> For American Negroes the indisputable and outstanding fact of the Russian revolution is that a mere handful of Jews, much less in ratio to the member of Negroes in the American population, have attained, through the Revolution, all the political and social rights that were denied to them under the regime of the Czar.[15]

In these circles of African-American radicalism, the Jewish question in Soviet Russia was viewed as a pivotal historical development – one that served as a model for the global anti-racist struggle.

This issue took on particular significance for the Bolshevik leadership, given the exceptionally high proportion of Jews within its ranks, which in turn fueled narratives portraying the Russian Revolution as a Jewish conspiracy. Lenin's stance on the Jewish question was marked by contradictions. After initially recognizing Jewish national identity in response to the Bund's departure from the Russian Social Democratic Party in 1903, he later denied the Jews national status based on Kautsky's definition of a nation, which required territorial rootedness and a shared language. Lenin argued that Jews were not concentrated in a single territory but were instead dispersed across many nations, from which they had assimilated various cultural traits. Moreover, Yiddish – despite the Bund's efforts to elevate its status – was, in his view, little more than a dialect, unsurprisingly abandoned by more assimilated Jews in the West. From a socialist perspective, assimilation was thus the only viable solution to the Jewish question. Bundist and Zionist tendencies had to be opposed, as they introduced an ethnic dimension into the socialist struggle. In the years that followed, Lenin's position shifted once again, largely in response to the Bolsheviks' evolving relationship with the Bund. However, the dominant view

[15] Quoted in W. James, *Holding aloft the banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean radicalism in early twentieth-century America*, London-New York: Verso, 1998, p. 166.

remained that the ultimate fate of Russian Jews was assimilation.[16] In a 1913 essay, he cited New York as an example of Jewish assimilation into modern culture. According to Lenin, this process was the inevitable fate of modern Jews – precisely the opposite of what the Bund advocated. The Bund sought to preserve Eastern European Jews as a distinct social group, tied to what he saw as an outdated and regressive past.[17] Lenin was evidently poorly informed about the cultural processes that accompanied Jewish political socialization in New York where Yiddish became the language of politicization of Eastern Jewish immigrants.[18] The idea that modern capitalist society functioned as a dissolving force on "traditional" cultural identities – causing them to disappear in favor of a new, modern, urban, and industrial culture – was contradicted precisely by the forms that the Jewish socialist movement was taking in the city with the highest Jewish presence in the world.

While Lenin viewed the Jewish autonomy advocated by the Bund as an obstacle to the revolutionary path, he was simultaneously committed to combating the widespread anti-Semitism that permeated the Russian proletariat and even segments of the socialist movement. It was essential to protect Jewish workers from the violence incited by the state and facilitated by the police forces.[19] In response to the wave of anti-Semitic violence triggered by the Kishinev pogrom (1903),[20] the Russian Social Democratic Party adopted a stance of resolute and active opposition. During the civil war, instances of anti-Semitism also emerged within the Red Army, though they were sporadic compared to the widespread and systematic anti-Semitism of the White Armies. Nevertheless, the revolutionary front was able to implement vigorous

[16] E. Kenig, *Lénine et les Juifs de Russie. Contribution à l'étude des conceptions de Lénine sur la question juive*, Paris: Centre d'études et de recherches marxistes, 1976.

[17] V.I. Lenin, *Osservazioni critiche sulla questione nazionale* (1913), in Id., *Opere*, Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1966, vol. 20, pp. 20-21.

[18] T. Michels, *A fire in their hearts: Yiddish socialists in New York*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

[19] E. Traverso, *The Marxists and the Jewish question: the history of a debate, 1843-1943*, New York: Prometheus Books, 1994. pp. 84-85.

[20] S. Lambroza, *The Pogroms of 1903-1906*, in *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, ed. J.D. Klier-S. Lambroza, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 195-247

measures to combat anti-Semitism, aided in part by the mobilization of radical Jewish political groups.[21]

At the Second Congress of the Comintern, the *Theses on National and Colonial Questions* explicitly mentioned anti-Semitism as one of the forms of bourgeois nationalist prejudice that needed to be vigorously opposed, as it represented a significant obstacle to the construction of internationalism.[22] The commitment to combating anti-Semitism was therefore a duty for communists worldwide. At the same time, Zionism was to be opposed as an expression of Jewish nationalism incompatible with communist internationalism. The Polish branch of Poale Zion participated in the early congresses with consultative voting rights, awaiting formal admission that never materialized. The presence of organizations that *ethnicized* the proletariat within individual nations – this applied to all Jewish political organizations – was seen as a weakening of the internationalist project. This position was explicitly articulated by the Italian Jewish communist Umberto Terracini at the Third Congress, where he called for the exclusion of both the Bund and Poale Zion from all future congresses, in any form.[23] The issue was also addressed in Palestine, where the establishment of a communist party was mandated on the condition that it would not assume any specific Jewish identity. Instead, Jewish and Arab workers were to struggle side by side against any political formation based on ethnic identity. Only after providing assurances in this regard was the Palestine Communist Party accepted into the Comintern.[24]

Poale Zion was tolerated in Russia until the late 1920s, whereas the Bund was quickly dissolved. Its left-wing members joined the Russian Communist Party, leading to the creation of the *Evsektsiia*, the Jewish section of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The Evsektsiia subsidized Yiddish-language literature and theater, while

[21] B. McGeever, *Antisemitism and the Russian Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

[22] J. Riddell (ed.), *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!: Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress of the Communist International, 1920*, New York: Pathfinder Press, 1991, p. 287.

[23] J. Riddell (ed.), *To the Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016, pp. 320-322.

[24] M. Budayrī, *The Palestine Communist Party 1919-1948: Arab and Jew in the Struggle for Internationalism*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010 (1979).

simultaneously taking an active part in the violent campaigns aimed at dismantling the religious, educational, and cultural structures of Eastern European Judaism– campaigns in which other institutions and press organs were also involved.[25] For the first time in history, Yiddish became an official language in Ukraine and Belarus.[26] A participatory and passionate observer of the Eastern Jewish world, Joseph Roth, while acknowledging that nowhere else had there been such a vigorous commitment to combating anti-Semitism as in the Soviet Union, sharply criticized this "forced modernization". He argued that it exposed the Bolsheviks' lack of understanding of Yiddish culture. In Roth's view, this culture was deeply embedded in centuries-old religious and cultural traditions; uprooting it from these foundations would inevitably result in a hollow and artificial construct.[27] Yet this was precisely the path that was taken, and the artificial construct reached another milestone with the 1928 decision to establish a Jewish Autonomous Oblast in the Russian Far East – a frozen wasteland on the Chinese border that many soon abandoned after initially migrating there. Though seemingly bizarre, this initiative aligned with the principles of *Korenizatsiya*: since the Jews lacked a designated territory, one was now provided to them, ostensibly to enable their national spirit to flourish.[28]

At the end of the 1920s, there was a resurgence of popular anti-Semitism, which historiography has interpreted in various ways: as a deep-seated flaw of Russian society; as a reaction to the authoritarian modernization imposed by the Five-Year Plans, which created hardship and intensified social competition among workers; as the Soviet manifestation of the virulent anti-Semitism that afflicted all industrial

[25] R. Weinberg, *Demonizing Judaism in the Soviet Union during the 1920s*, «Slavic Review», 67/1, 2008, pp. 120-153.

[26] Z.Y. Gitelman, *A Century of Ambivalence: The Jews of Russia and the Soviet Union, 1881 to the Present*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001, chapter 3; D. Shneer, *Yiddish and the Creation of Soviet Jewish Culture: 1918-1930*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. In the 1926 census, Jews were 8% of the population in the Republic of Byelorussia and 5% in the Republic of Ukraine.

[27] J. Roth, *Juden auf Wanderschaft*, Berlin: Die Schmiede, 1927, pp. 96-104.

[28] Thereafter, Stalin rarely spoke out on the Jewish question, although some private anti-Semitic utterances are known, see S. Kotkin, *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power, 1878-1928*, New York: Penguin Random House, 2014, chapter *Dead-end banditry*.

societies during the economic crisis;[29] and as a consequence of the competition between nationalities generated by the policy of "affirmative action".[30] What is certain is that, regardless of Stalin's distrust and ambivalence toward Jews, the Soviet state took vigorous measures to suppress this wave of anti-Semitism, which was framed as an exogenous element– foreign to the socialist project and one that had to be eradicated.[31] Moreover, the Soviet leadership perceived anti-Semitism not only as an attack on its policies but also as a direct threat to its authority, given the explicitly anti-Soviet tone that anti-Semitic rhetoric had adopted.[32] Things would change dramatically over the course of the 1930s.

The question of race in Latin America: the Buenos Aires Congress (1929)

At the Sixth Comintern Plenum (1926), a decision was made to establish a base in Latin America to counter the aggressive imperialist expansion of the United States in the region. By the Sixth Congress in 1928, there was, for the first time, a significant presence of Latin American delegates, leading to a renewed push for initiatives in the continent. The final theses reaffirmed the Comintern's support for «every movement against imperialist violence in the colonies, semi-colonies, and dependent countries (e.g. in Latin America); it carries on vigorous propaganda against every kind of chauvinism and imperialist ill-treatment of enslaved peoples and races, large and small (the attitude towards Negroes and workers of the 'yellow races', anti-semitism, etc.), and supports their struggle against the bourgeoisie of the oppressing nation».[33]

Following this commitment, two significant conferences were or-

[29] A. Sloin, *Theorizing Soviet Antisemitism: Value, Crisis, and Stalinist "Modernity"*, «Critical Historical Studies», 3/2, 2016, pp. 249-282.

[30] T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press, 2017; a similar thesis was maintained already by I. Larin, *Evrei i antisemitism v SSSR Evrei i antisemitism v SSSR*, Moscow: Gosizdat, 1929.

[31] A. Sloin, *Theorizing*, p. 257. W. Korey, *The origins and development of Soviet anti-Semitism: An analysis*, «Slavic Review», 31/1, 1972, pp. 111-135: 115-118.

[32] S. Davies, *'Us against Them': Social Identity in Soviet Russia, 1934-1941*, in S. Fitzpatrick (ed.), *Stalinism: New Directions*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 47-70.

[33] J. Degras, *The Communist International 1919-1943: documents*, vol. 2, 1923-1928, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 521.

ganized. The first, held in Montevideo in May 1929, was a gathering of revolutionary trade unions that led to the creation of the Confederación Sindical Latinoamericana. The second, held in Buenos Aires in June 1929, was the most important meeting of Latin American Communist parties to date, bringing together approximately 40 delegates representing a dozen political parties. One of the central issues discussed in Buenos Aires was the "question of race", for which José Mariátegui was invited to present the main report at the recommendation of Jules Humbert-Droz.[34] Humbert-Droz, who was increasingly alienated from the politics and methods of the Comintern, managed to secure a mission to Argentina, allowing him to distance himself from Moscow for a time.[35] Within Comintern circles, it was well known that the most sophisticated analysis of the indigenous question had been developed by Peruvian intellectuals led by Mariátegui, who had founded the Peruvian Socialist Party in 1928.[36] For this reason, they were asked to report on the issue of race, despite being recognized as a heterodox political group toward which caution was deemed necessary.[37]

Due to his poor health, Mariátegui was unable to attend the congress and sent Hugo Pesce as his personal delegate. Pesce presented the

[34] J. Mothes, *»Luis« gegen Mariátegui? Zur Rolle von Jules Humbert-Droz bei der Entwicklung der Lateinamerika-Politik der Kommunistischen Internationale*, pp. 139-167, in *Centenaire Jules Humbert-Droz: Actes*, La Chaux de Fonds: Fondation Jules Humbert-Droz, 1992.

[35] Two years later he would remove from all positions, J. Humbert-Droz, *De Lénine à Staline: dix ans au service de l'Internationale communiste, 1921-1931*, Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1971, chap. 26.

[36] Letter of Victorio Codovilla to Martinez de la Torre, a close collaborator of Mariátegui, dated 29 March 1929, in *La Internacional Comunista en América Latina en documentos del archivo de Moscú*, eds. V. Jeifets-A. Schelchkov, Santiago: Ariadna Ediciones, 2018, p. 1027.

[37] Codovilla warned the other organisers of the dangerous deviation of Mariátegui: «[Mariategui] insiste excesivamente sobre la necesidad de tener en cuenta "la realidad peruana", y en el fondo aboga por un partido socialista "amplio", pretextando una situación ambiental distinta de la de los otros países», in *La Internacional Comunista en América Latina*, p. 1212. Codovilla referred to the editorial *Aniversario y balance*, published on «Amauta», n. 17 (September 1928), pp. 1-3; on the conflict between Mariategui and the Comintern, see A.F. Galindo, *La agonía de Mariátegui: la polémica con la Komintern*, Lima: Desco, 1980.

report, situating the question of race within the broader framework of class relations in Peru. Revolutionary strategy, he argued, had to be anchored in a multiethnic working class capable of recognizing its shared exploitation beyond racial differences. This does not mean that Mariátegui overlooked the presence of racism in Peruvian society. On the contrary, he regarded it as one of the main obstacles to building class solidarity, noting that feelings of superiority and violent discrimination against Indigenous peoples were pervasive even within urban revolutionary circles. His insistence on the need to eradicate all traces of inter-ethnic racism to forge a cohesive revolutionary subject was closely aligned with the Leninist position on race.

At the same time, however, this perspective fundamentally opposed the interpretation of Indigenous peoples as an oppressed nation entitled to claim and pursue self-determination – specifically, the creation of a republic for the Indigenous peoples of the Americas. Mariátegui maintained that such a republic would merely reproduce class domination and exploitation. More fundamentally, the core problem with the Comintern's strategy was that Indigenous peoples did not constitute a nation in the first place. The Quechua population, for instance, was spread across the Andean highlands from Colombia through Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia, extending as far as Argentina and Chile in the south. To conceive of South America's geopolitical boundaries in terms of ethnic identity, he argued, was an entirely abstract exercise that ignored the reality of colonial states, which Mariátegui regarded as Latin America's definitive geopolitical framework.

The Peruvians' report was sharply criticized by Rabinovich, a Comintern official of Georgian origin who had been active in Latin America. While he acknowledged Mariátegui's materialist approach in emphasizing the social basis of Indigenous exploitation, he faulted him for failing to recognize the Indigenous question as a national issue. According to Rabinovich, this limitation stemmed from an unquestioning acceptance of existing political boundaries, which did not correspond to coherent national formations and thus required revision. Instead, he called for drawing lessons from the Soviet experience in which the national autonomy "to people like the Chuvash and the Kirghiz whose cultural and economic level is not much higher than that of the majority of the indigenous populations" has proved the success of the self-determination strategy.[38] Rabinovich thus merely reiterated the orthodox

[38] S.S.A. de la I.C., *El movimiento revolucionario latinoamericano. Versiones de la*

line established at the Sixth Congress, without directly engaging with the substantive issues raised by the Peruvian delegation.

The subsequent speeches reinforced the necessity of continuous efforts to eradicate racial prejudice and discrimination, particularly within trade unions, where such divisions were actively exploited by the bourgeoisie to weaken the unity of the labor movement.[39] Several speakers also criticized the Brazilian delegates to the Sixth Congress for their earlier claim that racial issues did not exist in Latin America.

This argument was later taken up by Jules Humbert-Droz, who emphasized the significance of the fact that a congress of communists was systematically addressing the race question. He acknowledged its immense importance– comparable to the situation in South Africa or the United States– but also underscored its complexity. Latin America presented a distinct challenge due to the coexistence of racial discrimination along color lines and the substantial presence of Indigenous populations, particularly in countries such as Peru, Bolivia, and Guatemala. Beyond Indigenous groups, themselves divided into numerous cultures and tribes, there were also Black populations, Creoles, and mestizos, forming a heterogeneous society that could not be easily aligned with the Comintern's framework of self-determination based on a direct connection between race and nation.

In making this argument, Humbert-Droz placed himself in a precarious position, as he was implicitly challenging the applicability of the Comintern's nationalities policy to Latin America. To avoid an outright rupture, he proposed that no final resolution be published, given the diversity of perspectives expressed during the debate. However, on one crucial point, he took a firm stance: he insisted that a fundamental task of communist parties in the region was to work toward the elimination of racial divisions and the construction of a unified, multiracial revolutionary subject. This also extended to the inclusion of Chinese workers, regarding whom concerns had been raised in some speeches about their integration into the movement.[40]

In his final response, Hugo Pesce reaffirmed the Peruvian delegation's position, drawing a clear distinction between the national and

Primera Conferencia Comunista Latino Americana Junio de 1929, Editado por la revista «La correspondencia sudamericana», Buenos Aires, 1929, p. 299.

[39] Particularly Ricardo Arturo Martínez, Venezuela, and Alejandro Barreiro Olivera, Cuba.

[40] *El movimiento revolucionario latinoamericano*, p. 312.

racial questions. He defined the nation as a historically contingent entity, fundamentally unrelated to any racial categorization. This conception of nationhood stood in stark contrast to the definition proposed by Stalin in 1913, which included "psychological unity" as an essential criterion, thereby veering into cultural essentialism. Ultimately, two final theses were published, each placing different emphases on the significance of the national question. However, they shared a common commitment to the anti-racist struggle:

> The false concept of racial inferiority wielded by the bourgeoisie or "civilizing" imperialism, as well as the promotion of rivalries between races in world of labour, have contributed to the persistence and intensification of racial prejudice that has delayed and continues to delay the unification of the proletariat white and mestizo with the indigenous and black proletariat.[41]

In Buenos Aires, the Peruvian delegation sought to demonstrate that race and nation were asymmetrical concepts referring to distinct subjects. They argued that revolutionary dynamics in Latin America had to be organized at the level of existing postcolonial nation-states and oriented toward an internationalist horizon, rather than being fragmented into abstract ethnic entities.

This position directly challenged the logic underpinning the Comintern's self-determination thesis– an issue that Jules Humbert-Droz recognized, emphasizing the need for further study. Indeed, without tracing back to the Tupac Amaru revolt of the 18th century, there had been recent indigenous uprisings, such as the 1915 Rumi Maqui rebellion, which Mariátegui himself had analyzed. However, the Comintern neither engaged in a systematic analysis of these movements nor sought direct contact with indigenous resistance groups. This rigid, top-down approach – premised on the reification of an abstract map of "nation/race" categories that ignored the reality of a continent where migration and labor force mixing were the norm – led to absurd extremes. A striking example was the proposal of Rodolfo Ghioldi – the former Secretary of the Argentinian Communist Party – to divide Argentina into three separate nations: one for Italians, one for Poles, and one for Jews.[42]

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[41] *Proyecto de Tesis sobre el problema de las razas*, in «*La Correspondencia Sudamericana*», 16, August 1929, p. 26. The two theses and a commentary by Humbert-Droz are published at pp. 25-30.

[42] M. Caballero, *Latin America and the Comintern 1919-1943*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986. p. 58.

Native Republics and self-determination in the Black belt

At the Third Comintern Congress (1921), two white South Africans, David Ivon Jones and Sam Barlin, introduced the issue of South African communism into Comintern debates, emphasizing a strong historical and political connection between African American and South African contexts. This marked the beginning of a discussion that revealed uncertainty about how to conceptualize the question of race in the Afro-Atlantic world. Three main approaches were considered: convening a global Black conference modeled on the Baku Congress; framing the African American question within the Leninist paradigm of national self-determination; and prioritizing the overcoming of racial divisions within trade unions. The 1922 Rand Rebellion in South Africa, which exposed the deep-seated racism among white workers, led South African communists to recommend a more gradual approach. They argued that emphasizing Black unity risked exacerbating interracial tensions within the working class.[43]

At the Fourth Comintern Congress, the Afro-Atlantic question received greater attention, particularly through the participation of Surinamese activist Otto Huiswoud and Jamaican writer Claude McKay. Huiswoud emphasized that racism represented a major barrier to Black participation in labor struggles, as many Black workers distrusted unions led by white leadership.[44] The final resolution, however, left limited room for a specifically anti-racist struggle. Nonetheless, the emphasis on integrating Black workers into trade unions implicitly acknowledged its importance. The resolution underlined the shared fate of white and Black workers – both victims of capitalism and imperialism – who were called upon to form a united front. At the same time, race was recognized as a transnational source of identity across the Atlantic space. African Americans – particularly those who had migrated to the industrial cities of the northern United States – were envisioned as the natural leaders of a revolutionary front. This front was intended to connect a broad region encompassing the Caribbean, the West African coast, and African countries such as South Africa and the Congo, where initial processes of industrialization were already underway.[45]

[43] Drachewytch, *The Communist International*, pp. 48-49.

[44] J. Riddell (ed.), *Toward the united front: proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International 1922*, Leiden: Brill, 2012, pp. 800-805.

[45] *Ibid.*, pp. 947-952.

The debate at the Fifth Congress appeared to create space for an anti-racist campaign. August Thalheimer argued that the principle of national self-determination required reconsideration in multi-ethnic contexts such as the United States, where a territorialization of national identities was unfeasible.[46] The African American Lovett Fort-Whiteman argued that racism in the United States was not targeted at a specific class but affected all Black people, thereby fostering a form of interclass racial solidarity. He further observed that African Americans perceived racism as a global issue, which led Black political movements to adopt a supranational orientation.[47] Thus, any socialist strategy needed to begin with an acknowledgment of the pervasive nature of racism in order to effectively engage Black communities in the project of world revolution.[48] Finally, John Pepper argued that the principle of national self-determination for Black Americans was merely an abstract formula. In reality, they were fighting for both formal and substantive emancipation, but this struggle was rooted within the United States, as they identified as Americans. In a country where workers spoke 56 different languages, national self-determination held little political significance for the migrant and multiethnic proletariat, whereas anti-racism and the pursuit of civil rights were of primary importance.[49]

This debate reflected a growing awareness of the specificity of racism and the transnational nature of the struggle against it. However, the Sixth Congress ultimately redefined the Black question in the United States and South Africa strictly in terms of the self-determination of oppressed nations. This shift was the outcome of internal debates

[46] *Protokoll, Fünfter Kongress der. Kommunistischen Internationale*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1967, pp. 580-581.

[47] M. Solomon, *The cry was unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998, pp. 47-49. The supranational character of black political movements becomes clear as early as the nineteenth century, on the interwar period see B.H. Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora. Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

[48] *Protokoll, Fünfter Kongress*, pp. 666-669.

[49] *Protokoll, Fünfter Kongress*, pp. 699-700. John Pepper was a Hungarian communist of Jewish origin who fled to Austria and then Russia after the failure of the Hungarian revolution. In 1922 he was sent to the U.S. by the Comintern, see T. Sakmyster, *A Communist Odyssey: The Life of József Pogány/John Pepper*, Budapest-New York: Central European University Press, 2012.

within the Comintern, revealing two alternative strategies grounded in different understandings of the racial question. Drawing on Lenin's parallel between the Irish and African-American struggles,[50] Nasonov – a rising figure of the Young Communist International – came into close contact in Chicago with Harry Haywood, a prominent emerging voice in the African-American communist movement. Together, the two developed a proposal for Black self-determination in the form of an independent republic to be established in the Black Belt.[51] Harry Haywood was virtually the only African American within the Communist Party of the United States to advocate for this position. He received his political education in Moscow, attending the Communist University of the Toilers of the East since the 1925 and the International Lenin School in 1927. Immersed in Soviet ideological training, he came to define himself as a "Black Bolshevik".[52]

During the congress, African American delegates voiced strong opposition to this proposal– most notably James W. Ford and, in even more forceful terms, Otto Hall, Harry Haywood's brother. A similar stance was taken by Sidney Bunting in response to the proposed shift in South African strategy toward the creation of a Native Republic. However, the South African Communist Party experienced internal divisions on this issue. Alex La Guma, who had been invited to Moscow in 1927, supported the principle of self-determination and advocated for framing the Black question in South Africa within the broader context of the anti-imperialist struggle. Between 1924 and 1927, the South African party had grown significantly, expanding its

[50] In the *Thesis On National and Colonial Questions* approved in the Second Congress, Lenin mentioned Irish and Afro-American as underprivileged nations.

[51] Nasonov published an article on the Bullettin of International Bureau in 1928, N. Nasonov, *Negritianskaia problema v Severo-Amerikanskikh Soiedinennykh Shtatakh*, in Rgaspi 495-155-46, pp. 66-75. The Black Belt was an area of predominately African American counties stretching from eastern Virginia to eastern Texas; see H. Kkehr-W. Tompson, *Self-determination in the black belt: Origins of a communist policy*, «Labor History», 30/3, 1989, pp. 354-366.

[52] See H. Haywood, *Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist*, Chicago, IL: Liberator Press 1978; on the meaning of "black bolshevist" see C. Høgsbjerg, *Communism and the Colour Line. Reflections on Black Bolshevism*, in Mahler-Capuzzo, *The Comintern and the Global South*, pp. 96-121; and C. Bergin, *'Something Real': Black Bolshevism and the Comintern*, «Twentieth Century Communism», 24, 2023, pp. 43-74.

Black membership largely through its alliance with the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union, its outreach efforts in Black communities and workplaces, and its use of the Bantu language for propaganda purposes.[53] The adoption of the Native Republic strategy marked the prelude to a party crisis in the early 1930s – not only due to the content of the theses themselves, but also because of the increasingly rigid, hierarchical relationship between the Comintern center and its peripheries. This centralization fostered disaffection and mutual distrust.

The Black Belt Republic thesis found little support among CPUSA leaders, who were compelled to adopt it slowly and reluctantly in the years that followed. Its reception further deepened the divide between white and African American workers. Moreover, African Americans largely aspired to full integration within the United States, rather than being relegated to a separatist enclave.[54] Among the most forceful criticisms came from Otto Huiswoud, who argued that the Black question could be framed as a national-colonial issue in Africa and the West Indies, but not in the United States. In his 1930 article *World Aspects of the Negro Question*, he did not even mention the principle of self-determination, nor did he define African Americans as a nation. On the contrary, he emphasized the struggle for racial equality as one of the most crucial arenas of communist engagement: «The old Social Democratic notion that the Negro question is only a class question, prevailed with us for a considerable time. We are only now beginning

[53] On the South African Communist Party see A. Drew, *Discordant comrades: Identities and loyalties on the South African left*, London: Routledge, 2019 (2000), pp. 94-111; R. Kelley, *The Third International and the Struggle for National Liberation in South Africa*, «Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies», 38 (1), 2014, pp. 245-246; Drachewych, *The Communist International*, 75-97; on the formation of the Negro Bureau and its function in the late 1920s Comintern strategy, see H. Weiss, *Framing a Radical African Atlantic. African American Agency, West African Intellectuals and the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers*, Leiden: Brill, 2013, pp. 122-129; H. Adi, *Pan-Africanism and Communism: The Communist International, Africa and the Diaspora, 1919-1939*, Trenton: Africa World Press, 2013,

[54] O. Berland, *The Emergence of the Communist Perspective on The "Negro Question" in America: 1919-1931: Part One*, «Science & Society», Vol. 63, No. 4 (Winter, 1999/2000), pp. 411-432; *The Emergence of the Communist Perspective on the "Negro Question" in America: 1919-1931: Part Two*, «Science & Society», Vol. 64, No. 2 (Summer, 2000), pp. 194-217; H. Adi, *Pan-Africanism*, chapter 2.

to realize that the Negro question is not only a class question but also a race question». [55] And he concluded in a way that clearly opposed the Thesis of the VI Congress: «It is the duty of our Party to mobilize and rally the masses of white workers in defense of the Negro workers, linking up the struggles of the white with that of the black workers through all of its campaigns and activities».[56]

The idea of establishing an independent Black state within North America never held a significant place in African American political movements. In 1917, Cyril Briggs, leader of the African Blood Brotherhood, briefly entertained the possibility of advocating for a Black independent state within the borders of the United States, drawing inspiration from the struggles of Poles and Serbs in Europe. However, he soon abandoned this position in favour of proposing a migration to South America or Africa.[57] This was an option already proposed by certain figures within nineteenth-century Black abolitionism, such as Martin Delany. In 1924, Hubert Harrison also put forward the idea of establishing a state within the United States.[58] Thus, the pursuit of this policy risked discrediting the communists within Afro-American political circles; the NAACP denounced the proposal as "a plan of plain segregation".[59]

The CPUSA's inaction in implementing the 1928 decision prompted the Comintern to issue a second directive, reaffirming that the question of self-determination was crucial and that the party was expected to actively commit to it. The program was further refined to distinguish it clearly from Garveyite nationalism. The envisioned black states in the Black Belt were to form a single political entity, determine their own relations with other nations, and carry out land confiscation from white owners in order to redistribute it to black peasants.

During the discussions surrounding the drafting of the document

[55] O. Huiswoud, *World Aspects of the Negro Question*, «The Communist», vol. 9, no. 2 (February 1930), pp. 132-147: 132.

[56] O. Huiswoud, *World Aspects*, p. 147.

[57] T. Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, London: Routledge, 2017 (1957), p. 323.

[58] J.B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Struggle for Equality, 1918-1927*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020, chapter 16.

[59] R. Kanet, *The Comintern and the 'Negro Question': Communist Policy in the U. S. and Africa, 1921-41*, «Survey», 19/4 (Autumn), 1973, pp. 86-122: 105.

for the Sixth Congress, Nasonov's primary opponent was Endre Sík.[60] Sík, a Hungarian from a converted Jewish family, had been taken prisoner in Russia during the First World War and joined the Russian Communist Party in 1920. From the mid-1920s, he began teaching in the Comintern schools, focusing on Africa and African-American issues, while simultaneously pursuing his own university studies, which culminated in an extensive doctoral dissertation on the history of Black Africa.[61]

Sík was a staunch opponent of the thesis advocating for a Black Republic in the Black Belt. He emphasized the necessity of combating racism as a mechanism of imperialist domination, which strategically divided the working class along artificially constructed racial lines, arguing that race had no biological foundation.[62] In the United States, the exploitation of Black people had historically been rooted in racial contempt and the doctrine of racial inequality. It was now essential to recognize the political foundations of racism and to combat them. However, it made little sense to define these social groups in terms of a separate national identity, since they were fully American – albeit subjected to structural inequality, which precisely needed to be dismantled. The case of the African colonies was different: there, the anti-racist struggle could also take the path of anti-colonial national emancipation. It was no accident, Sík argued, that in the U.S., it was the Black middle class that played the card of nationalism in order to preserve its relative class privilege. The struggle, therefore, had to be framed primarily as an anti-racist one– a struggle for equality, not for national independence.

The battle between Nasonov and Sík continued in the Kutv Journal

[60] On the confrontation Nasonov-Sík, see I. Filatova, *Anti-Colonialism in Soviet African Studies (1920s–1960)*, in *The Study of Africa*, Volume 2: *Global and Transnational Engagements*, ed. P. Tiyambe Zeleza, Dakar: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 2007, pp. 203-223: 216; A. Davidson, *Pervoe pokolenie otechestvennykh afrikanistov*, «Novaia i noveishaia istoriia», 5, 2019, pp. 69-80; A. Davidson, *The Study of South African History in the Soviet Union*, «The International Journal of African Historical Studies», 25/1, 1992, pp. 2-13; D. Colin-G. Littlejohn, *Endre Sík and the Development of African Studies in the USSR: A Study Agenda from 1929*, «History in Africa», 10, 1983, pp. 79-108.

[61] I. Filatova, *Anti-Colonialism in Soviet African Studies*, p. 209.

[62] A. Sík, *The Comintern Programme and the Racial Problem*, «The Communist International», no. 16, 15 August 1928, pp. 407-411.

«Revolutsionnyi Vostok».[63] Sík argued that the Comintern's debate was marked by a superficial and confused use of the term "race", and he devoted a substantial volume to clarifying the concept.[64] This was the most far-reaching intellectual contribution on the subject of race produced within Comintern circles. Sík undertook the ambitious task of developing a communist conception of race, critically analyzing it as a cultural-historical construct, devoid of any naturalistic foundation in physical anthropology. At the same time, he expressed concern that the notion of a greater or lesser aptitude of different peoples for historical change and progress – based on presumed racial characteristics – was still circulating even within the Soviet sphere.[65] Moreover, he criticized the inconsistency and conceptual confusion arising from any conflation of the race question with the national question, which he regarded as one of the most serious limitations of the Comintern's analytical framework. In the preface to the volume, the presidium of the Research Group on National and Colonial Problems stated that Comrade Sík's book constituted the only rigorous attempt at a systematic study of the race question, one capable of overcoming the revisionist interpretation advanced by Kautsky.[66] However, Sík's positions, which diverged in significant ways from the line adopted by the Comintern after 1928, did not go unnoticed. Nasonov, invoking the orthodoxy of the Sixth Congress, launched a harsh attack on Sík's volume[67] and Sík's political defeat became evident when he was compelled to engage in a humiliat-

[63] The article of N. Nasonov, *Negritianskaia problema v Severo-Amerikanskikh Soiedinennykh Shtatakh* was republished in «Revolutsionnyi Vostok», 1929, no. 6, pp. 59-76; the critical response of A. Sík, *K voprosu o negritianskoi probleme v SASSH*, «Revolutsionnyi Vostok», 1929, no. 7, pp. 138-167.

[64] A. Sík, *Rasovaya problema i marksizm*, Moskva, 1930.

[65] *Ibid.*, p. 8. He referred to a course held by Mikhail Pavlovich in 1922-23, *Imperializm. Kurs lektsiy chitannykh v Akademii General'nogo Shtaba v 1922-1923 gg. Lektsiya pervaya: Filosofskaya teoriya o sushchnosti imperializma – teoriya Seyera*, Moskva: Krasnaya Nov', 1923, p. 12; Pavlovich was considered the most prominent marxist orientalist in Soviet Russia in the 1920s and he was one of the main speakers at the Baku congress, see M. Kemper, *Red Orientalism: Mikhail Pavlovich and Marxist Oriental Studies in Early Soviet Russia*, «Die Welt des Islams», 50/3, 2010, pp. 435-476.

[66] They referred to K. Kautsky, *Rasse und Judentum*. Ergänzungsheft zur "Neuen Zeit", Stuttgart: J.H.W. Dietz, 1914.

[67] N. Nasonov, *Rasovaya problema i marksizm v ponimanii t. Shiika*, «Revolutsionnyi Vostok», 1930, no. 9-10, pp. 323-331.

ing act of self-criticism for having defended positions that ran counter to those of the Comintern.[68] The irony of the story lies in the fact that Nasonov was executed a few years later during the Stalinist purges, whereas Sík, after a brief detention at the Lubianka, went on to study at the Academy of Sciences and subsequently enjoyed a distinguished postwar political career in socialist Hungary.

Conclusion

In the 1920s, the Communist International and the Soviet Revolution represented an unequivocally anti-racist force operating globally in a world where racial discrimination and oppression were fundamental organizing principles of both international and interpersonal relations. Building a universal political subject that would unite all people exploited by capitalism and imperialism required the elimination of prejudice and discrimination based on skin color, race, national belonging, religious belief, and other markers of identity. This radical universalism marked a decisive break with the earlier socialist tradition. The Second International, at the Stuttgart Congress (1907), was in fact divided on the condemnation of colonialism. Justifications for colonial rule, which circulated within international socialism, were grounded in a barely concealed hierarchical conception of human races.

The Comintern actively worked to overcome obstacles to the construction of a truly universal internationalism. At the same time, however, it had to confront the strong heterogeneity of the political subjectivities it encountered throughout the world. The guiding principle of its overall strategy was shaped by a Leninist compass – namely, the connection between the anti-capitalist struggle of the industrial proletariat in the global North and the anti-imperialist struggle of the oppressed nations in the global South. Yet, the simplicity of this scheme proved inadequate for providing the necessary tools to understand the diverse contexts in which the Comintern operated.

Nevertheless, during the 1920s, it remained possible to exercise critique within the Comintern and to engage in a genuine effort to understand cultural "otherness". Although this was not "free research" in the strict sense – given that a clear political agenda guided the setting

[68] A. Sík, *Zamechaniia na kritiku tov. Nasonova*, «Revolutsionnyi Vostok», 1930, no. 9-10, pp. 331-334.

of priorities – there was still a plurality of perspectives and a vibrant debate. This was particularly evident within the Comintern's educational institutions, which functioned as an extraordinary laboratory for the encounter between different radical political cultures, despite being embedded in a pedagogical project aimed at the Bolshevization of the international communist movement.

On this journey to discover the non-Western exploited people of the world, the term race was not often used. The "bourgeois doctrines" of race, which were highly popular during the era of positivism, were completely rejected, while there was a growing tendency to classify cultural differences along national lines. This process reached its turning point in 1928, with the Sixth Congress, when the program of "Native Republics" was launched. The radicalization of the Comintern line led to a reinforcement of political initiatives in the global South and to a more energetic involvement of Black members within the Comintern leadership, although this was short-lived. This "national turn" in Comintern strategy was consistent with the *Korenizatsiya* policy within the Soviet Union. The revolutionary strategy of the 1930s further emphasized the national framework that had been embedded in Bolshevik political culture since the pre-war period. In this context, transnational anti-racist struggles and the construction of multiracial communist parties were subordinated to a strategy centered on the nationalization of subaltern subjects from the South – or were even hindered or opposed outright. The strategy of national emancipation was wrapped in multicultural rhetoric, within which subtle forms of racialization could nevertheless persist, compatible with Stalin's essentialization of "national psychologies".

Other ways of constructing political subjectivities that the Comintern encountered during its expansion – those based on a migrant and multiethnic proletariat that had lost its roots or relocated them into diasporic identities irreducible to nation-state-building narratives – were marginalized. This ultimately undermined the anti-racist potential that the Bolshevik Revolution had initially generated and alienated many individuals who had looked to the Comintern as a vehicle for social liberation and freedom from racial discrimination.

Paolo Capuzzo