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Communism and the East: The Baku Congress, 1920

The First Congress of the Peoples of the East was held in the city of Baku from September 1 to 8, 1920. It has tended, on the whole, to attract attention rather more because of the colorful Oriental pageantry which surrounded it than because of the importance of its debates and resolutions. The first account to become available in the West, for instance, was that of H. G. Wells, who had been in Russia when the Congress was taking place. He reported that Zinoviev and his associates had "held a congress at Baku, at which they gathered together a quite wonderful accumulation of white, black, brown, and yellow people, Asiatic costumes and astonishing weapons. They had a great assembly in which they swore undying hatred of capitalism and British imperialism: they had a great procession in which I regret to say certain batteries of British guns, which some careless, hasty empire-builder had left behind him, figured: they disinterred and buried again thirteen people whom this British empire-builder seems to have shot without trial, and they burnt Mr. Lloyd George, M. Millerand, and President Wilson in effigy." Wells confessed that he could not take the Baku Congress very seriously: "It was an excursion, a pageant, a Beano. As a meeting of Asiatic proletarians it was preposterous."¹ Recent accounts of the Congress are less dramatic, but in different ways they tend equally to trivialize it. Insufficient attention is devoted to the Council of Action and Propaganda, elected by the Congress and charged with continuing its work; and the Congress is not adequately related to the development of the Bolsheviks' policy on the national and colonial question, whose formulation effectively began at this time.²

1. H. G. Wells, *Russia in the Shadows* (London, 1920), pp. 79, 82 (New York, 1921), pp. 96-97, 99.

2. The Congress is discussed in G. Z. Sorkin, *Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka* (Moscow, 1961); A. B. Arutiunian and G. Z. Sorkin, "Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka," *Sovetskoe Vostokovedenie*, 1957, no. 5, pp. 114-20; A. B. Arutiunian-Arents, "V. I. Lenin i Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka," *Istoriia SSSR*, 1960, no. 2, pp. 246-54; Rudolf Schlesinger, *Die Kolonialfrage in der Kommunistischen Internationale* (Frankfurt, 1970); H el ene Carr ere d'Encausse and Stuart R. Schram, *Le marxisme et l'Asie, 1853-1964* (Paris, 1965; expanded English trans., London, 1969); and Branko Lazitch and Milorad M. Drachkovitch, *Lenin and the Comintern*, vol. 1 (Stanford, 1972). Useful bibliogra-

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At least three reasons may be suggested for devoting more attention to the First Congress of the Peoples of the East. In the first place, it constituted an episode of some importance in the development of the Communist International. The Congress was convened by the Comintern executive, and its proceedings formed (as Zinoviev put it) a "supplement, a second part, the second half" of those of the Second Comintern Congress, which had been held earlier in the year. The Council of Action and Propaganda elected by the Baku delegates was in turn directly subordinated to the Comintern executive in Moscow. The convocation of the Congress and the establishment of the Council were both significant initiatives in these early years of existence of their parent body, the Communist International.

In the second place, the Congress played a not inconsiderable role in the development of British-Soviet relations, and more precisely in the negotiations which were proceeding at this time regarding the conclusion of a trade agreement between the two countries. The British Cabinet was divided in its views on the desirability of an agreement with the Soviet Russian government—with a considerable section, of whom Churchill and Curzon were the most prominent, opposing any such agreement in principle. This section of the Cabinet was induced to give its support to the signature of the trade agreement in March 1921 only on condition that the Bolsheviks agreed in return to bring to an end their "anti-British" agitation in the East, of which the Baku Congress was considered a particularly egregious example.

The Bolsheviks appear to have been aware of the tactical advantages thus to be derived from their ability to promote or restrain the revolutionary movement in the colonial world. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that their interest in the national and colonial question was an exclusively tactical and manipulative one. For (and thirdly), as the Baku Congress and its aftermath illustrate, the problem was one of greater complexity than the Bolshevik leaders had yet appreciated. It was one thing formally to proclaim the unity of the Russian and colonial peoples in the struggle to overthrow the imperialist yoke; but it proved to be quite another to secure the practical implementation of this (and other) policies in countries where an industrial proletariat scarcely existed and the influence of tradition was strong and recalcitrant. The Baku Congress symbolized the formal espousal by the Bolshevik leadership of the cause of the oppressed and colonial peoples; but it represented a no less striking introduction to the complexities and ambiguities of such a position, with which the Comintern would attempt to come to terms in the following years.

phies are D. N. Egorov, ed., *Bibliografia Vostoka*, vol. 1: *Istoriia* (Moscow, 1928), and Enrica Collotti Pisichel and Chiara Robertazzi, *L'Internationale Communiste et les problèmes coloniaux* (Paris and The Hague, 1968).

In the first years of existence of the Soviet regime it appeared superfluous to attempt to construct a long-term strategy for the colonial world, or indeed for the West itself; for the victory of revolutionary forces in the major European countries seemed certain. Writing in the first issue of *Communist International* in May 1919, Zinoviev remarked that the International already had three Soviet republics as its main base, in Russia, Hungary, and Bavaria: "But nobody would be surprised if by the time these lines appeared in print we have not three, but six or more Soviet republics." In a year, he added, they would "already be beginning to forget that in Europe there was a struggle for communism, for in a year all Europe will be communist." Only in England and the United States was there a possibility that capitalism might survive for another year; but this would be "beside a wholly communist European continent."³ Even Lenin, in his address to the Comintern's founding congress, was convinced that the victory of the proletarian revolution was guaranteed, and that the formation of the international Soviet republic was imminent. All the comrades present who had seen the establishment of the Communist International and of the Soviet Republic would, he assured them, see the formation of the World Federation of Soviets. This July, he wrote in 1919, would be the "last difficult July": the "next July we will see the victory of the international Soviet republic—and that victory will be complete and final."⁴

With the passage of time and the apparent re-establishment of political stability in Europe, these optimistic perspectives came to require some modification. Zinoviev admitted to the Second Comintern Congress that he had been "overenthusiastic" in his forecast that the whole of Europe would become Soviet in one year. He was now inclined to the view that two or even three years would be required.⁵ This forecast had to be qualified in its turn. Addressing the 1924 Congress of the Russian Communist Party, Zinoviev maintained: "On the whole we estimated the objective tendencies of development accurately. But the factor 'time' we did not assess altogether correctly. This is now abundantly clear to us." There could be no doubt that the victory of socialism in the European countries was now "not a question of three months, but of a far longer period."⁶

Lenin, reflecting on these developments, noted that the proletarian van-

3. *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional*, no. 1 (May 1, 1919), cols. 38, 42, 44. There was a time, he noted later, when the Bolsheviks had considered that "only a few days or even hours remained before the inevitable revolutionary upsurge." See *Piat' let Kominternu*, Mar. 1, 1924, in G. E. Zinov'ev, *Sochineniia*, 16 vols. (Leningrad, 1923–29), 15:281.

4. V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., 55 vols. (Moscow, 1958–65), 37: 511, 520, and 39:89.

5. *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional*, *Vtoroi s'ezd: Stenograficheskii otchet*, rev. ed. (Moscow, 1934), p. 11.

6. *RKP(b), Trinadtsatyi s'ezd: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1924), p. 42.

guard, at least, had been won over; and this was the main thing. There still remained, however, a "long way to go to victory. One cannot win only with a vanguard." To throw the vanguard alone into decisive struggle, while the class as a whole had not been persuaded to extend to it at least a minimum degree of support, would be "not just stupid but criminal."⁷ The tempo of development of the revolution in capitalist countries was clearly much slower than had been the case in Russia; they could "not at present gamble that it will accelerate." Indeed it appeared that the course of development in Russia between 1905 and 1917 would now have to repeat itself in Europe.⁸ A new factor, however, had entered the revolutionary equation: the rise of radical nationalist movements in the colonial world, especially in Asia; and from 1920 onward the Bolsheviks gave it an increasing degree of attention, hoping in this way to "call in the East to redress the balance of the West."⁹

Before this time few of the Bolshevik leaders had devoted much thought to the problems of the colonial world and to the role those countries might play in the world revolutionary process. Lenin was perhaps the only exception. He had written on developments in China and Turkey, and had gone so far as to entitle an article "Backward Europe and Progressive Asia." There was no doubt, Lenin wrote, that a victory of the Russian proletariat "would create unusually favorable conditions for the development of revolution in both Asia and Europe." Yet even Lenin was at this time convinced that revolutionary change in the colonies, though it might be combined with or follow from such changes in the European metropolitan countries, could in no sense precede or precipitate the Western revolution.¹⁰

Other Bolshevik leaders were even more emphatic. Bukharin, for instance, held that colonial risings and national revolutions formed a "part of the great world revolutionary process." But "of course," he added, "colonial risings and national revolutions (Ireland, India, China, and the like) can have absolutely no *direct* relation to the developing proletarian revolution." In these countries the working class was generally weak, and there could accordingly be no prospect of establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat.¹¹ Zinoviev found it possible to give an extensive report on the activity of the Comintern to the party's 1919 congress, omitting any reference to the East until his attention was drawn to it, in the course of his concluding remarks, by an interjection

7. Lenin, *PSS*, 41:77-79.

8. *Ibid.*, 42:59, 40:204.

9. The expression is used by E. H. Carr, following Canning, in *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923*, 3 vols. (London and New York, 1950-53), 3:271.

10. Lenin, *PSS*, 27:51, 39:329.

11. N. I. Bukharin, *Ekonomika perekhodnogo perioda* (Moscow, 1920), p. 155.

from the floor. In a report to the All-Russian Congress of Soviets later in the year he discussed the work of Communist parties in the European countries and in America, and then announced, "I will not dwell on other countries, in order not to make my report too lengthy." As late as June 1920 he believed that only the "first tongues of flame" of the revolutionary conflagration had reached the East. Only a "weak beginning" had been made.¹²

With the extension of the bounds of Soviet-ruled Russia, however, and the failure of the advance of the Red Army into Poland to precipitate a popular rising, the East began to claim both a greater degree of attention and a more exalted role in the world revolutionary schema. They now spoke, Lenin wrote, as "representatives of 70 percent of the world's population"; and he advanced the slogan, acknowledging that it constituted a departure from Marx's more restrictive formulation, "Proletarians of all countries and oppressed peoples, unite." On the introduction to political life of the working masses of the East, Lenin argued, now depended "to an enormous degree" the fate of the whole Western civilization. The East had a "most important revolutionary role [to play] in the next phases of world revolution."¹³

Some writers, claiming the authority of Marx, went so far as to hold that the Communist revolution must indeed be "preceded by a number of national revolutions of the oppressed peoples and first of all of India and the peoples of the East."¹⁴ The Baku *gorkom* of the Azerbaijan party considered that it was "still in question where the first decisive blows will be dealt to the world bourgeoisie—in the metropolitan countries or in the colonies." It was "in any case clear," however, that the "extension of the struggle against capital throughout the world, the introduction into the orbit of this struggle of the many millions of the people of the East, will bring closer the downfall of bourgeois overlordship." The whole Third International, noted M. N. Pavlovich (a scholar-revolutionary who represented the Comintern at the Baku Congress), had adopted the Bolshevik point of view: "All communists—Russian, French, Italian, and others—now became Asians and resolved with all their means to support any revolutionary movement in the East and in Africa."¹⁵

It remained, however, to elaborate an appropriate strategy. Accordingly the Second Comintern Congress, urged *Communist International*, should "di-

12. *RKP(b), VIII s'ezd: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1919), p. 123; *VII Vserossiiskii s'ezd sovetov: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1920), p. 116; G. E. Zinov'ev, *Nabolevshye voprosy mezhdunarodnogo rabocheho dvizheniia* (Moscow, 1920), p. 125.

13. Lenin, *PSS*, 42:71–72, 44:282.

14. *Zhizn' natsional'nostei*, May 26, 1919.

15. Archives of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, Moscow, cited by Sorkin, *Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka*, p. 19; *Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka: Stenograficheskie otchety* (Petrograd, 1920), p. 139.

rect its attention to the East . . . , for whoever is able to approach the subject nations of the East and make them his allies . . . will emerge victorious in the final struggle between labor and capitalism."¹⁶ The attempt made at the Second Congress to define such a strategy was the occasion for the discussion of a series of theses which together provided the main elements of the resolutions which were debated at the Baku Congress some months later.

The main task of the Congress, Lenin declared, was to "work out or to outline a practical starting point so that the work which hitherto has been conducted among hundreds of millions of people [in the East] in a disorganized manner, should be conducted in an organized manner, unitedly, systematically." Both in his opening address and in his report on behalf of the commission on the colonial and national question Lenin emphasized the importance of the formation of Soviets in the noncapitalist countries. "Soviets are possible there," he insisted. "They will be not workers' but peasant Soviets or Soviets of the toilers."¹⁷ The idea of the Soviet organization was simple, and could be applied not only to proletarian but also to peasant feudal and semifeudal relations. On this basis the unification was possible of the revolutionary workers of the Communist, developed countries with the "revolutionary masses of those countries where there is no or almost no proletariat, with the oppressed masses of colonial, eastern countries." Granted effective assistance from the Russian workers, the colonial countries might indeed be able to circumvent the capitalist stage of development.

The commission found it difficult to agree with Lenin's view that support should be given to the bourgeois-democratic movement in the backward countries; and it was eventually agreed to describe such movements as "national-revolutionary" rather than "bourgeois-democratic." To Lenin, however, there was no doubt that any nationalist movement could only be bourgeois-democratic, "since the main mass of the population in backward countries consists of peasants, the representatives of bourgeois-capitalist relations." Although openly reactionary leaders should not be assisted, Communist parties in the East could not operate other than through the support of such movements. More generally, Lenin concluded, revolutionary work in the national and colonial question must now be their "main task."¹⁸

Not all delegates were satisfied with Lenin's arguments. G. M. Serrati, representing the Italian Socialist Party, opposed any support whatsoever of bourgeois "national-revolutionary" movements, and went so far as to describe the theses as counterrevolutionary. M. N. Roy, who summed up his views in a set of additional theses which the Congress also endorsed, held that for the

16. *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional*, June–July 1920, p. 2316.

17. *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional*, *Vtoroi s'ezd: Stenograficheskii otchet*, p. 28.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 101, 27; Lenin, *PSS*, 41:247.

time being it was possible to make use of bourgeois national-revolutionary elements. The "first and essential task," however, must be the foundation of a Communist party, which would "organize peasants and workers and lead them to revolution and to the establishment of Soviet republics."¹⁹ More immediately important than these theoretical disagreements, however, was the more pressing question of bringing the Comintern's policy to the attention of those for whose benefit it had been formulated. This was the task of the Baku Congress.

The decision to hold the Congress was taken at the end of June 1920 at a meeting of the Comintern Executive Committee together with some of the delegates who had attended the Second Congress.²⁰ An Appeal was issued "To the Enslaved Masses of Persia, Armenia and Turkey," inviting them to the Congress, which was to meet in Baku on August 15. "Spare no effort to be present in the greatest possible numbers," ran the circular, addressing itself in the first instance to the workers and peasants of the Near East, but also to "more distant peoples" in India and the Muslim lands. The Congress, it was hoped, would "give strength to millions and millions of the enslaved throughout the world," and might "bring closer the day of final victory and liberation."²¹

The Comintern Executive entrusted the organization of the Congress to an Organization Bureau, consisting in the first instance of E. D. Stasova and G. K. Ordzhonikidze, subsequently enlarged to include A. I. Mikoian, N. Narimanov, and S. Said-Galiev.²² The Bureau had its first meeting at the beginning of July. Stasova, in an organizational report, suggested that the Comintern Executive be asked to postpone the opening of the Congress from August 15 to 25. Delegations were to be invited from Persia, Turkey, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Soviet Turkestan, Khiva, Bukhara, Afghanistan, and the other countries and peoples of the Soviet and non-Soviet East. Altogether as many as 3,280 delegates were envisaged. Further meetings reviewed the election of delegates and the local arrangements; and accepted messages of support from towns and villages of the Soviet East (one such "typical" communication reported the sacrificial slaughter of sixty-three cattle and thirty-seven sheep in honor of the Congress, and requested that arrangements be

19. *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional, Vtoroi s'ezd: Stenograficheskii otchet*, pp. 155, 498. The discussion at the Congress on the national and colonial question is considered further in N. E. Korolev, "Razrabotka Leninyim politiki Kominterna po natsional'nomu i kolonial'nomu voprosam," in K. E. Shirinia, ed., *Vtoroi kongress Kominterna* (Moscow, 1972), pp. 152–93.

20. Sorkin, *Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka*, p. 15; A. I. Mikoian, *Dorogoi bor'by* (Moscow, 1971), p. 581; Alfred Rosmer, *Moscou sous Lénine*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1970), 1:144.

21. *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional*, no. 12 (1920), cols. 2259–64 (a date of September 1 is given in col. 2262).

22. Sorkin, *Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka*, p. 16; E. D. Stasova, *Stranitsy zhizni i bor'by* (Moscow, 1957), p. 107.

made for their transport to Baku).²³ The Orgburo experienced some difficulty in carrying out its duties; but the Congress eventually assembled for its first session on September 1.

The opening of the Congress was preceded by a ceremonial meeting of the Baku Soviet of Deputies and of the Azerbaijan Congress of Trade Unions. It was addressed by Zinoviev, who together with the other Comintern delegates had just arrived by train from Moscow. They must remember, he declared, that the world was inhabited "not only by white-skinned people, not only by Europeans, with whom the Second International specially reckoned; apart from them, the world is inhabited by millions of people, who live in Asia and Africa. We want to end the power of capital throughout the world. And that will become possible when not only in Europe and America but throughout the world we light the fire of revolution and when behind us follows the whole of laboring Asian and African humanity."²⁴ Zinoviev was followed by Radek, and then by the foreign Communists present: Béla Kun, Tom Quelch, Shablin, Rosmer, John Reed, and Steinhardt. Attention naturally centered, however, on the opening session of the Congress itself, which was scheduled to take place the following day.

Almost two thousand delegates from twenty-nine Eastern nationalities were present to hear Zinoviev's opening address.²⁵ The work of the Second Comintern Congress was outlined, and its conclusions recapitulated. They had aimed at Baku, Zinoviev noted, to secure a "more complete mass representation of the toilers of the whole of the East" than had been possible in Moscow. He pronounced the Congress a "most important historical event": now "not individuals, but tens, hundreds of thousands, millions of the toiling peoples of the East are rising up, who represent the majority of the world's population and who, thus, are alone capable of resolving finally the struggle between labor

23. Sorkin, *Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka*, pp. 16, 17; *Kommunist* (Baku), Sept. 5, 1920.

24. The proceedings of the Congress were reported in *Kommunist* (Baku) from September 5 onward. The discussion which follows is based on the text in *Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka: Stenograficheskie otchety*; page references to this source are contained in the text. A Conference of the Youth of Asia opened nine days later. See *Kommunist* (Baku), Sept. 12, 1920.

25. According to the stenographic protocol (p. 5), 1,891 delegates were present, representing some twenty-nine nationalities. This figure appears also in *Izvestiia*, Sept. 21, 1920, in *Kommunisticheskiĭ Internatsional*, no. 14 (1920), col. 2941, in *Narody Vostoka*, no. 1 (1920), p. 57, and in A. Iu. Tivel and M. Kheimo, *Desiat' let Kominterna v resheniakh i tsifrakh* (Moscow and Petrograd, 1929), p. 373. A figure of 1,902 delegates, however, is given in *Narody Vostoka*, no. 1 (1920), p. 4; and *Kommunist* (Baku), Sept. 12, 1920, reports "about 2,000" delegates (p. 1). Sorkin, from an examination of the list of delegates and of delegates' mandates, concludes that "not fewer than 2,050" delegates were present (*Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka*, p. 21). But not all of them appear to have attended the first session.

and capital" (p. 31). Before them there now stood the "task of igniting a general holy war against the English and French capitalists" (p. 45). "Comrades! brothers!" he concluded, "we call you to a holy war above all against English imperialism!" His appeal was greeted with "stormy applause" and "repeated cries of 'hurrah' "; the delegates stood, brandished their weapons, and replied, "We vow it." Zinoviev hoped that the declaration might be heard in London and Paris and in all the cities where (for the time being) capitalists remained in power. "Long live the fraternal alliance of the peoples of the East with the Communist International! May capitalism perish! Long live the empire of labor." Stormy applause broke out; and the delegates replied in their turn, "Long live the Third International," and "Long live the unifiers of the East—our respected leaders, our beloved Red Army" (p. 48).

This was the most dramatic point of the proceedings of the Congress; and the address as a whole occupied the entire first session. Radek followed with a report on the "international situation and the tasks of the toiling masses in the East." "We are united with you by fate," he told the delegates. "Either we unite with the peoples of the East and speed up the victory of the Western European proletariat, or we will perish, and you will be enslaved" (p. 70). It was thereupon agreed to form four subcommissions to deal with the agrarian question, the national-colonial question, the construction of Soviets, and organizational matters (p. 80). A Council of Action and Propaganda was elected at the final session of the Congress. It was mandated to conduct propaganda, to publish a journal and pamphlets, to organize a university of social sciences for the East, and to offer assistance to revolutionary movements. The Council had a membership of forty-eight, and in turn it was to elect a Presidium of seven, two of whom were to represent the Comintern Executive, with the right of veto. The Council was itself to function as a subordinate organ of the International (pp. 211–13, 219–20; there was again some confusion about the precise number of members of these bodies).

The work of the Congress concluded with the adoption of the resolutions proposed by the subcommissions, and with the adoption of a manifesto to the Eastern peoples which called for the "liberation of mankind from the yoke of capitalist and imperialist slavery. . . . In this holy war all the revolutionary workers and oppressed peasants of the West will be with you. . . . Long live the uniting of all peasants and workers of the East and West, the uniting of all workers, all the oppressed and exploited."²⁶

The Congress, however, had also a public and ceremonial aspect. On September 3, a public holiday, a military parade took place on the streets of

26. *Narody Vostoka*, no. 1 (1920), pp. 57–61.

Baku, and Zinoviev unveiled a monument on Liberty Square. A dozen yards from the monument, according to a British intelligence report, stood a scaffold with "most lifelike" effigies of Lloyd George, Millerand, and President Wilson suspended from it, attired in court dress with a full array of decorations. The three figures were thereupon set on fire; and as they burned, bundles of English one-pound notes fell from their pockets.²⁷ On September 8, following the final session of the Congress, another public ceremony was enacted as the twenty-six Baku commissars, for whose deaths the British authorities were held responsible, were solemnly reinterred (pp. 223–24).

Reactions to the Congress in Russia varied only in their degree of enthusiasm. *Pravda* on September 8 hailed the Congress as a "major event in the history not only of the East, but in the history of world revolution." The development of a powerful revolutionary movement in the East, it considered, heralded the "fall of imperialism and the triumph of the world socialist revolution." Pavlovich declared that the Congress had "made the first breach in the Chinese wall which hitherto separated the peoples of the East, firstly, from each other, and secondly, from the revolutionary West." In all these countries, he believed, the prerequisites existed for social revolution. There could be "no doubt that the Congress of the Peoples of the East [would] play a major historical role in the speeding up of the process of separation of the 'colonies' from the metropolitan countries . . . and of the communist order throughout the world."²⁸ If the outcome of the Congress of the Peoples of the East had been the establishment of the Council of Action, declared an editorial in the Baku paper *Kommunist*, "the offspring of the Council [would] be the emergence of a federation of Soviet peoples in the East."²⁹

The Congress's anti-imperialist purpose was not lost on the British authorities. Every effort was made to prevent the Turkish delegates from reaching Baku across the Black Sea, and a maritime patrol was maintained along the northern Turkish sea coast. The delegates were able to proceed only when a storm blew up and the patrol vessels were forced to put in at Constantinople. "Almost half-dead," it was reported, the Turkish delegates reached their destination.³⁰ The delegates from Persia were less fortunate: some were arrested by the local police, apparently acting on the instigation of British officers, and those who reached the Caspian Sea and began to cross it were

27. Secret Political Report, Oct. 25, 1920, in Foreign Office file 371/5178/E13412, Oct. 30, 1920, Public Record Office, London (hereafter FO).

28. *Narody Vostoka*, no. 1 (1920), pp. 9–10 (and in *Zhizn' natsional'nostei*, Oct. 27, 1920).

29. *Kommunist* (Baku), Sept. 12, 1920, p. 1.

30. *Ibid.*, Aug. 30, 1920, p. 1.

bombarded by a British airplane, killing two delegates and wounding several others.³¹

It is difficult to assess how seriously the Congress was taken by the British Cabinet. The *Times*, at least, affected editorial amusement at what it termed the “spectacle of two Jews, one of them a convicted pickpocket, summoning the world of Islam to a new Jihad” (September 23). The journal *Near East* described Baku—“an amazing city”—as a “place where life is so constantly unsafe that people regard barbarism and bloodshed as part of the ordinary routine of existence.” Its working people were “as picturesque and villainous a set of ruffians as ever made up a riot.” But many members of the Cabinet—Churchill, Curzon, and Montagu prominently among them—appear to have regarded the Soviet threat to Britain’s eastern possessions with increasing alarm. The Bolsheviks, a Cabinet meeting was told in May, were “making difficulties” for the government “all over the East,” in Turkey, the Caucasus, Persia, Turkestan, and Afghanistan, and had “not concealed their intention to create trouble for us in India.” Trade negotiations, however, were shortly to begin between the two sides. It was “generally felt . . . that advantage should be taken of the forthcoming conversations with M. Krassin, if possible, as a condition of entering into trade relations, to effect an all-round settlement which would include the East.”³² The government, Curzon remarked in a memorandum, must exact its price for (as he saw it) coming to the assistance of the Bolsheviks. That price could “perhaps better be paid in a cessation of Bolshevik hostility in parts of the world important to us than the ostensible exchange of commodities, the existence of which on any considerable scale in Russia there is grave reason to doubt.”³³ The British government, for its part, was now calling in the West to redress the unfavorable balance of the East.

The Russo-Polish war in the summer of 1920 temporarily supervened. Once the crisis had passed, however, the government made it clear that the renewal of the trade negotiations would depend on the cessation of anti-British propaganda in the East, alarming accounts of which were now reaching London. Curzon, in a note to Chicherin on October 1, 1920, took particular exception to Soviet actions in the Caucasus, Central Asia, Persia, and Afghanistan, and to the “revolutionary Conference of Asiatic peoples in Baku,” which was “clearly directed against British interests.”³⁴ At congresses in Moscow, Baku, and elsewhere, he added, there had been a “real hurricane of propaganda,

31. Sorokin, *Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka*, p. 21; *Pravda*, Sept. 16, 1920.

32. *Near East*, 18, no. 483 (Aug. 5, 1920): 199; Cabinet minutes, May 21, 1920, Cab. 30(20)3, Cab. 23/21, Public Record Office, London (hereafter Cab.).

33. “Negotiations with M. Krassin,” May 27, 1920, C. P. 1350, Cab. 24/106.

34. *Dokumenty vnesheii politiki SSSR*, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1959), pp. 242–44 (original in FO 371/5434/N4512, Dec. 20, 1920).

intrigue, and conspiracy against British interests and British power in Asia."³⁵ When the trade agreement was eventually signed on March 16, 1921, a letter was handed to the Soviet representatives by Sir Sydney Chapman specifying the action which the British government considered necessary under the terms of the agreement. The letter dealt exclusively with agitation and propaganda in Afghanistan and India, and it was made clear that the maintenance of the agreement would be entirely conditional upon the Soviet government's termination of such activity. "If we care about anything in the Trade Agreement," wrote a Foreign Office official in a minute which received Curzon's endorsement, "it is the possibility that it may stop Bolshevik propaganda against us in the East or elsewhere."³⁶

The Bolshevik leaders, for their part, were aware of the crucial importance of the colonial possessions, and especially of India, to British capitalism. Britain, it was pointed out, was "only an Empire as long as she holds India. Take India away from her, and she becomes a small island kingdom." India was the "foundation stone of the British Empire." If revolution broke out there, it would "bring with it enormous changes in the history of mankind."³⁷ British capitalism, Radek argued, could be overcome not only in London, Manchester, Sheffield, and Glasgow. "It must be broken in the colonies. There is its Achilles' heel."³⁸

There is some evidence that the Bolshevik leaders in fact regarded the revolutionary movement in the East, so exquisitely calculated to embarrass the imperial overlord, simply as a useful tactical device. By increasing the level of anti-imperialist propaganda and agitation it appeared possible to bring pressure to bear on the British government, and thus significantly to improve the Soviet bargaining position. This essentially manipulative line of thinking is represented most clearly, perhaps, by Trotsky. In a letter to Chicherin in June 1920, he expressed the opinion that a Soviet revolution in the East would be of advantage to them "mainly as a most important item of diplomatic exchange with England." Every means should be employed, he urged, to "underline our readiness to do a deal with England regarding the East."³⁹ Radek also pointed out that every colonial revolution would "ease the position of the Soviet republic."⁴⁰

Krasin reported in an (intercepted) letter to Litvinov that the British

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 317–20 (original in FO 371/5431/N118).

36. The letter is printed in *Anglo-sovetskie otnosheniia, 1921–1927: Noty i dokumenty* (Moscow, 1927), pp. 8–11 (it is not included in *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR*); FO 371/6854/N4823, Apr. 20, 1920.

37. *Vestnik NKID*, no. 8 (Oct. 15, 1920), p. 116.

38. *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional, Vtoroi kongress*, p. 114.

39. *Trotsky Papers*, vol. 2 (The Hague, 1971), no. 556, p. 509.

40. *Ezhegodnik Komintern*a (Petrograd and Moscow, 1923), pp. 278–79.

government was "very well-informed regarding the secret negotiations between Moscow and the Oriental countries." Lloyd George, he considered, was in "great fear of a Bolshevik offensive in Persia." This possibility, together with domestic labor unrest, had "forced Lloyd George to enter into negotiations with Russia."⁴¹ Pavlovich also observed that the "decisive course" of Soviet policy in the East, reflected particularly in the establishment of the Council of Action and Propaganda of the Peoples of the East, had "compelled" British ruling circles to "speed up the changing of their policy toward Soviet Russia." The Baku Congress met in September; and "already in December," he pointed out, the British government had prepared a draft agreement.⁴²

The Soviet government does appear generally to have abided by its undertakings under the terms of the trade agreement, often to the dismay of more vigorously inclined local Communists. The Tashkent propaganda school was closed down; and instructions were issued to Soviet representatives in Afghanistan and Persia that they must observe the provisions of the agreement and refrain from "artificial attempts to introduce communism."⁴³ Indeed the trade agreement, according to a letter from two members of the Council of Action and Propaganda to its chairman (intercepted by British intelligence), had dealt a "fatal blow" to their work: "The main basis of our agitation was our struggle with England. This was the most convincing argument in our work and the cornerstone of our propaganda." The conclusion of the agreement, which prohibited such activity, had now "placed the Eastern Communists in a very awkward position, and . . . entirely ruined the work which they had built up with such difficulty." In the circumstances, they wrote, "what possible sense can there be in continuing our work in the East?"⁴⁴

The Council of Action and Propaganda did not in fact cease to exist at this point; and it had already undertaken a wide range of activities. Its first meeting took place on the day following its election, when arrangements were made for the publication of a journal and for the preparation of a report on the Congress. E. D. Stasova was elected secretary of the Presidium. Four sections were established: for agitation and propaganda, organization and training, and information, as well as a Secretariat.⁴⁵ The journal *Peoples of the East*

41. Political Report (Copenhagen, June 8, 1920), FO 371/4036/205118, June 22, 1920.

42. M. N. Pavlovich, *Sovetskaia Rossiia i kapitalisticheskaia Angliia*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1925), p. 37 (emphasis in original).

43. *Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR* (Moscow, 1960), 4:165-68; *Kommunist*, 1956, no. 18, p. 111.

44. Secret Report, no. 233, June 2, 1921, FO 371/6844/N6733, June 10, 1921.

45. Sorkin, *Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka*, p. 43; Stasova, *Stranitsy zhizni i bor'by*, p. 110; Arutiunian-Arents, "V. I. Lenin i Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka," p. 252. The statement that "there is no record that the Council of Action and Propaganda ever met" evidently requires correction. See Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International*, vol. 1 (London, 1956), p. 106.

eventually appeared in Russian and Turkish (editions in Arabian and Persian were in preparation); and considerable numbers of proclamations and leaflets were produced in the major Eastern languages. Sections were also established under the auspices of the Council in Persia, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.⁴⁶

Six-week shock courses were organized in Baku with the assistance of the Kavburo and the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan party, embracing political economy, geography, and the organization of Soviets, as well as questions of the natural sciences.⁴⁷ On January 16, 1921, a solemn reception was provided for the first students to complete the courses, and Narimanov and Ordzhonikidze addressed them. The graduates held a joint meeting with the Council of Action and Propaganda; and a telegram was dispatched to Lenin, extending a "warm greeting to the leader of the world revolution. . . . The ideas of the liberation of the East, proclaimed by you, serve as our guiding light."⁴⁸

The British diplomatic ultimatum, it was reported, "caused a considerable stir, both at the Communist Headquarters in Moscow, and in the Council of Action and Propaganda. A great deal of telegraphing took place between Moscow and Baku on this subject; the lines, in fact, being almost entirely occupied for several days in discussing the question as to what action should be taken in this connection." The Council subsequently held a secret session, at which the new situation was discussed "at length from every point of view."⁴⁹ British intelligence reported that it was decided not to dispatch a group of agitators to Afghanistan on receipt of instructions to this effect from Moscow; and further instructions were received to curtail expenditure on propaganda.⁵⁰

It appeared, then, that the work of agitation and propaganda among the Eastern peoples which had been launched at the Baku Congress had been

46. *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional*, no. 15 (1920), col. 3367; Soviet archival source, cited in Arutiunian-Arents, "V. I. Lenin i Pervyi s"ezd narodov Vostoka," p. 252.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 253; *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional*, no. 15 (1920), col. 3367.

48. Soviet archival source, cited in Arutiunian-Arents, "V. I. Lenin i Pervyi s"ezd narodov Vostoka," p. 253.

49. Secret Intelligence Service report no. 409, Oct. 24, 1921, FO 371/6856/N11963, Oct. 27, 1921.

50. *Ibid.*, FO 371/8193/N6024, June 21, 1922. The Council was reported by Colonel Stokes, the British representative in Tiflis, originally to have been allocated some 10,000 gold rubles, 150,000 rubles "in Nicolai money," £500 in sterling, and six large diamonds (Report no. 95/2, received Feb. 7, 1921, FO 371/6277/E1688, Feb. 7, 1921). The reduction in the Council's budget may have been influenced by the reported discovery by Moscow that previous allocations of cash had been squandered (*ibid.*). References to the splendid style of the Council's existence, however, may have been exaggerated. Stasova recalled that although they had lived in the palace of a former khan, conditions there had been "extremely arduous." Moreover, she added decorously, "there were no conveniences, even the most basic" (*Stranitsy zhizni i bor'by*, p. 111).

sacrificed to Soviet state interests. To an extent, at least, it seems difficult to resist the conclusion that the Soviet leaders simply had “no desire to endanger the hope of a provisional *modus vivendi* with the Western powers.”⁵¹ This, however, is only part of the explanation we require. It was at least as important that the Baku Congress and its aftermath had demonstrated that the organization of the colonial revolution was by no means so straightforward a matter as seems originally to have been supposed, and that the attempt to introduce directly Communist measures in the Eastern countries might be premature. To refrain from “artificial attempts to introduce communism” represented as much the lesson of the Bolsheviks’ experience as it did a decision to subordinate the Eastern revolution to the maintenance of the trade agreement with Britain.

A number of the difficulties encountered at the Baku Congress were simply technical. It proved impossible, for instance, in such a multinational assembly to resolve satisfactorily the question of translation. Speeches were interpreted at various times into Russian, Turkish, and Persian, and also into Turkmen, Chechen, Uzbek, and Komi. A request for a translation into Kabardinian had to be declined (p. 49). It eventually became necessary to limit the number of speakers, to restrict official translations to three languages (Russian, Azerbaijani Turkish, and Persian), and to instruct interpreters to limit themselves to no more than a quarter of the time occupied by the original speaker. Those unable to understand any of these three languages were advised by Zinoviev to sit with someone who could provide an informal interpretation for them (pp. 99, 100). The effect, not surprisingly, was that “not the faintest notice was taken of most of the numerous speeches made, the delegates being far more interested in each others’ swords and revolvers.” One delegate, British intelligence reported, had been provided with credentials and instructed to “rise and applaud loudly” after Zinoviev declared war on imperialism. He was unable to understand the speeches in Russian, however, and fell asleep. He “awoke suddenly to find the Congress loudly applauding Zinoviev’s declaration of war against Imperialism.”⁵²

It proved difficult, moreover, to assemble sufficient properly accredited delegates, and the credentials of many were slender in the extreme. It was “especially difficult,” Mikoian recalled, “to establish contact with the Persians and Turks.” Efforts were made to secure proper delegations with the co-operation of Persian and Turkish Communist organizations in Baku. Many

51. Carrère d’Encausse and Schram, *Marxisme et l’Asie*, p. 41; similarly M. N. Roy, *Memoirs* (Bombay, 1964), pp. 468, 482.

52. Secret Political Report, Oct. 25, 1920 (cited in note 27); Stokes (Tiflis), Report no. 33/121, Oct. 25, 1920, FO 371/5435/N3390, Nov. 29, 1920.

delegates, however, had eventually to be selected from the groups of political émigrés in Soviet Turkestan at this time. (Their “main shortcoming,” according to *Zhizn' natsional'nostei*, was less their nonrepresentative character than the fact that many were pacifists or for other reasons non-Bolshevik.) Some Indian soldiers, who had deserted from the British army at Khorasan, reached Baku to be hailed as delegates; and a further 135 delegates were apparently collected at Enzeli and then “allotted to various provinces and towns of Persia which they were alleged to represent.”⁵³

A more serious fault, in Zinoviev's view (the first Comintern congress, after all, had similarly been provided with delegates from the material at hand in Moscow at the time), was that despite all efforts Indians and Chinese were “very little represented” (p. 46). Indeed, out of some two thousand delegates only fourteen came from India and seven from China. Delegates from Azerbaijan and from the Soviet Caucasus accounted for almost half of the audience (p. 5). Zinoviev announced that Eastern peoples not represented at the Congress might send a representative to join the Council of Action and Propaganda (p. 212). It remained, nevertheless, a genuine “Congress of the Peoples of the East” only in aspiration.

The Congress, moreover, was by no means the “compact and unanimous whole” of Zinoviev's subsequent description. Another delegate described it rather more accurately as a “queer assembly, all zealous and fervent. It was not an assembly, it was a conglomeration of motley people.”⁵⁴ It was heterogeneous politically as well as ethnically. About half the delegates declared themselves to be Communists; but almost a quarter were nonparty, and the remainder included anarchists and S.R.'s as well as representatives of openly bourgeois parties. As Stasova recalled, many representatives of the Central Asian republics “promoted a far from Bolshevik line, and it was necessary to overcome it.” Not even the chief representative of the Azerbaijani party, Narimanov, could be considered altogether reliable. Considerable efforts were necessary before he could be persuaded to accept the necessity of a search of the harems by the Cheka, after it had been learned that wealthy locals had placed their riches there to escape confiscation.⁵⁵

Indeed, by no means all those present had assembled for the purpose of political discussion. Among them, Stasova recorded, were “various khans and

53. Mikoian, *Dorogoi bor'by*, p. 582; *Zhizn' natsional'nostei*, Aug. 3, 1920; Roy, *Memoirs*, p. 395; Stokes, Report no. 33/121 (cited in note 52).

54. *Petrogradskaia pravda*, Sept. 18, 1920, quoted in FO 371/5435/N244, Oct. 12, 1920; Shaukat Usmani, *From Peshawar to Moscow* (Benares, 1927), p. 100.

55. Sorkin, *Pervyi s'ezd narodov Vostoka*, p. 21; Stasova, *Stranitsy zhizni i bor'by*, p. 110. Zinoviev subsequently reported to the Comintern that the nonparty faction had in fact been “much more numerous than the Communist faction.” See *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional*, no. 14 (1920), cols. 2941–44.

beks, who had decided to make use of their journey to Baku to attend to various commercial matters: to sell carpets, leather work, and so on." A number of particularly dubious delegates and open speculators had to be expelled from the city. Most Muslim delegates, however, according to another report, brought local produce with them, and "with this they proceeded to trade and from all accounts managed to do considerable business during their stay in Baku."⁵⁶

The individual delegates might, admittedly, have been more discriminat-ingly chosen. On the whole, however, their political shortcomings revealed the strength of tradition in the East, and strongly implied that the obstacles which the Bolsheviks faced in bringing about the Eastern revolution were considerably more significant than they had yet appreciated. It was reported, for instance, that "many violent speeches" had been made; but the "general effect was in many cases spoiled by large numbers of the Moslem representatives going outside to say their prayers."⁵⁷ Every effort was made to stress the political and social equality of the women of the East. Two women as well as two men were elected as joint chairmen of the Congress, and three women were elected to its Presidium (pp. 100, 155). Two of them subsequently addressed the assembly; and a five-point resolution was proposed, providing among other things for the formation in the Eastern countries of local committees on the rights of women. It was pointed out that women had to overcome the "despotism of men" as well as that of capital (pp. 216-17). There were only fifty-five women delegates present, however (p. 5); and the proposal that some of their number be elected to the Presidium met with vigorous resistance. Zinoviev regarded their successful election as a "momentous event."⁵⁸ The issue nevertheless revealed at the same time that formidable cultural obstacles remained to be overcome before equality for women, together with the rest of the Comintern's program for the East, could be realized.

The strength of tradition had no less significant an impact on political orientations. Enver Pasha of Turkey, who was present in Baku at this time, was not in fact a delegate to the Congress. He sent a statement of his views, however, and as it was deemed of "major political importance" it was distributed and read to the delegates (pp. 108-12). Despite some favorable references to the "natural ally of all the oppressed, Soviet Russia" and to the Third International, it was essentially a manifesto of an orthodox nationalist character. The Congress Presidium, in a resolution commenting on Enver's statement, warned that the independence movement in Turkey was directed

56. Stasova, *Stranitsy zhizni i bor'by*, pp. 109-10; Secret Political Report, Oct. 25, 1920 (cited in note 27).

57. Secret Political Report, Oct. 25, 1920.

58. *Petrogradskaia pravda*, Sept. 18, 1920 (cited in note 54).

“only against foreign oppressors, and its success would by no means signify the liberation of Turkish peasants and workers from oppression and exploitation generally” (pp. 117–18). Some opposition to the resolution was nevertheless apparent in the hall; and Enver generally “exercised great influence over the Moslem delegates from the various districts of Central Asia,” being “looked upon by them as a heroic figure and the representative of Moslem hostility to the Western powers and particularly England.” Chiefs and delegates “insisted on rendering Oriental obeisance to Enver Pasha when presented to him,” and he was greeted with “salutes and even acclamations” when he positioned himself on horseback beside the course of the parade of September 3.⁵⁹

Many delegates warned that a “colossal ideological baggage” hindered the development of socialist ideas in the East (p. 157). The influence of the October Revolution had been considerable, one delegate declared; but “we were not able immediately to form all [our] masses of customs and conditions of life into a communist framework.” It was well known, he added, that “the East is completely different, its interests are completely different, from the West.” An “inflexible carrying out of the ideas of communism” would meet with opposition (p. 87). As it was, despite the declarations of the Soviet government guaranteeing the inviolability of traditional religious and customary observance, Muslims had told him that they had not been allowed to pray or to bury their dead in accordance with their religion and established customs (p. 91). “Take away your counterrevolutionaries,” he appealed—to “stormy applause” from the floor. “Take away your colonizers, now working under the mask of communism!” (p. 90).⁶⁰

Zinoviev referred to these questions in his speech a month later at the Halle Congress of the German Independent Socialist Party. He defended the Congress against the skepticism generally displayed by the German socialists. It was, he insisted, “a revolutionary act, an act of hostility against English capital.” He conceded, however, that Enver Pasha’s hands and feet had been kissed in the street in Baku, and pointed out that one had to “reckon with the bucolic [*derevencheskii*] prejudices of the people.” A “colossal work of enlightenment” remained to be performed.⁶¹

Zinoviev expressed confidence that as the struggle developed and as the peasants formed themselves into Soviets, they would discard their belief in

59. British High Commissioner (Constantinople), Nov. 5, 1920, FO 371/5439/N2539, Nov. 16, 1920; Rosmer, *Moscou sous Lénine*, 1:147.

60. The elimination of such excesses was the main theme of a resolution adopted by the Politburo of the RKP(b) following a joint meeting with twenty-seven delegates from the Baku Congress in Moscow on October 13, 1920. Lenin’s draft is in *Leninskii sbornik*, vol. 36 (Moscow, 1959), pp. 133–34.

61. G. E. Zinov’ev, *Mirovaia revoliutsiia i Kommunisticheskiĭ Internatsional* (Petrograd, 1920), pp. 45, 47, 48.

the Sultan and in their traditional rulers, as the Russian peasants had done (p. 42). This, however, presupposed that the overall strategy to be adopted was clear, unequivocal, and generally supported. This was by no means the case.

The main problem, as it was subsequently to remain, was that of the "national bourgeoisie." Should this group be supported, and if so, in what circumstances? Zinoviev, in his opening address at the Congress, emphasized the need patiently "to support those groups which are not yet with us, [and] even in a few questions are against us—for instance, in Turkey, comrades, you know the Soviet government supports Kemal. We do not forget for a minute that the movement headed by Kemal is not a communist movement. We know that." They were "ready," however, "to assist any revolutionary struggle against English imperialism." They would accordingly support "such a movement as the national movement of Turkey, Persia, India, China." At the same time they had their own "not less important task—to help the laborers of the East and the struggle against the rich, already now to assist them to build their communist organizations, to explain what communism is, prepare them for the real labor revolution" (pp. 41–42, 44, 45).

Zinoviev's exposition was clear enough. The delegates, however, did not always share his views. Some, such as the members of the Azerbaijani party group, resolutely refused to countenance any degree of "recognition or support" of the national aspirations of the native bourgeoisie: "The main problem is to prepare the masses for the establishment of a Soviet republic."⁶² Other delegates leaned in the opposite direction: toward Pan-Islamism, Pan-Turkism, or toward nationalism of a more straightforward character. The Indian Revolutionary Organization in Turkestan, for instance, asked the delegates and Soviet Russia to "help India, so acutely needing your assistance." Such assistance should be rendered, they added, "without any interference in the internal and religious life of those who await liberation." All revolutionaries addressed themselves to Russia for help in the "struggle," as they termed it, "for the realization of their national programs" (p. 106). In vain did Zinoviev insist that it was not the purpose of the revolution in the East "to require the English capitalist overlords to take their feet off the table and then allow the rich Turk to place his own there" (p. 43).

It proved difficult in practice, moreover, to maintain such a policy of "conditional support." Pavlovich soon found it necessary to warn that while the Comintern favored alliances with bourgeois-democratic groupings in the colonial countries, it did not favor combination with them. Local Communists

62. Secret Political Report, Oct. 25, 1920 (cited in note 27).

must “unconditionally retain freedom of action of the proletarian movement.”⁶³ The degree of success achieved by the policy, moreover, remained distinctly meager. The Third Comintern Congress was informed that while Kemal continued to fight for the independence of Turkey against the Entente (and loudly proclaimed his revolutionary solidarity with Soviet Russia) he was nevertheless “conducting a vigorous struggle against communists” by means of arrests and executions, and had even sponsored a spurious nonrevolutionary “communist party”: “with a provocative aim: so as to end any communist influence in Turkey.”⁶⁴ British intelligence reports from Persia were to the effect that the Soviet representative there continued to intrigue, “though apparently with indifferent success,” while in Afghanistan Bolshevik propaganda was also “meeting with very little success.”⁶⁵

Communist party membership figures reported by the Comintern bore out such estimates. In Persia there were 2,000 members but no press organs; in Turkey there were two press organs but no members; while in Korea and China neither members nor press organs could be found. In India and Afghanistan no figures were indicated, for in neither country did a Communist party yet exist. Zinoviev responded with the slogan, “Proletarians and oppressed peoples of all countries, unite in the general struggle against imperialism and for communism.” But the point was precisely that these two objectives had proved almost impossible to identify.⁶⁶ Only, it appears, among merchants and traders, who favored the development of trading relations for reasons which had little to do with a commitment to socialist principles, had the cause of Soviet Russia registered an advance.⁶⁷

These problems had first and most notably emerged in northern Persia during the course of the Baku Congress. The port of Enzeli on the Caspian Sea was occupied by Red forces on May 18, 1920, and the nearby town of Resht in Ghilan Province was taken after its Anglo-Indian garrison had fled. A republic was declared there on June 4, and a Provisional Revolutionary Government was formed under the Persian democrat Kutchuk Khan, all the members of which bore the title “commissar.”⁶⁸ Following Kutchuk’s sub-

63. *Zhizn' natsional'nostei*, July 30, 1921.

64. *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional. Tret'yi vsemirnyi kongress: Stenograficheskiĭ otchet* (Petrograd, 1922), p. 464.

65. FO 371/8193/N6024, June 21, 1922.

66. *Ezhegodnik Komintern*, pp. 54–55; *Tret'yi vsemirnyi kongress*, pp. 468–69.

67. *Economist*, Jan. 22, 1921, p. 119; *Novyi Vostok*, 1923, no. 4, p. 218.

68. M. N. Ivanova, *Natsional'no-osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie v Irane v 1918–1922 gg.* (Moscow, 1961), p. 85; idem, “Natsional'no-osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie v Gilianskoi provintsiĭ Irana v 1921–22 gg.,” *Sovetskoe Vostokovedenie*, 1955, no. 3, pp. 46–55. See also A. N. Kheifets, *Sovetskaia Rossiia i sopredel'nye strany Vostoka v gody grazhdanskoi voiny, 1918–20* (Moscow, 1964).

sequent departure from the government a more left-wing course was adopted; and a resolution was proposed at the Baku Congress hailing this new revolutionary state.

The attempt to introduce Communist policies in Ghilan, however, the NKID reported, "did not lead to successful results."⁶⁹ Antireligious propaganda and the expropriation of the landlords failed to win support for the government. Indeed the antireligious propaganda was widely resented, and the peasants generally refused to take over the lands which were offered to them. In October a newly elected Central Committee of the Persian Communist Party "after clarification of the failure of communist policy in Ghilan . . . adopted a resolution on the necessity for the revolution in Persia to pass through a bourgeois stage." This "put an end," as Chicherin noted, "to the attempts to introduce a communist order which had been conducted by the local Soviet government in Ghilan."⁷⁰

In January 1921 new "theses on the socioeconomic situation of Iran and the tactic of the Iranian Communist Party 'Adaliat'" were adopted. The theses made clear that the Iranian Communist Party would have to refrain from the "immediate introduction of purely communist measures" and admitted the "impossibility of the early appearance of communism in Persia." The party must rather attempt to secure the cooperation of all classes, from the proletariat to the middle bourgeoisie, and should seek to establish common cause with parties representing the petty bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia. The strength of religious and cultural prejudices was explicitly acknowledged. The Ghilan episode, moreover, had "again raised the threat of Russian domination and thus weakened the anti-English movement." Any further armed intervention from this source would only harm the revolutionary movement.⁷¹

The support of Kutchuk Khan, Safarov commented, had been an example of the "overestimate of the real relation of forces," which had operated to the benefit exclusively of world imperialism. Where the working-class organization was weak, there was a need to avoid "revolutionary adventurism." A "long transitional period," or an NEP period, was "necessary also for the Eastern countries," where religious, ethnic, and cultural prejudices remained strong. The Iranian party itself admitted a fall in membership by 1922 of more than three-quarters, and by 1924 only six hundred members were

69. Roy, *Memoirs*, p. 395; NKID, *Godovoi otchet k VIII s'ezdu sovetov za 1919-20 gg.* (Moscow, 1921), p. 72.

70. M. N. Pavlovich, *Ekonomicheskoe razvitiie i agrarnyi vopros v Persii XX veka* (Moscow, 1921), p. 30; NKID, *Godovoi otchet*, p. 73; *Izvestiia*, Nov. 6, 1921.

71. *Zhizn' natsional'nostei*, Mar. 17, 1921 (quoted at length, but without any reference to Russian intervention, in Ivanova, *Natsional'no-osvoboditel'noe dvizhenie*, pp. 101 ff.).

reported. Its delegates to Comintern congresses conceded that “the conquest of power by the toilers may be delayed.” They could offer only the rather bleak hope that “with the growth of an industrial proletariat the party’s prospects would improve.”⁷² There was, in fact, little need for the British government to require the Comintern to refrain from attempts directly to bring about a socialist order in the East. The failure of the attempt to do so in Ghilan was lesson enough.

British intelligence reported that the Council of Action and Propaganda had not been allowed to discuss the Ghilan episode.⁷³ Its significance was nevertheless clear enough to the Council’s members. Not simply did the Council suffer from problems of organization, resources, and personnel—the substance of the explanation it offered for its lack of results in a report to the Comintern executive in April 1921.⁷⁴ These problems were real enough: Stasova, for instance, was soon transferred to other duties; and her successor, Ordzhonikidze, had little time to spare from governmental duties. Baku was also found to be a less than adequate base, and two further councils were established, according to *Izvestiia*, at Tashkent and in the Far East (February 18, 1921). Yet altogether more serious was the misconception of the possibility of revolutionary change upon which the Council’s functions had been based. Announcing the problems toward the solution of which it would address its efforts, the first number of the Council’s new journal, *Narody Vostoka*, emphasized the need to “work out the most correct paths of revolutionary destruction and revolutionary construction” (p. 3). This soon proved to be an unrealistic objective; and the first issue of the journal was, perhaps appropriately, also the last. The Council itself was “working actively,” Zinoviev reported to the Third Comintern Congress. But this statement almost certainly erred on the side of diplomacy. Rosmer, at least, recalled that the immediate results of the Congress had been “not such as might have been expected from it.” An intelligence report indicated that the Russians had “frankly admitted” the failure of the Congress and were now “just as anxious to drop all mention of the Congress as they were in the earlier stages to advertise it.”⁷⁵ The Comintern executive, in its circular containing the agenda of the Third Comintern Congress, declared that the Baku Congress had been

72. G. Safarov, *Problemy Vostoka* (Petrograd, 1922), pp. 171, 176; Sepehr Zabih, *The Communist Movement in Iran* (Berkeley, 1966), p. 52; *Tretyi vseмирnyi kongress*, p. 468.

73. Secret Political Report, Oct. 25, 1920 (cited in note 27).

74. Sorkin, *Perвыi s'ezd narodov Vostoka*, p. 44.

75. *Protokoll des III Kongresses der Kommunistischen Internationale* (Hamburg, 1921), p. 211; Rosmer, *Moscou sous Lénine*, 1:147; Secret Political Report, Oct. 25, 1920 (cited in note 27).

of “great and undoubted historical significance.” The Third Congress was nevertheless asked to deal with the Eastern question “not only theoretically . . . but as a practical matter.”⁷⁶

This reappraisal of revolutionary perspectives reacted also upon the Congress of the Peoples of the East, of which the one in Baku had supposedly been only the first. Béla Kun promised the delegates at Baku that at the second such congress, “the representatives of the federations of Eastern Soviet states will be reporting how the Eastern poor took power into their own hands, how they are building their Soviet organs, and how they are advancing forward on the path at the end of which lies the elimination of any kind of exploitation, that is communism” (p. 182). Zinoviev similarly promised that the Baku Congress would be “not the last, but the first.” Succeeding meetings would be held “not less often than once a year” (p. 211). This forecast was not realized. Indeed, perhaps the most concise estimate of the significance of the Baku Congress is provided simply by its title. It was the “First Congress of the Peoples of the East.” It was also the last.

76. *Kommunisticheskii Internatsional*, no. 17 (June 1921), col. 4031.