

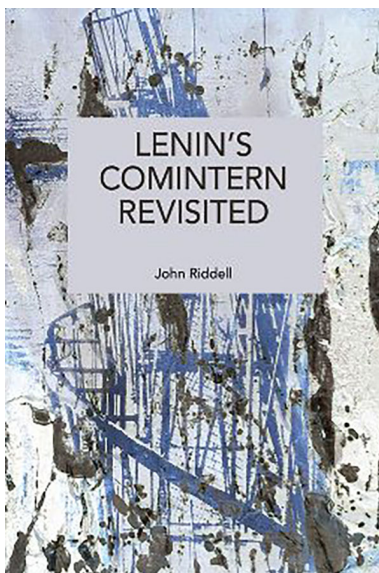
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Review

The Early Comintern in Context

- Reviews section -



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Lenin's Comintern Revisited

By John Riddell

Leiden, Brill: Historical Materialism, 2026, xiv + 321 pages,
bibliography and index, Haymarket paperback \$30.99.

READERS WILL FIND inside this austere presented and written book a rich vein of political analysis from the documents and debates of the Communist International (CI), or Comintern as it came to be known, as it sought to analyze and shape tumultuous events during the period of victories and defeats following the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Lenin's Comintern Revisited is the latest in a series of books by the Comintern Publishing Project, founded in 1983 by Riddell who served as general editor. Riddell has been aided by Mike Taber, who has been the general editor of the project since 2019.

As Taber explains in the Foreword, the present book is actually an introduction to the whole series and the Communist International itself. He also explains the project's origins and how he and Riddell came to it.

Ten volumes of documents are already published, and an eleventh on "Revolutionary Youth" is in preparation. (xi-xiv) [\[1\]](#)

This volume introduces the first four congresses of the Comintern and plenums; meetings of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI); and other documents of the Communist International from its founding in 1919 to 1924.

The book is a combination of guide to large sets of documents, some only recently available in English and others for the first time; a rough annotated guide to Comintern documents; and focused treatments, summaries, and commentary on a series of political themes and debates set in the historical context in which they unfolded.

Given the sheer volume of documents related to these questions, Riddell's summaries are both useful on their own but can also be thought of as guides to further research which would undoubtedly lead to more insights. An index is included for those wishing to further pursue study of the themes treated in this volume.

Comintern Origins and Debates

The broad outlines of the Comintern's history are well known. The founding of the Communist International in 1919 against the backdrop of World War I and the Russian Revolution, and the 21 conditions for admission of national parties to the International, have long been debated on the left.

The first four congresses of the Comintern were understood in Marxist circles as belonging to the revolutionary phase of the International, ending in the late 1920s when Stalinism took hold of the Russian-dominated Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the International. But the documentation upon which that knowledge was drawn represented only a portion of the documents and oral interventions that the Comintern produced.

Difficulty in obtaining those documents and speeches has been compounded by their being in different languages mostly Russian, German, French and English. Riddell's familiarity with those languages, his solid command of the particular and global historical context in which they unfolded, and his firm Marxist grasp of the method and ideology that guided Lenin and the Comintern leadership and its sections, give coherence and educational value to this book.

Riddell draws on both written reports, resolutions and other documents of the congresses and plenums, as well as transcripts of the proceedings in which delegate's reports and interventions were recorded.

Riddell deftly presents Comintern debates as they unfolded and lets its various spokespeople speak in their own words, while also suggesting interpretations in instances when events proved and disproved the power and efficacy of competing analyses and courses of action.

Central to the Comintern leadership were Karl Radek, Leon Trotsky, Zinoviev and to a lesser degree, Bukharin and Kamenev and Joseph Stalin.

Lenin himself emerges as a sort of senior statesman often chairing meetings and intervening sparingly around carefully chosen themes. But he invested considerable energy around issues that he believed to be central for the International such as anti-Imperialism, the struggle against the remnants of Second International reformism or what the Bolsheviks called "opportunism," and the United Front.

The volume begins with a chapter titled "The Second International: Birth and Death" which outlines the backdrop of the founding of the CI. The Second International was founded in 1889 and consisted of mass Socialist parties mostly in Europe, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) being its largest and most influential.

Despite wide agreement on antiwar texts approved by the International in 1907, 1910 and 1912 proclaiming that declarations of the impending Imperialist war would be met with calls for a general strike and total parliamentary opposition, the leaders of the German, French, British and other Socialist Parties supported the war aims of their respective governments.

The Russian and Italian parties were opposed, and during the war Lenin became the leader of the Zimmerwald antiwar left (named after the Swiss village where a small, but significant gathering of antiwar Socialist Party leaders took place in 1915).

The First Congress

Following the war and the Russian Revolution, Lenin led a left movement against the "opportunism" of the Second International which led to the Communist or Third International. Chapter 3, "Towards a New International" reviews the antiwar Zimmerwald movement and the Russian Revolution as background events leading to the founding of the Third International.

The congresses and the plenums which took place between them were held in Moscow under the auspices of the Russian Communist Party, which enjoyed the prestige of having led the world's first proletarian socialist revolution and the state power and resources that went accompanied it.

But travel to revolutionary Russia in times of war and blockade was long, difficult and dangerous. Three delegates

perished on their way home from the first congress.

The First congress of the Communist International in Moscow in 1919 was hastily called and convened under difficult conditions, including food and fuel shortages.

These conditions contributed to the limited representative scope of the congress, heavily weighted in favor of European parties. There were relatively few representatives from Asia or other colonized parts of the world. There were few women. A German delegate argued that its limited representativeness meant that it should not proclaim itself a new International.

Lenin and others strongly disagreed, arguing that proclaiming the International would be a clear break with the opportunist, reformist Second international that had betrayed the working class and socialism through its support for the imperialist war, and send a revolutionary message to the left-moving workers of the world inspired by the Russian Revolution.

The Second Congress

The Second congress took place in 1920 under much more promising conditions. The counterrevolutionary White armies had been defeated, and it seemed for at time that workers elsewhere were following the revolutionary example of the Russian Revolution.

This congress was much broader in representation, with considerable participation from non-European parts of the world, particularly Asia, and matched by strident declarations in favor of the anti-Imperialist and anti-colonial struggle.

This was the congress where the famous 21 conditions for admission were debated and approved. As the Communist parties and the International stimulated considerable interest and prestige in advanced working-class circles worldwide, Lenin and the Bolsheviks wanted to be certain that the reformists who had betrayed socialist internationalism in 1914 would be barred from admission.

Anti-Imperialism was a key theme discussed at the Second Congress, and Riddell offers an extended analysis of the debates and resolutions on this question. The importance to which Comintern leaders beginning with Lenin accorded the struggles of peoples dominated by Imperial power, such as those under Romanov rule in the vast Russian empire, underscored their commitment to anti-Imperialist struggle.

Rightwing voices in the Second International had justified colonial exploitation on the most racist basis. Some spoke of the “barbaric backwardness” of colonized peoples and the need for future European socialist societies to maintain colonies.

The First Congress had passed resolutions clearly condemning colonial and Imperialist plunder. But as Riddell points out, this denunciation of Imperialism and solidarity with its colonial victims lacked a vision of agency on the part of colonial subjects themselves.

The Second Congress went much further in elaborating a thorough, anti-imperialist program and practice.

The Baku Congress

The Comintern also sponsored an historic conference of non-European largely colonized peoples in the Baku, the capital of Soviet Azerbaijan in 1920.

The conference drew 2050 participants including 1891 delegates, most of whom were from new Soviet republics in Asia, but also Turkey, Armenia, Iran and Georgia. It was a stunning expression of anti-Imperialism and gave considerable prestige to the International.

Those wishing to learn more about this remarkable conference Riddell edited a volume from the series, "To See the Dawn: 1920-First Congress of the Peoples of the East," the complete record of its speeches, interventions, and documents.

A smaller conference sponsored by the Comintern, of the "Toilers of the East" was held in Moscow in 1922, further underscoring Lenin's and the Comintern's commitment to full support of the colonial revolution and national liberation movements. Riddell also outlines the debate on how Communist parties were to relate to anti-colonial bourgeois forces and governments.

Early Comintern documents supporting the struggles of colonized peoples did not explicitly mention Black liberation, but the implication was clear and noticed by Black revolutionary nationalists in the United States. Here too, the Comintern broke with earlier conceptions that viewed the oppression of Black and other peoples of color simply as part of their exploitation as workers.

The Comintern recognized the Black struggle in the United States as a form of colonial repression. Black delegates who were part of the U.S. delegation consulted with Lenin during the congress.

Riddell sums up Comintern thinking on Black liberation noting that its leaders "held that the liberation struggle of Black people formed part of the world uprising of oppressed peoples against colonialism and racism, and that oppressed Black people thus constituted a central force in the worldwide struggle for socialism" (229).

The United Front

The Third Congress in 1921 was held amid a period of revolutionary hope and then counterrevolution. That congress saw the elaboration of the United Front, a rich discussion on party organization and democratic centralism, and some discussion of fascism.

One of the most significant developments in the Comintern was the elaboration of the United Front policy, which in the words of Riddell "became of the most effective tools for working class action inherited from the era of Lenin and the Russian Revolution" (127). Indeed, the question of alliances and with whom, remains an enduring feature of socialist politics.

Riddell presents the development of the policy by reviewing the debates and documents in close connection with the political events in Germany as they unfolded. In 1920, a far-right military coup, the Kapp putsch, overthrew the Social Democratic SPD government.

In response the German Comintern section, the KPD appealed to other working class political organizations-the SPD, the USPD which was a left split from the SPD, and the KAPD, which had split from the KPD, for united working-class resistance.

The USPD opposed the appeal, citing the radical demands of its platform, while the KAPD opposed the alliance from an ultraleft, sectarian position. But workers responded with strikes and vigorous resistance and chased the Kapp putschists out of power, leading to the restoration of the SPD government. The strategy became generalized and theorized in the Comintern as the United Front.

The debate on the United Front was complicated by its connection to at least three other questions that arose alongside the German events: 1) the “theory of the offensive” advanced by the leadership of the KAPD and other Comintern figures, 2) the workers’ government demand, and 3) the transitional approach.

The establishment of short-lived Soviet governments in Hungary and parts of Germany produced a wave of enthusiasm and optimism. Lenin was particularly enthused. But the overthrow of these, and the failure of the 1920 Italian general strike to move from defensive and limited demands to a drive for power, eventually made it clear that the period opened by the Russian revolution, that of revolutionary openings had ended.

Yet as the revolutionary crescendo descended, some like the KAPD leadership around Ruth Fischer and Arkady Maslow misread, as soon became clear, the period as still being one of revolutionary possibility and proposed an insurrectionary offensive involving a “united front from below” to bypass the leaderships of other workers’ organizations.

This approach was rejected by the Comintern. Lenin, Trotsky, Radek and others, pointing out that attempting to bypass the leaders of reformist parties and unions would not be a united front at all. Following the “theory of the offensive,” the KAPD and its allied VKPD and after initial hesitation, the KPD attempted an insurrection in March 1921. Workers responded to the call in series of cities, but right-wing military units crushed the movement with heavy losses.

For A Workers’ Government

In this context, the question arose regarding what type of alternative to capitalist rule would a united front propose, and how it could be widely embraced in the working class and its organizations?

Following the United Front logic, the answer was proposing a “workers’ government” to be made up of recognized workers’ organizations that would defend working class interests.

Communists would support such a government but not necessarily participate in it, but in any event retain their right to criticize such a government if they felt that it was not serving working class interests. Such a government would be a prelude to anticapitalist transformation.

There was a debate regarding the possibility of such a government emerging from parliamentary elections. The document “Theses on Tactics” is the main document that discusses the workers’ government.

The congress also discussed the importance of raising transitional demands to bridge the gap between the current

state of working-class consciousness and the revolutionary consciousness necessary for socialist revolution. This would later be codified in the founding document of the Fourth International (1938), drafted by Trotsky.

United Front and Fascism

The Fourth Congress in the words of Riddell “tied together the united front, transitional demands, and the prospect of a worker’s government in a single arc reaching from today’s movements to a struggle for power.” (263) As he also points out, the question of the defense of bourgeois democratic capitalist governments and institutions when threatened by the far right was not resolved.

Riddell explains how the document on the United Front produced by the Third Congress represented a compromise, even a sort of watering down of its main message.

Zinoviev signed on to the united front strategy and gave the main report, but seemed to do so reluctantly, demonstrating sympathy for the ultraleft KAPD position on the theory of the offensive and stressing the reformism and “betrayal” of the Socialist parties more than the need for united working-class anti-fascist action across organizations.

The United Front was eventually abandoned by the Comintern as it came under the control of the privileged bureaucratic layer of Communist Party functionaries. In the late 1920s the Comintern under Stalin’s control pursued an ultraleft orientation that abandoned the united front based on a premise that a “third period” of capitalist crisis was opening that would see revolutionary situations develop.

In such a period, Stalin and his acolytes held that the greatest danger to the working class and the revolution was the Social Democratic parties of the old Second International which were branded “social fascist.” With the working class often evenly divided between Socialist and Communist parties and affiliated unions, such a policy effectively ended the United Front.

This sectarian policy had its most disastrous consequences in Germany where the KPD not only refused antifascist alliances with the Socialists, but actually also blocked with the Nazis against the Socialists in some electoral campaigns.

This tragic division of the working class at a time of needed proletarian unity greatly helped Hitler take power in 1933. Subsequently the Comintern turned in the opposite direction, calling for “popular fronts” involving alliances with supposed antifascist bourgeois forces.

A brief chapter outlines early analyses of fascism and traces Comintern policy on anti-fascism through the Popular Front. The Fourth Congress of the Comintern took up the question of fascism, but in a rather limited form mostly in the context of discussions on the United Front.

Fascism had only recently taken power in Italy by the time of the fourth congress, and it would be nearly a decade before German fascism took power.

Contemporary far-right governments from Trump to Bolsonaro to Orban have stimulated interest in fascism, and this chapter would be a good place to start.

Riddell reproduces Mike Taber's summary of Clara Zetkin's remarkable report to the enlarged plenum of the ECCI written shortly after Mussolini took power. Those looking for more Marxist analyses of fascism can consult Trotsky's works and those of Daniel Guérin, both written after fascism had been firmly installed in Italy and Germany.

Democratic Centralism

Riddell reconstructs the debates and the actual record of how various Comintern-affiliated parties handled questions of party organization and democratic centralism, and the role of Lenin and the Russian Communist Party in the Comintern and relations with its sections.

Riddell's account reveals a far more nuanced image of democratic centralism that has been often assumed by historians and the balance sheet of contemporary socialist organizations that experimented with hyper-centralist norms that led to gutting democratic rights within those organizations.

Critics from the left and the right have long accused the Communist Parties and the International under Lenin of paving the way for Stalinist hyper-centralization. But Riddell offers evidence that the conception and practice of democratic centralism under Lenin's leadership of the Comintern were worlds apart from its hideous Stalinist distortion.

Lenin insisted on discipline and centralism in carrying out agreed-upon party policies, strategies, positions and campaigns. But this was not a "Leninist" invention. In fact, as Riddell points out, most voluntary associations expect policies approved democratically to be carried out.

Riddell cites Lenin explaining that the centralism of the Second International was a strength. It was the reformist and centrist leadership that violated democratic centralism by acting contrary to agreed-upon antiwar declarations while undemocratically stifling antiwar voices in their own parties.

At the same time, the rights of minorities within Comintern parties were also guaranteed. Riddell offers numerous declarations and examples of actual practice that underscored the democratic part of the equation. His quote from Trotsky on this question is worth reproducing here.

(I)t is important to observe very strictly the statutes of the organization — regular meetings of the rank and file, discussions before conventions, regular conventions and the right of the minority to express their opinions (there should be a comradely attitude and no threats of expulsion). You know that was never, never done in the old (Russian) party. Expulsion of a comrade was a tragic event and was done only for moral reasons and not because of a critical attitude. (150)

Riddell cites historian Paul Le Blanc who called attention to numerous examples of recognition of national differences, and the importance of flexibility in organizational matters. In fact, the key document on this question, the 1921 "Theses on Organization" explicitly warned against centralization that cut across democracy.

Riddell leads the reader into a discussion of how notions of democratic centralism also informed the relations between the Comintern and its sections. Here too, as a number of left scholars have emphasized, the record of the

Comintern regarding its sections stands diametrically opposed to the hyper-centralization and intervention by the Stalinized Comintern.

Riddell quotes several documents and interventions regarding the importance of considering varied national and local conditions and traditions in the organizational structure and practices of Communist parties.

Women and the Comintern

Chapter 14 on the Communist Women's Movement outlines the work of the Comintern regarding women's oppression and the organization of women members. It draws on *The Communist Women's Movement, 1920-1922: Proceedings, Resolutions, and Reports*, published in 2022 and edited by Mike Taber and Daria Dyakonova.

The Comintern established a women's commission under the leadership of veteran German Socialist leader Clara Zetkin who had also led the Second International's socialist women's movement, which founded the March 8 International Women's Day marches.

The first Congress approved a resolution "On the Need to Draw Women Workers into the Struggle for Socialism" drafted by veteran Russian Communist leader Alexandra Kollontai. International conferences of Communist women were held in Moscow in 1920 and 1921.

The Communist movement in this period defended women's bodily autonomy and campaigned for the repeal of anti-abortion laws. There were Comintern women's publications, and the Communist parties were encouraged to set up women's commissions and publications.

But behind the resolutions and commissions were rampant patriarchal and sexist attitudes on the part of many male Communists. The commitment to autonomous women's organization waned as the International abandoned the United Front policy and embarked on an ultraleft course.

In 1925 the Comintern women's journal was discontinued. By the mid 1930s Stalinist parties in the Soviet Union and throughout the world began to promote patriarchal values.

Degeneration and Legacy

Shortly after the Fourth congress, the Comintern began to embark on the road that would lead to Stalinist refutation of the practice and much of theory of the Comintern in Lenin's time. A brief penultimate Chapter 26 outlines the early stages of Stalinism and the end of the International as a revolutionary instrument.

By the Fifth congress, the process of ending free internal discussion had begun and the Comintern began to "undercut the authority and autonomy of national leaderships and open the door for bureaucratic intrusions by the Moscow Comintern centre into the selections of national leaderships." (316)

Lenin's Comintern Revisited gives contemporary readers an important introduction to a period rich in political lessons. Though the period was vastly different from our own, many questions that the Comintern confronted in Lenin's time from the United Front to anti-imperialism and the rights of oppressed nations to self-determination have a contemporary ring.

The section on party organization and democratic centralism should be of great interest to contemporary socialists trying to build the socialist movement. As Riddell sums up, this sweeping documentation project “expresses the conviction that this experiment in internationalism, now a century in the past, retains its relevance to present-day struggles. It deserves the effort to preserve revolutionary memory.” (321)

The book and its materials may require concerted study and work to absorb its lessons, but those willing to invest the effort will find much of value in this account of a period full of victory and defeat in the struggle for socialism.

September-October 2026, [ATC 244](#).

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[1] Three previous volumes have been reviewed in *Against the Current*: about the Third Congress and the Fourth Congress as well as and the International Executive Committee Plenums in 1922-23. — ATC