Debating the Revolution

written by John Rose | March 26, 2017

Book Review – John Riddell (editor and translator), *To the Masses: Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921* (Brill/Haymarket, 2016), £39.99.

To the Masses is the last volume of a hugely ambitious project to make the proceedings of the (four) congresses of the Communist International held during Lenin's time available in English. It's an extraordinary achievement for John Riddell, a Canadian revolutionary socialist historian and activist.

With good reason the publisher can boast of "this newly translated treasure of 1,000 pages of source material…supplemented by an analytic introduction, detailed footnotes, a glossary with 430 biographical entries, a chronology, a comprehensive index". The volume also includes 32 appendices which portray behind the scenes exchanges between delegates at the congress. A brief review cannot begin to do justice to a resource like this. It will justifiably demand the attention of generations of professional and amateur historians, socialist activists and curious general readers who want to deepen their understanding of the desperate struggle to internationalise the world's first socialist revolution in Russia in October 1917.

Readers may know that one debate above all dominated proceedings, the so-called "March Action" in Germany 1921 and the "theory of the offensive" that underpinned it. It was an event that came close to destroying the newly founded German Communist Party (KPD) and certainly contributed to the failure of revolution in 1923. This journal [*International Socialism*] has discussed the theory of the offensive many times but the combination of scholarly devices described above exposes it to a powerful new light. Its seductive appeal carried, at least superficially, both political and intellectual authority. Three examples demonstrate this, beginning with one of its unlikely roots: the Polish-Soviet war of 1920.

In spring 1920 the Red Army had not only repelled a Polish invasion of Soviet Ukraine but had begun to chase the Polish army back to Warsaw. A year later Trotsky described the expectation among the Bolsheviks that this might have been the trigger for a "landslide of revolutions", led by workers in Germany and Italy. Of course, it was a dangerous illusion but it inspired an article by Nikolai Bukharin in the Comintern's world journal, headlined "The Policy of the Offensive". As Riddell notes, it "drew on precedents from the French revolutionary wars of the 1790s to make the case that Soviet advances could spark revolution beyond Soviet borders". The theory of the offensive, open to flexible interpretation, was born.

The emergence of the theory coincided with a major contradiction that Lenin would also address in

1920 in his pamphlet “Left-Wing” Communism. The sudden growth of mass based communist parties, involving tens of thousands of newly recruited workers with very high revolutionary expectations, just as the wider revolutionary tide was receding. The theme of the 3rd Congress, To the Masses, like Lenin’s pamphlet, carried the implicit warning: don’t bypass the masses. With glorious hindsight, this might seem obvious, but the sheer excitement and novelty, the energy and expectation, the pressure of and from so many new revolutionary workers to act now could seem irresistible. Lenin’s dictum that “without revolutionary theory there can be no successful revolutionary movement” had never been more urgent.

And there was also the insidious but again seductive appeal brought to Germany in March 1921 by one Comintern delegate, the loathsome Béla Kun, which can be summed up as: The Russian Revolution is disintegrating. German comrades must act now to rescue it. Kun denied it but To the Masses conclusively confirms its authenticity. (Loathsome justifiably describes Kun who told Lenin that Clara Zetkin, his major opponent at the congress, was suffering from senile dementia and she should commit suicide).

Lenin’s task at the congress was to win the argument against the theory of the offensive, but at the same time to manage the argument, because of its potential to blow the congress apart, splitting the German Communist Party and indeed the Comintern leadership. Not just Bukharin, but Comintern chairman Grigori Zinoviev was also implicated.

Zetkin’s nearly ten thousand word recollection of her conversations with Lenin (appendix 3i) makes absolutely compelling reading. Convincing her would test the strategy. Zetkin, a formidable figure at the congress, was a close comrade both of Rosa Luxemburg and her successor as leader of the German Communist Party in 1919, Paul Levi. Levi had been expelled from the party for opposing the March Action as well as the irresponsible way he had opposed it. Lenin now launched his own offensive, we might even call it a charm offensive, to bring both sides together once the argument was concluded. There would be an attempt to create a path back for Levi, even though he was detested by many in the German party. At the same time, the other side must not feel too “humbled and embittered”. Zetkin recalled Lenin’s words to her:

You and your friends will have to accept a compromise. You must rest content with taking home the lion’s share of the congress laurels. Your fundamental political line will triumph…

The congress will wring the neck of the celebrated theory of the offensive and will adopt a course of action corresponding to your ideas. In return, however, [the congress] must grant the supporters of the offensive theory some crumbs of consolation…in passing judgement on the March Action, we will focus attention on the way that proletarians, provoked, fought back against the lackeys of the bourgeoisie” (p37).

Chivalry aided compromise in the German delegation. Zetkin had clashed with her German comrade Fritz Heckert over the March Action. The following day was her birthday and Heckert presented her with a bouquet of flowers—it was Lenin’s suggestion: “Comrade Heckert, you pursued a wrong policy in Germany, for which you have good reason to be angry. Clara merely told you the truth about your policy. Maybe not all her words were appropriate, but yesterday you attacked her bitterly and unjustly. Make up for it with a bouquet of roses today.” And yet an editorial comment casts a shadow over the compromise: “in a congress notable for its candour and controversy, almost nothing was said in criticism of the Executive Committee of the Comintern’s record”.*

This debate might have dominated congress but we should not lose sight of its wider significance. There was the sheer majesty of the event itself which lasted three weeks and was attended by 600 delegates from 55 countries, including China, Palestine, the United States and Australia. An

enormous effort went into providing translation and written recording facilities with the extremely limited technical means then available. It is no exaggeration to say that this was international working class democracy in action; delegates together represented millions of workers from across the world.

You can dip into this extraordinary book and track any number of arguments, with Manabendra Roy from India insisting that the Congress's concluding theses recognise not just anti-imperialist struggles but the role colonial possessions played in stabilising international capitalism. British Communist delegate Tom Bell warned against over-reliance on "past…formulas" partly in response to a speech by Leon Trotsky. There was the "open letter" strategy with demands designed to rally workers in all left wing parties, the forerunner of the united front and a direct counter to the theory of the offensive. Karl Radek introduced the idea of transitional demands. Georg Lukács, philosopher and Hungarian comrade of Kun, contributed to the March Action debate. Alexandra Kollontai, not just reporting on the Communist women's movement, but also representing the Workers' Opposition in Russia and opposing the Bolshevik government's New Economic Policy.

There was also a catastrophic omission: no debate on the left's failure to resist the rise of Italian fascism. There is a comprehensive article to be written, with the new material drawn from To the Masses, about the way some Comintern leaders, again under the misguided influence of the theory of the offensive, concocted a split in the Italian Socialist Party. This led to the birth of a frankly deformed Italian Communist Party, incapable of resisting the rise of Benito Mussolini. The To the Masses editorial introduction pulls no punches on this issue:

[The congress] theses on tactics and strategy made only brief mention of the need to resist fascism. Zinoviev's closing remarks revealed the Comintern leadership's ignorance of conditions in Italy: he hailed the Communists' leading role in a united anti-fascist action in Rome, unaware that the Italian Communist Party had stood aside from this initiative (p30).

There are also tantalising insights that help explain what we now know to be the thunderbolt of the 20th century: the rise and fall of soviet communism.

Trotsky to Congress: "I can now reveal this secret, since we are now demobilising (after the civil war victory). During the period when we were fighting on four fronts, our army numbered 5,300,000 men, of which no less than three-quarters of a million were skilled workers. That was an extremely heavy and unbearable loss for the economy ." (p117)

It had also drained the soviets—tens of thousands of those workers had been local soviet leaders. Workers' soviets, vibrant revolutionary democratic institutions without historical precedent, rooted in the productive process, would not revive.

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