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Congress of the Peoples of the East resonates 100 years later

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For a moment, let's travel back in time exactly 100 years to Baku, a city in what was known then as the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. Somewhere in the city, nearly 1,900 people gathered in a crowded, noisy hall for eight days to conduct the Congress of the Peoples of the East.

Look around the assembly and we'll see people representing not only the revolutionary working-class organizations of the capitalist and imperialist nations, but also revolutionaries representing national liberation struggles from the colonial and semicolonial world.

Some of them may look ragged or in grief from their travels to Baku. The road between their countries and Azerbaijan was perilous. After all, most of the globe was gripped in the ravages of World War I only two years earlier, and the first successful working-class revolution had seized state power from Tsarist Russia a year before that.

The world's imperialist powers were eager to contain this type of threat to their power. Britain had established a military blockade of Soviet Russia and used it to impede travel to Baku — in one instance killing two delegates and injuring several others when British warplanes attacked a ship traveling from Iran. The Armenian and Georgian governments, not yet overthrown by working-class forces, outright banned attendance of the conference. Delegates from these countries crossed borders in secret.

The congress was called after a decision by the Second Congress of the Communist International, a worldwide coalition of communist parties and organizations from all over the world, for the purpose of building unity and solidarity between the working-class movements of the “West” with the anti-colonial national liberation movements of the “East.”

Achievements of the congress

Eight days of thorough political discussion yielded the comprehensive [Manifesto of the Congress of the Peoples of the East](#), which laid out the most important unities of the gathering:

- In the spirit of ending the power of the rich over the workers but also the power of some peoples over others, the congress urged the workers of the imperialist countries to unite with the peasants and other oppressed classes of the peoples of the East.
- The congress thoroughly and ruthlessly condemned the British Empire and its presence and schemes in India, Turkey, Persia (now known as Iran), Mesopotamia and Arabia (areas now roughly corresponding to most of Iraq and Kuwait, and parts of Syria and Turkey), Palestine, Egypt, China, Korea, Afghanistan, Armenia, Georgia and Eastern Europe.

- The congress presented a thorough analysis of the political economy of British colonialism and the forced migration of the colonized peoples. In short, British imperialist capital, in order to survive, must go beyond its borders to find new investments and new markets, and by violent seizure of colonies, they own the land, banks and factories of the colonized people. This causes the forced migration of people because they cannot find employment in their own lands.

Most important was the congress's declaration of solidarity and support for the anti-colonial struggles of the colonized world. Though acknowledging that the liberation struggles would not stop at the elimination of foreign imperialists nor the expropriation of land from the big landlords, the congress urged a united front between the oppressed classes of each country and their own national bourgeoisie in order to begin independent economic development.

But until the Soviet system is implemented, in which the working and toiling masses gain the experience of self-government, the anti-colonial revolution will not be complete.

Unprecedented steps in women's liberation

Despite the best efforts of the Communist International, only 55 of the almost 2,000 delegates of the Congress of the Peoples of the East were women. But even this was a leap forward in the fight for women's political rights — two women sat alongside two men in the joint chair committee and three women won elections to the presidium.

Perhaps the most remembered and studied speech of the congress is that of Turkish communist Naciye Hanim, who took the delegates to task: "However sincere and however vigorous your endeavors may be, they will be fruitless unless you summon the women to become real helpers in your work." She insisted on the necessity of

women's liberation and political participation to foster genuine revolution.

Hanim rejected a women's movement that aimed for assimilation into feudal or bourgeois life: "The women's movement in the East must not be looked at from the standpoint of those frivolous feminists who are content to see woman's place in social life as that of a delicate plant or an elegant doll."

[Hanim also presented a list of demands](#) that not only reflected the development of the women's liberation struggle at the time, but also pushed it forward and provided a model for women's struggles moving forward:

- Complete equality of rights;
- Ensuring to women unconditional access to educational and vocational institutions established for men;
- Equality of rights of both parties in marriage;
- Unconditional abolition of polygamy;
- Unconditional admission of women to employment in legislative and administrative institutions;
- Establishment of committees for the rights and protection of women everywhere, in cities, in towns and villages.

Solidarity from workers of imperialist countries

Readers here in the U.S. would be particularly interested in the statements of John Reed, a U.S. revolutionary and journalist.

At the time, the United States was the rising imperialist power of the world, having violently seized Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines as colonies a little over 20 years before. Having reported on and studied these wars, Reed used his speech to warn the congress about the brutal nature of U.S. imperialism:

"You, the peoples of the East, the peoples of Asia, have not yet experienced for

yourselves the rule of America. You know and hate the British, French and Italian imperialists, and probably you think that 'free America' will govern better, will liberate the peoples of the colonies, will feed and defend them.

"No. The workers and peasants of the Philippines, the peoples of Central America and the islands of the Caribbean, they know what it means to live under the rule of 'free America.'"

He further exposed the bloody role of U.S. imperialism in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Armenia and, most notably, the Black nation inside the U.S.: "With the purpose of distracting the attention of the American workers from the capitalists, their exploiters, the latter stir up hatred against the Negroes, provoking war between the white and Black races. The Negroes, whom they lawlessly burn alive, are beginning to see that their only hope lies in armed resistance to the white bandits."

John Reed provides a model for the workers of the imperialist countries on the revolutionary attitude to take towards U.S. imperialism and solidarity with the peoples of oppressed nations: "Do not believe the promises of the American capitalists! There is only one road to freedom. Unite with the Russian workers and peasants who have overthrown their capitalists and whose Red Army has beaten the foreign imperialists!"

Vital lessons for anti-imperialists

The theses developed at the Congress of the Peoples of the East were built on the foundation of Lenin's theory of imperialism and to this day provide revolutionaries with a stronger analysis on how to build a world revolution.

Those who read this article and study the minutes of the congress may be shocked at the continuing relevance of its theses. Of course, we must always take into account

the changes in material conditions of the world — the role of “number 1 imperialist” shifting from Britain to the United States, the structural shift from outright colonialism to neocolonialism, etc.

But the relevance of the Congress of the Peoples of the East speaks to the timeliness of the tools of Marx and Lenin for the study of society and revolution.

