

## **V.2: REVIEWS**

**John Riddell (ed.): To the Masses. Proceedings of the Third Congress of the Communist International, 1921, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2015. 1299 pp. (Historical Materialism Book Series. 91). – ISBN 978-9-00428-802-7.**

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This voluminous book is the latest part of a wide-ranging enterprise undertaken by John Riddell to publish the proceedings of the first four congresses of the Communist International, that is, the congresses held in Lenin's lifetime.<sup>1</sup> This volume includes the plenary discussions and resolutions of the Third Congress that took place in Moscow from 22 June to 12 July 1921, with more than 600 delegates from 55 countries. It is the congress that inaugurated a new political orientation of international communism which was later termed the "united front" tactic. It is also the congress that broadened the scope of communist activity. Several sessions were dedicated to the mobilisation and organisation of women and the youth, and to the tasks and tactics of communists in trade unions and cooperatives. But the main concern of the Congress proceedings was strategic: how should communists respond to the sharp change of political conditions in Europe where a socialist revolution appeared less imminent? There were opposing views about the most suitable response: while a "leftist" option favoured radical minority actions in order to push workers into revolutionary struggle, the "Right" (before the congress in a minority) was looking for a more gradual way to advance towards revolution by rooting Communists in the daily struggles of the working class. The debates about these alternative courses of action were heated and verbally quite violent, even personally injurious and they exceeded the time allowed. As a result, the other questions had to be squeezed into the remaining sessions. The discussions about the draft resolutions on revolution in colonies and semi-colonies had to be fitted into the final day's programme, leaving the commission on Eastern questions no time to give its report.

This collection is the first complete scholarly publication in English of the proceedings, the theses and resolutions of the Third Congress of the Third International. In the early years of the Comintern, its predominant working language was German. It was in this language that the debates of all 24 sessions were published from stenographic records less than six months after the congress closed, a Russian publication followed a year later, along with

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<sup>1</sup> John Riddell (ed.): *Founding the Communist International: Proceedings and Documents of the First Congress, March 1919*, New York, Pathfinder, 1987; John Riddell (ed.): *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite! Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920*, 2 vols., New York, Pathfinder, 1991; John Riddell (ed.): *To See the Dawn. Baku, 1920. First Congress of the Peoples of the East*, New York, Pathfinder, 1993; John Riddell (ed.): *Toward the United Front. Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 1922*, Leiden e.a., Brill, 2011.

summaries in French and English (the other two languages for which there was a translation service at the congress). Riddell's edition is based on this German edition of 1921. The resolutions and theses are taken from another German version of 1921 but their wording has been compared with a Russian version of 1933. Misspelled names have been corrected. But translations, as is often the case, pose problems with terminology. Some words have a broader or a slightly different meaning from one language to the other. Such cases are discussed in the editorial notes. The volume also contains a third type of source material in the form of 32 appendices translated from archival and published sources in German, Russian and French, given here in chronological order. These and the extensive editorial introduction are welcome contributions to the contextualizing of the proceedings. Both help to understand the complex and confusing political situation the delegates and the ECCI leadership were in after the revolutionary prospects in Europe had dwindled, and the deep fractures that divided them about the correct strategy to undertake. Thus the introduction begins with a broad survey of the year 1920 with its great hopes but also the failures of revolutionary uprisings in Germany and Italy, which nevertheless pushed the majority of the German Party to the left. The introduction is also helpful in outlining the main results of the congress and its legacy. Specialists will be particularly interested in Riddell's interpretation of the leading figures of the congress and their respective roles. These seven historical actors comprise, not surprisingly, Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev and Radek, but also three non-Russian Communists – Clara Zetkin, the absent Paul Levi, who had been excluded from the German Party for his criticisms of the March Action, and the mostly silent Béla Kun, who had probably acted on his own initiative when he actively supported the infamous March Action as the head of the ECCI mission to Germany.

Proceedings of a Comintern congress are not exactly something that one reads systematically from the first page to the last. The detailed introduction and the glossary with its short biographical notes are thus useful guides through the book. I have been picking what interested me most, but I ended up reading much more than I had intended. I would like to mention just two fascinating examples of the richness and intricacy of these debates, when critical thinking was still part of the International's way of functioning. On the one hand, the third congress was characterised by intensive and open debates, not only in plenary sessions but in its commissions and corridors. It was the only congress which scheduled a session on the internal policies of the Russian party. One can thus say that this was the first and only time the Communists of the world made Soviet Russia an object, before it became an imprint of their subjectivity. On the other hand, if the fight against gender and race discrimination stood on the political agenda, its implementation was far from having been achieved. These failings, however, were also explicitly exposed. As Zetkin said in her report on the Second International Conference of Communist Women held in Moscow 9-15 June 1921, on the eve of the Third Comintern Congress: "Comrades, it would perhaps be tempting and seductive for some to view the appearance of delegations from the Near and Far East simply from an aesthetic viewpoint. But the women delegates personified more than the exotic, unusual, and fairy-tale character of the Orient. The conference experienced a powerful historical moment, unforgettable and undying in its significance. [...] Comrades, the fact that women of the East came to us shows the exceptionally wide-reaching significance of the Third International's revolutionary struggle. It is the first, and until now the only organisation that truly inspires the hopes and the trust of the Eastern peoples. It is the first International to embrace all humankind. The International shall be the human race – the entirety of humanity." If there is a regret to mention, then it is the absence of a nominative list and of sociological data like age and gender in the list of delegations at the end of the book.