APPENDIX: 1b

Minutes of the Second Congress of the Communist International

Fifth Session: July 28, 1920: Theses on the National and Colonial question as presented by Zinoviev and passed unanimously with three abstentions

Source: https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch05.htm

1. An abstract or formal conception of the question of equality in general and national equality in particular is characteristic of the bourgeoisie by its very nature. Under the pretence of the equality of the human person in general, bourgeois democracy proclaims the formal legal equality of the proprietor and the proletarian, of the exploiter and the exploited, and thus deceives the oppressed classes in the highest degree. The idea of equality, which is itself a reflection of the relations of commodity production, is transformed by the bourgeoisie, under the pretext of the absolute equality of the human person, into a tool in the struggle against the abolition of classes. The true significance of the demand of equality lies only in the demand for the abolition of classes.

2. As the conscious expression of the proletarian class struggle to throw off the yoke of the bourgeoisie, and in accordance with its main task, which is the fight against bourgeois democracy and the unmasking of its lies and hypocrisy, the Communist Party should not place the main emphasis in the national question on abstract and formal principles, but in the first place on an exact evaluation of the historically given and above all economic milieu. Secondly it should emphasise the explicit separation of the interests of the oppressed classes, of the toilers, of the exploited, from the general concept of the national interest, which means the interests of the ruling class. Thirdly it must emphasise the equally clear division of the oppressed, dependent nations which do not enjoy equal rights from the oppressing, exploiting, privileged nations, as a counter to the bourgeois democratic lie which covers over the colonial and financial enslavement of the vast majority of the world’s total population, by a tiny minority of the richest and most advanced capitalist countries, that is characteristic of the epoch of finance capital and imperialism.

3. The imperialist war of 1914 has shown all the enslaved nations and oppressed classes throughout the world with particular clarity the mendacity of bourgeois-democratic phraseology, justified on both sides by phraseology about peoples’ liberation and the right of nations to self-determination, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and Bucharest on the one side and the Treaty of Versailles and St. Germain on the other have shown that the victorious bourgeoisie determines even ‘national’ frontiers to suit its economic interests. Even ‘national’ frontiers are merely objects of trade for the bourgeoisie. The so-called ‘League of Nations’ is merely the insurance policy by which the victors in this war mutually guarantee their booty. The strivings to re-establish national unity, for ‘reunification with ceded territories’ are for the bourgeoisie nothing other than the attempts by the vanquished to gather strength for new wars. The reunification of nations that have been artificially torn apart also corresponds to the interests of the proletariat. The proletariat can however only achieve real national freedom and unity by the path of revolutionary struggle and over the body of the defeated bourgeoisie. The League of Nations and the whole post-war policy of the imperialist states reveal this truth even more clearly and sharply, everywhere strengthen the revolutionary fight not only of the proletariat of the advanced countries but
also of the toiling masses of the colonies and the dependent countries, and hasten the collapse of petty-bourgeois illusions in the possibility of peaceful coexistence and the equality of nations under capitalism.

4. From the principles set forth it follows that the whole policy of the Communist International on the national and colonial question must be based mainly on the union of the workers and toiling masses of all nations and countries in the common revolutionary struggle for the overthrow of the landlords and of the bourgeoisie. For only such a union can secure victory over capitalism, without which the destruction of national oppression and inequality is impossible.

5. The international political situation has now placed the dictatorship of the proletariat on the order of the day, and all the events in international politics are concentrated inevitably around one single central point, around the struggle of the international bourgeoisie against the Russian Soviet Republic. The latter rallies around itself, on the one hand, the soviet movements of the vanguard of the working class in every country and, on the other hand, all the national liberation movements of the colonies and the oppressed nationalities who have been convinced by bitter experience that for them there is no salvation outside an alliance with the revolutionary proletariat and the victory of Soviet power over world imperialism.

6. Consequently it is impermissible today to limit oneself to mere recognition or proclamation of sympathy with the toilers of various nations, but it is necessary to pursue a policy of bringing about the closest possible alliance between all the national and colonial liberation movements with Soviet Russia. The forms of this alliance will be determined by the stage of development of the communist movement among the proletariat of every country, or of the revolutionary liberation movement in the backward countries and among the backward nationalities.

7. Federation is a transitional form on the way to the complete unification of the toilers of all nations. Federation has already showed its expediency in practice, not only in the relations between the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic and the other Soviet Republics (the Hungarian, Finnish and Latvian in the past, those of Aserbaijan and the Ukraine at present), but also within the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, even in relation to nationalities who possessed neither political existence nor self-government (for example the Bashkir and Tartar Republics in the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, which were set up in 1919 and 1920).

8. The task of the Communist International in this respect consists not only in the further development of this federation based on the soviet order and the soviet movement, but also in its study and the testing of our experiences with it. Recognising that Federation is a form in the transition to complete unification, we must strive for an ever closer federal link. What must be taken into consideration is first the impossibility for the Soviet Republics, surrounded as they are by the militarily significantly stronger imperialist states of the whole world, of continuing to exist without closer links with other Soviet Republics; secondly the necessity of a close economic alliance between the Soviet Republics, without which it is impossible to restore the productive forces destroyed by capitalism and assure the welfare of the toilers; and thirdly the efforts to create a unified world economy according to a common plan regulated by the proletariat of all nations. This tendency has already emerged quite openly under capitalism and insistently seeks its further development and completion under socialism.
9. In the sphere of relations within states the national policy of the Communist International cannot confine itself to the bare formal recognition of the equality of nations, expressed only in words and entailing no practical obligations, to which the bourgeois democracies confine themselves, even those that call themselves ‘socialist’.

It is not sufficient for the Communist Parties to expose unflinchingly in their propaganda and agitation both on the parliamentary tribune and elsewhere the continually repeated offences in every capitalist state, in spite of all the ‘democratic’ constitutions, against the equality of nations and the guaranteed rights of national minorities. It is also necessary first to clarify constantly the point that only the soviet order is capable of assuring nations true equality by uniting first the proletariat and then the whole mass of the toilers in the fight against the bourgeoisie, and secondly to give direct support to the revolutionary movements in dependent nations and those deprived of their rights, through the Communist Parties of the countries in question.

Without the last particularly important condition the struggle against the oppression of the dependent nations and the colonies and the recognition of their right to a separate political existence remains the kind of mendacious hypocrisy that we see in the parties of the Second International.

10. Recognising internationalism in words alone and watering it down in practice with petty-bourgeois nationalism and pacifism is a common phenomenon not only among the parties of the Second International but also among those that have left the International. This phenomenon is frequently seen even in those parties that now call themselves Communist. The fight against this evil, against the most deeply-rooted petty-bourgeois nationalist prejudices, which appear in every possible form such as racial hatred, the baiting of minorities and anti-semitism, must be brought all the more into the foreground the more burning becomes the question of transforming the dictatorship of the proletariat from a national dictatorship (i.e. a dictatorship existing only in one country and incapable of pursuing an independent international policy) into an international dictatorship of the proletariat in at least a few advanced countries which is capable of exercising a decisive influence on international politics). What petty-bourgeois nationalism means by internationalism is the mere recognition of the equality of nations (irrespective of the fact that such recognition is granted in words alone) which leaves national egoism untouched. Proletarian internationalism on the other hand demands: 1) the subordination of the interests of the proletarian struggle of the one country to the interests of this struggle on a world scale, and 2) the ability and the readiness on the part of the nation that carries out its victory over the bourgeoisie to make the greatest national sacrifice in order to overthrow international capitalism.

Therefore the first and most important task in those countries that are already completely capitalist and have workers’ parties that really do represent a vanguard of the proletariat, is to combat the petty-bourgeois pacifist distortions of the conceptions and policies of internationalism.

11. In relation to those states that have a more backward, predominantly feudal, patriarchal or peasant patriarchal character, special attention must be paid to the following points:

a) All Communist Parties must support the revolutionary liberation movements in these countries by their deeds. The form the support should take must be discussed with the Communist Party of the country in question, should such a party exist. This obligation to offer active assistance affects – in the
first place the workers of those countries on which the backward countries are in a position of colonial or financial dependence.

b) An unconditional struggle must be carried out against the reactionary and medieval influence of the clergy, the Christian missions and similar elements.

c) A struggle is necessary against PanIslamism, the Panasian movement and similar currents which try to tie the liberation struggle against European and American imperialism to the strengthening of the power of Turkish and Japanese imperialism, the nobility, the big landlords, the clergy, etc.

d) Support for the peasant movement in the backward countries against the landowners and every form and remnant of feudalism is particularly necessary. What must be striven for above all is to give the peasant movement as revolutionary a character as possible and wherever possible to organise the peasants and all victims of exploitation in soviets and thus bring about as close a link as possible between the Western European communist proletariat and the revolutionary movement of peasants in the East, in the colonies and in the backward countries.

e) A determined fight is necessary against the attempt to put a communist cloak around revolutionary liberation movements that are not really communist in the backward countries. The Communist International has the duty to support the revolutionary movement in the colonies only for the purpose of gathering the components of the future proletarian parties – communist in fact and not just in name in all the backward countries and training them to be conscious of their special tasks, the special tasks, that is to say, of fighting against the bourgeois-democratic tendencies within their own nation. The Communist International should accompany the revolutionary movement in the colonies and the backward countries for part of the way, should even make an alliance with it; it may not, however, fuse with it, but must unconditionally maintain the independent character of the proletarian movement, be it only in embryo.

f) It is necessary continually to lay bare and to explain among the broadest masses of all, but in particular of the backward, countries the deception committed by the imperialist powers with the help of the privileged classes in the oppressed countries when, under the mask of politically independent states, they bring into being state structures that are economically, financially and militarily completely dependent on them. The Zionists’ Palestine affair can be characterised as a gross example of the deception of the working classes of that oppressed nation by Entente imperialism and the bourgeoisie of the country in question pooling their efforts (in the same way that Zionism in general actually delivers the Arab working population of Palestine, where Jewish workers only form a minority, to exploitation by England, under the cloak of the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine). In today’s economic conditions there is no salvation for the weak and dependent nations outside of an alliance with Soviet Republics.

12. The centuries of enslavement that the weak and colonial nationalities have suffered at the hands of the great imperialist powers has left in the toiling masses of the enslaved countries not only a feeling of combativity, but also a feeling of mistrust towards the nations that have exploited them in general, including the proletariat of those nations. The base betrayal of socialism by the majority of the official leaders of that Proletariat between 1914 and 1919, when the social patriots masked the defence of ‘their’ bourgeoisie’s ‘rights’ to enslave and plunder the financially dependent countries under ‘defence
of the Fatherland’ – this betrayal could only strengthen that completely justified mistrust. Since this mistrust and national prejudices can only be rooted out after the destruction of imperialism in the advanced countries and the radical transformation of the whole basis of economic life in the backward countries, the removal of these prejudices will only be able to proceed very slowly. This means that the class conscious communist proletariat of every country has the duty of giving special care and attention to national feelings, in themselves outdated, in those long-enslaved countries and nationalities, and at the same time the obligation to make concessions in order to overcome this mistrust and these prejudices all the more rapidly. Without the voluntary alliance of the proletariat and with them the toiling masses of every country and nation in the world united as one, the victory over capitalism cannot be drawn to a completely successful conclusion.