

LENIN AND SNEEVLIET: THE ORIGINS OF THE THEORY OF COLONIAL REVOLUTION IN THE DUTCH EAST INDIES

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This work will first explore the origins of Colonial Revolution in the Dutch East Indies and subsequently analyze how the experience of a ‘bloc within’ policy between the Indisch Sociaal Democratische Vereniging (ISDV) and the Sarekat Islam lead to the Second Congress of the Comintern at which the Committee on the National and Colonial Questions was established. It will be argued that in each phase the Dutch Revolutionary Marxist Hendricus Sneevliet played a crucial role. Finally it will be shown that in the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party and the first alliance in the 1920s with the Kuomintang, the same Sneevliet at the request of Lenin, played a crucial role.

Colonial Revolution: The Dutch East Indies

It is well known that the Russian Revolution greatly influenced subsequent events in China. Of particular importance for China has been Lenin’s theory of colonial revolution and the resulting united front strategy. That this strategy was pioneered in the Dutch East Indies some four years before it was formally accepted as Comintern dogma in 1920 and some six years before the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) implemented it in China, is not so well known. In fact, events in the Dutch East Indies had a considerable influence upon the future orientation of the modern Chinese Revolution.

Lenin’s theory of colonial revolution was first propounded in the summer of 1920 at the Second Congress of the Communist International in

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Petrograd and Moscow.² His theses on the National and Colonial Question stipulated that the communists should enter into a temporary alliance with bourgeois democracy in the colonial and backward countries, but should not merge with bourgeois democracy. Under all circumstances the communists should uphold the independence of the proletarian movement no matter if even in its most embryonic form.³ In fact these lines express the famous united front strategy of which Lenin is generally accepted to be the first proponent. It is certainly no accident that Lenin's, and for that matter the Comintern's, preoccupation with Asia coincided with the Commissariat for Foreign Affairs's determined effort to bring about a diplomatic break-through with China.

It was not until the summer of 1920 that Lenin finally outlined his strategic programme for Asia. In Austria and Hungary the communists had achieved very little and similarly in Germany there was little hope of any proletarian uprising taking place. With a deteriorating situation at home, Lenin had no choice but to turn to the East. Marx had prophesied that the workers of the world would, in the most advanced industrial countries in Europe, be led by the masses of the proletariat. The Bolshevik Revolution had already shown that a dictatorship of the proletariat had first to be established in a backward and minimally industrialised country. Marx's insistence that colonial Asia would automatically be freed following the victory of European workers became a sore point after 1917. Therefore any legitimate proletarian alliance with a nationalist bourgeois democracy in Asia necessitated a reinterpretation of Marxist dogma. This is exactly what Lenin set out to do at the Second Congress of the Comintern in July 1920. However, it should be pointed out at this stage that not only the failure of the revolution in Europe and the precariousness of the Bolshevik Revolution itself gave Lenin the stimulus to turn to the East. Theory did not precede revolutionary practice. Lenin was certainly not the theoretical and strategic genius he has been generally held up as with regard to his theory on colonial revolution. Revolutionary practice was followed by the necessary reinterpretation of orthodox Marxism. The theory of colonial revolution came forth from Asia itself. It was in the Dutch East Indies where a small proletarian party aligned itself with a bourgeois nationalist mass movement four years before the Second Congress of Comintern took place.⁴

² *Der Zweite Kongress der Kommunistische Internationale: Protokoll der Verhandlungen vom 19. Juli in Petrograd und vom 23. Juli bis 7 August 1920 in Moskau*. Hamburg 1921.

³ Preliminary Draft theses on the National and Colonial Question, for the Second Congress of the Communist International, June 5, 1920. V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Moscow 1960. Translation of the fourth enlarged Russian edition, Vol. 31, pp. 144-51.

⁴ This thesis has been outlined in my study 'Revolution in China: Sneevlietian Strategy', MA thesis, University of Auckland, 1968.

Before the Russian Revolution Lenin had only written a few articles about Asia.⁵ In these brief articles he focused his attention mainly on new developments in China and the Dutch East Indies. It was the Boxer Uprising in 1900 which drew his attention to the region. In the first issue of 'Iskra' Lenin wrote 'The War in China'.⁶ It appears that it was primarily his dissatisfaction with Tsarist policy which led him to write about China. It was another twelve years before Lenin wrote about China.⁷ This time it was in praise of China's new provisional President, Dr. Sun Yat-sen. A year later he wrote about developments in the Dutch East Indies. The Dutch Marxist, W. van Ravestein, had informed Lenin about the establishment of the Sarekat Islam in the Dutch East Indies.⁸ Lenin wrote:

A significant development is the spread of the revolutionary democratic movement to the Dutch East Indies, to Java and the other Dutch colonies, with a population of some forty million. First, the democratic movement is developing among the masses of Java, where a nationalist movement has arisen under the banner of Islam. Secondly, capitalism has created a local intelligentsia consisting of acclimatised Europeans who demand independence for the Dutch East Indies. Thirdly, the fairly large Chinese population of Java and the other islands have brought the revolutionary movement from their native land. ... The usual events of a pre-revolutionary period have begun. Parties and unions are being founded at amazing speed. The government is banning them, thereby only fanning the resentment and accelerating the growth of the movement. ... The awakening of Asia and the beginning of the struggle for power by the advanced proletariat of Europe are the symbol of the new phase in world history that began early this century.⁹

It is interesting to note Lenin's interest in the development of the revolutionary movement in the Dutch East Indies at this early stage. Equally significant are his contacts with the leaders of the Dutch Marxist movement like Dr. W van Ravestein. The Dutch comrades were well-informed about developments in the Indies.

⁵ Ibid., chap. I: The Leninist Idea of Asia: The Initial Phase; and, chap. II: China and the Dutch East Indies, pp. 5-13.

⁶ 'The War in China', *Iskra*, No. 1 December 1900 in V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 372-7.

⁷ 'Democracy and Narodism in China', *Nevskaya Svovda*, No. 17, 15 July, 1912 in *Collected Works*, Vol. 18, pp. 163-9.

⁸ 'The Awakening of Asia', *Pravda*, No. 103, 7 May 1913 in *Collected Works*, Vol. 19, pp. 85, 86.

⁹ Ibid.

The Sarekat Islam had been founded in 1911 as the Sarekat Dagang Islam in Surakarta, Java. The organisation had set out to protect the interests of batik merchants from competition by local Chinese commercial interests. A year later the organisation changed into a broader movement. It now set itself the additional task of fostering the social development of the local Javanese. At its first Congress, Tjokroaminoto, its new leader, made it clear that the Sarekat Islam was not a political party and that it would certainly not be disloyal to the Dutch colonial government.¹⁰ In a very short time the Sarekat Islam grew into a mass movement to be reckoned with. In the space of five years its membership increased to 800,000 members. One of the principal reasons for this phenomenon was the government's own Ethical Policy which, ironically enough, aimed at the economic and social improvement of the lives of the Indonesians. As a result of this policy the Dutch administration was greatly expanded and reached out even to the level of local policy-making. With the traditional authorities brushed aside and the native population generally impoverished, the people began to look toward a new source of strength and inspiration. The Sarekat Islam looked promising to them. Although the movement's religious character had been kept rather vague, some people in Celebes and Borneo felt that the founding of the movement was but a first step to a 'holy war'. Although most government leaders and Indies European citizens were very upset about the rapid growth of the Sarekat Islam, Governor General Idenburg did not ban the movement. However they were not allowed to exist as a centralized organization as yet.¹¹ It was at this stage that a young Dutch labour organiser, Henk Sneevliet, arrived in the Dutch East Indies.

At twenty-eight, Sneevliet was already regarded as one of Holland's most promising politicians. He was a gifted speaker, good pamphleteer and a remarkable organiser. A hard worker himself, he was demanding of his comrades. His revolutionary zeal was that of a fundamental religious fanatic, a man destined to make an impact upon the world of his day. His only shortcoming was his stubbornness: Sneevliet was incapable of compromise.¹² Within a year after his arrival in the Dutch East Indies, this man had involved himself with typical zeal in the activities of the Indonesian railroad workers' union (VSTP).¹³ He took on the editorship of the VSTP's newspaper, *De Volharding* (Persistence) and under his leadership the VSTP soon became a

¹⁰ J. Th. P. Blumberger, 'De Sarekat Islam', *Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsch Oost-Indie*, Vol. III.

¹¹ B. J. Brouwer, *De houding van Idenburg en Colijn tegenover de Indonesische beweging*, Kampen 1958, pp. 46-50.

¹² For biographical data, see *Voor Vrijheid en Socialisme*, M. Perthus, ed., Rotterdam 1953.

¹³ D. M. G. Koch, *Batig Slot: Figuren uit het Oude Indie*, Amsterdam, 1960; and D. M. G. Koch, *Verantwoording: Een Halve Eeuw in Indonesie*, Bandung, 1956.

well-organised and more radical union. At the time the Indies still lacked a proletarian party. It was in May 1914 that, on Sneevliet's initiative, the Indies Social Democratic Association (Indische Sociaal Democratische Vereniging; ISDV) was founded.¹⁴ This party was later to become the Perserikatan Kommunist di India (PKI). The people who founded the ISDV were by no means of one single political persuasion. The reformist wanted 'some kind of Fabian Society and they declared that conditions were as yet not favourable for socialist propaganda'.¹⁵ They really advocated the establishment's Ethical Policy and favoured close association with the socialists in the Dutch parliament. The majority of the founding-fathers of the ISDV were of a different opinion. They felt strongly that they were duty-bound to directly propagate socialist principles to the people of the Indies. Sneevliet and his adherents thought that the class-struggle against colonial capitalism should be fought by the socialists in the Indies itself and not necessarily via their comrades in Holland.¹⁶ Sneevliet's radical majority won and from the outset they decided that the party's effectiveness would lie in an alliance with nationalist mass movements. Only in this manner would the ISDV be able to reach the masses in the Indies. Sneevliet himself claimed that the theoretical foundation of this new policy was based on the debates of the Second Socialist International held in Stuttgart in 1907, Kautsky's 'Sozialismus und Kolonialpolitik' and the latter's 'Der Weg zur Macht'.¹⁷ Deliberations on the colonial question in Stuttgart had led to a heated debate when the colonial commission of the congress proposed that the Second International should endorse a resolution which, in effect, supported colonialism: 'The Congress does not in principle and for all time reject all colonial policy, which, under a socialist regime, may have a civilising effect.'¹⁸ Kautsky spoke in favour of the socialists' anticolonial views and after a heated debate that policy was retained.

The outbreak of the First World War and the collapse of the Second International caused a delay in the activities of the young party. In 1915 the

¹⁴ Blumberger, *De Communistische Beweging in Nederlandsch-indie*, Haarlem, 1935, p.2; and, Perthus, *Voor Vrihgeid en Socialisme*, p. 51.

¹⁵ Niederlandisch-Ost-Indien. Bericht für den Zweiten Kongresz der Kommunistischen Internationale. Die Sozialen Verhältnisse und die Entwicklung der Revolutionären Bewegung. *Berichte zum Zweiten Kongresz der Kommunistische Internationale*, Hamburg 1921, pp. 391-410. Translated in Bing, 'Revolution in China', appendix D. p. 187.

¹⁶ H. Sneevliet, Zwerversbrieven, *Het Vrije Woord*, No. 18, 10 September 1921, p. 1.

¹⁷ H. Sneevliet, Zwerversbrieven, de Huidige Toestand der Indische Beweging, *Het Vrije Woord*, 15 November 1921, p.7. *Het Vrije Woord* serialised 'Socialismus und Kolonialpolitik'.

¹⁸ *Internationaler Sozialisten-Kongress zu Stuttgart*, 18 bis 24 August 1907, Berlin 1907, p. 112. The International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, Kalendar dlya vsekh, 7 October 1907, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 13, pp. 86, 87.

ISDV started to publish its newspaper, *Het Vrije Woord* (The Free Word).¹⁹ The first alliance of the ISDV with a bourgeois nationalist mass party was with Insulinde. Although it was much larger than the ISDV, Insulinde had no more than 6,000 members by 1917. Insulinde had been founded in 1907 as a non-political Eurasian association. Their nationalism also appealed to the Indonesian intellectual elite, but the Eurasian core of the party attracted few of the Indonesian masses.²⁰ Within a year the ISDV leadership realised its mistake and at its party congress in June 1916 they decided to cancel the alliance. A number of ISDV members had also become members of the Insulinde and they were asked to give up their dual membership.²¹ This time the ISDV revolutionaries turned their attention to the rapidly growing Sarekat Islam. It was Sneevliet's intention to influence the Sarekat Islam through the unions and so move the organisation in a more radical direction.²² ISDV members were most active in the VSTP. As Sneevliet himself noted:

Our comrades tried to foster the development of the unions and tried to transform already existing unions with a European leadership into class conscious organisations. This met with success in the railway union; the outcome of this was that many Europeans left the organisation (including Indies nationalists). The executive was made up mostly of Javanese and in 1918 the union had already 8,000 members. Following this example, other civil servants also organised themselves in unions. In 1919 a rental union office was founded on the initiative of the railway union. This organisation has now a membership of between 15,000 and 20,000 workers. The union movement also developed amongst the skilled workers of the sugar factories.²³

With amazing speed Sneevliet's protégés, Semaun and Darsono, penetrated into the innermost councils of the Sarekat Islam.²⁴ Although in 1913, the Sarekat Islam leaders still rejected all ideas of anti-Dutch activity, at their first National Congress in June 1916, a demand for self-government had already been formulated.

¹⁹ *Het Vrije Woord*, 10 October, 1915.

²⁰ P. H. J. Jongmans, *De Exorbitante Rechten van den Gouverneur-Generaal in de Praktijk*, Amsterdam 1921, pp. 130-8. J. Th. P. Blumberger, *De Indo-Europeesche Beweging in Nederlandsch-Indies*, Haarlem, 1939, pp. 35-43.

²¹ Verslag van de derde algemeene vergadering der Ind.Soc.Dem.Ver., *Het Vrije Woord*, 25 June 1916, p. 178.

²² H. Sneevliet, *Zwerversbrieven*, *Het Vrije Woord*, No. 18, 10 September, 1921, p. 1.

²³ *Berichte zum Zweiten Kongress...*, pp. 391-410. See Bing, 'Revolution in China', appendix D, p. 188.

²⁴ J. Th. P. Blumberger, *De Nationalistische beweging in nederlandsch-Indie*, Haarlem 1935, p. 76.

Apart from the activities of Sneevliet and his followers, the ISDV policies were given a boost by the influence of the First World War on the Dutch East Indies economy. Troubled with inflation and spiralling prices, more and more of the discontented flocked to the ever more radical banners of the Sarekat Islam. In fact the influence of the ISDV increased so rapidly that, by 1917, the Sarekat Islam shifted from a non-political policy to open hostility toward the Dutch East Indies Government.²⁵ Although the Second National Congress had been a triumph for the Marxists, it had also become clear that some of the bourgeois nationalist elements in the Sarekat Islam were hardly what one could call revolutionary. A struggle between these two forces would end in a split in February 1923. The Dutch East Indies government became increasingly alarmed about the growing influence of the ISDV. When Sneevliet wrote an inspiring article in March 1917 in *De Indier* hailing the overthrow of the Tsar in Russia and suggesting to his readers that this could also be done in the Dutch East Indies, the government swiftly moved against him.²⁶ Unfortunately Sneevliet's arrest completely backfired. It ended in an acquittal of the revolutionary Marxist and with extensive publicity for the Russian Revolution.²⁷ However, Sneevliet's continued agitation amongst the soldiers and sailors finally, in 1918, brought about his expulsion and he returned again to Holland.²⁸

The Dutch East Indies' experience of the ISDV alliance first with Insulinde and later with the Sarekat Islam later exerted its own influence upon Lenin's Theory of Colonial Revolution and the revolution in China. The First and Second International had not paid much attention to the colonial question and when Sneevliet arrived in the Indies it had seemed obvious to him that a small proletarian party should work through a nationalist mass party to reach the people. In this respect Sneevliet was quite outspoken:

The Sarekat Islam has provided us with the people for the unions which are developing in Java. The Sarekat Islam has also given us railway workers, the rest of the government employees and also workers in private enterprise. It is the task of the revolutionaries to develop the Sarekat Islam into a communist organisation; an organisation which will be a member of the Third International.²⁹

²⁵ *Het Vrije Woord*, 1917. Blumberger, *De Nationalistische beweging*, pp. 65-7. Sarekat Islam Congress, 20-27 October, 1917, Batavia, 1919.

²⁶ Barend Coster, *Het haatzaai proces te Semarang, Voor Vrijheid en Socialisme*, pp. 142-4.

²⁷ A. Baars, H. Sneevliet, *Het proces Sneevliet, De Sociaal Democratie in Nederlands Indie*, privately published, Semarang 1917.

²⁸ Blumberger, *De Communistische Beweging*, pp. 4-6. *Voor Vrijheid en Socialisme ...*, p. 60.

²⁹ H. Sneevliet, *De Wantoestanden in Indie* (Lecture for the Student Socialist Movement, Leiden), *De Tribune*, 21 April 1920, p. 4.

The peculiar manner in which the alliances worked in practice from an organisational point of view may not have been due entirely to Sneevliet's initiative. According to the law, Dutch East Indies organisations were simply not allowed to set themselves up as parties. This did not, of course, mean that the various organisations which were formed to foster social, economic and cultural interests were not politically oriented. More often than not an individual belonged to a number of organisations. The policy of dual membership as far as the ISDV, Insulinde, and later the Sarekat Islam was concerned, did not only mean that ISDV members became members of Insulinde and/or the Sarekat Islam but also that Sarekat Islam and Insulinde members joined the ISDV without giving up their membership in the Sarekat Islam and Insulinde. The advent of the First World War and the deteriorating economic circumstances led to a sudden and rapid growth of the Sarekat Islam. It was these circumstances which combined to bring about the first practical example of colonial revolutionary strategy. As pointed out already, Sneevliet himself claimed that they based themselves on the debates of the Second Socialist International debates of 1907 as well as Kautsky's 'Sozialismus und Kolonialpolitik' and 'Der Weg zur Macht'.³⁰ Sneevliet was aware of the problems and the risks such a new strategy contained:

I know just as well as you do, that it is not easy to make a choice between the existing parties in the various colonies. I am aware that we often will experience disappointments. I know that we will repeatedly not be trusted by those alongside whom we will struggle. But nevertheless: It is necessary. ... It is not easy in times of strong reaction to keep the red banner high. This was experienced in many ways by our Indonesian and European socialists in Java during the last years. ... I don't think about the last year so unfavourably as you do. And I see the frantic reaction of the rulers as a recognition of the value of our movement. Don't think that I do not want to see the weak spots of the movement. However that is no reason for me to ignore the influence of our work.³¹

Not long after his expulsion from the Dutch East Indies, Sneevliet was to discuss this new colonial strategy with the leadership of the Comintern in Moscow, the young comrades of the fledgling Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang of Dr Sun Yat-sen in China.³²

³⁰ See note 16.

³¹ H. Sneevliet, *Zwerversbrieven V. De Huidige Toestand der Indische beweing, Het Vrije Woord*, 15 November 1921. Signed: Shanghai, October 1921.

³² In 1968 I called this new strategy after its initiator, 'Sneevlietian Strategy'. Since then I have found that his contemporary critics in the Dutch East Indies recognised the ISDV/Sarekat Islam alliance as something unique too. The editors of *De Locomotief* called

The Establishment of the Comintern

The Communist International was organised by Lenin and the Bolsheviks as a rival to the Second International. When Lenin founded the Comintern on 4 March, 1919, communist parties were scarcely in existence in Europe. From the outset, the Comintern tended to identify itself with Europe. Lenin and his comrades firmly believed at the time that revolution was imminent in a number of European countries. The First Congress of the Comintern was largely a propaganda exercise. Most delegates had received no authorisation of the political movements they purported to represent and quite a few of them were merely foreigners living in Russia. Of the 34 delegates to the First Congress, only four had come from outside Russia. And of the 34 delegates only two were purported to represent Asia.³³ One represented Korea and the other China. The Chinese delegate, Liu Shao-chou, represented the 50,000-strong Union of Chinese Workers in Russia.³⁴ He had, however, no connections with any of the small Marxist, anarchist or socialist circles in China nor did he represent the Kuomintang.³⁵ Apart from a brief appearance at the First Congress, Liu Shao-chou was never heard of again. The First Congress paid hardly any attention to Asia and none of the Asian representatives were taken into the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI). The manifesto of the First Congress was of typical Western orientation: 'The liberation of the colonies is possible only in conjunction with the liberation of the industrial working class ...'³⁶

It is interesting to note the active policy the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs was pursuing with regard to China in 1919. The First Karakhan Manifesto had been issued shortly after the occurrence of the May Fourth Incident in China.³⁷ While the Bolsheviks were already officially seeking a diplomatic break-through with China, they had as yet failed to derive a new strategy in dealing with the entire situation in Asia. The failure of the revolutionary attempts in Berlin and Munich, as well as the collapse of the

it 'Communonationalism'. H. Sneevliet, *Zwerversbrieven* VI, Communonationalism en uitzetting, *Het Vrije Woord*, No. 12, 16 May 1922, p. 1. For an excellent and very extensive account of the rise of the Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI) up to 1927 see R. McVey, *The Rise of Indonesian Communism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965.

³³ *Vos'moi s'ezd RKP (b). Protokoly*, Moscow, 1959, pp. 501-04.

³⁴ N. A. Popov, *Oni s nami srzhalis' za vlast' sovetov*, Leningrad, 1959, pp. 180-1.

³⁵ It was claimed that Shao-chou represented a Chinese Socialist Workers' Party. See, *Pervyi Kongress Komintern, mart 1919 g*, Moscow, 1933, p.161.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

³⁷ Sow-Teng Leong, *Sino-Soviet Diplomatic Relations, 1917-1926*, Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1976, pp.68, 116.

Hungarian Soviet Republic had induced the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs to turn East. New internal developments inside Russia itself, forced the Bolshevik ideologists to turn their attention to the revolution in the East. There were Chinese, Korean, Persian, Turkish, Azerbaijani, Bukharan, Kirghiz, and Kalmuk nationals living on Bolshevik territory. In order to bring these people into the orbit of the revolution a congress was organized for them firstly in November 1918 and secondly in November 1919.

It was in the Second All-Russian Congress of Communist Organisations of Eastern Peoples that Lenin took great interest. In a major report to the Congress, Lenin declared that 'the socialist revolution in each country would be neither solely nor chiefly a struggle of the revolutionary proletariat against their respective bourgeoisie, but rather a struggle by all the imperialist oppressed colonies and countries against international imperialism.'³⁸

Lenin was quick to impress upon the delegates that the solutions to the problems of colonial revolution were not to be found in any communist book. As Lenin put it to the delegates:

You will have to tackle that problem and solve it through your own independent experience. ... You will have to base yourselves on the bourgeois nationalism which is awakening and must awaken. ... At the same time you must find your way to the working and exploited masses of every country and tell them ... that their only hope of emancipation lies in the victory of the international revolution.³⁹

Lenin's suggestion of an alliance between the proletariat and the national bourgeoisie met with a direct challenge from one of the delegates. Nevertheless the resolutions of the Congress confirmed Lenin's novel strategy. Point three of the resolution states that it was in the first place the task of the party to establish communist parties in Eastern countries. Secondly these parties would have to give temporary support to the nationalist movement in these countries in order to overthrow Western imperialism.⁴⁰ Although still vague and rather brief the outlines of his Theory on Colonial Revolution were already visible. In May and June of 1920 Trotsky's Red Army accomplished a series of dramatic successes in the East. There was the occupation by the Red Army of Baku and Enzeli as well as the proclamation of the Azerbaijani and Kuchuk Soviet governments. By 1920 it had become clear that the revolutions in the West would take longer than at first anticipated by the Bolshevik leadership. A diplomatic break-through

³⁸ Address to the All-Russian Congress of Communist Organisations of the Peoples of the East, 22 November 1919 in Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 30, p. 195.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 161-2.

⁴⁰ *Zhizn Narodnostei*, No. 47, 14 December 1919, p. 2.

with China was still a priority while the eastern people inside Soviet Russia and now also those bordering the Soviet Empire in the East impressed upon the Bolshevik leadership the necessity of solving the national and colonial question once and for all.

The Second Congress of the Comintern

The Second Congress of the Comintern was held in Moscow and Petrograd in July 1920. The Second Congress was certainly more representative of the world communist movement than the First Congress. Europe's four leading socialist parties sent delegates. If in 1919 the Comintern had been a mere figment of Lenin's imagination, by 1920 it had already grown into a force to be reckoned with. The Red Army's advances into Poland made Lenin believe that Europe would still follow the Bolshevik example.⁴¹ In the debates of the Second Congress, the national and colonial issue did not loom very large. Seen in proper perspective the major issues of the Congress reflected Bolshevik preoccupation with the West. There were the trade unions, parliamentarianism, the agrarian problem, establishment of Soviets, the entry of communists into the British Labour Party, conditions for admission to the Comintern, representation in the Executive Committee and finally the world political situation with special reference to Poland.⁴² With regard to the national and colonial issue, the Bolsheviks were much more concerned with solving the vital nationality question within the confines of their own borders, than they were in devising a Theory of Colonial Revolution for the colonial and semi-colonial countries of Asia. The theses on the National and Colonial Questions finally adopted at the Second Congress reflect this Bolshevik preoccupation with the national question.⁴³ However during the debates and discussions on these theses something quite unexpected happened. Instead of a heated debate on the future of such multi-national countries as Poland, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia as well as the problems of the numerous national minorities within Soviet Russia, the delegates launched into a stormy discussion on colonial revolution. This sudden change was certainly not due to the Bolshevik leadership. Apart from Lenin none of the Comintern leaders had had much to say about Asia. In fact, when confronted for the first time with Lenin's theses on the National and Colonial Questions, they strongly opposed any proletarian alliance with bourgeois nationalism. They felt that it would be wrong to exaggerate the revolutionary importance of the nationalist

⁴¹ L. O. Trossard, *De Jaurés à Lenine—notes et souvenirs d'un militant*, Paris 1930, p. 137.

⁴² *Der Zweite Kongress der Kommunistischen Internationale*, Protokoll der Verhandlungen, Hamburg 1921.

⁴³ *Vtoroi Kongress Kominterna, iiul-august, 1920 q*, Moscow 1934, pp. 491-5.

uprisings in the colonies.⁴⁴ The Bolshevik change in emphasis can certainly not be solely attributed to the strategic genius and far sightedness of Lenin. The Second Congress as a whole bore witness of Lenin's preoccupation with the West and the Theses indicate a continued interest in the national question. For the answer to this interesting question we must turn to the Committee of the National and Colonial Questions set up by the Second Congress.

The Committee of the National and Colonial Questions

The Committee was comprised of twenty members, only six of whom represented eastern or colonial countries. Two of these delegates were to play a prominent role in the deliberations of the committee. One was a young Indian named Manabendra Nath Roy and the other the representative of the Dutch East Indies, G. Maring.⁴⁵ Roy was the son of a well-known Brahmin family in Bengal who had joined the revolutionary movement at an early age. In Mexico he organised a communist party and it was there that he met Michael Borodin for the first time. In 1919 Roy travelled to Europe and in 1920 took an active part in the Second Congress. At the time Roy had just turned 23. He was exceptionally bright and had some knowledge about developments in British India. The other Asian specialist was none other than Henk Sneevliet, the Dutch revolutionary Marxist who had been working in the Dutch East Indies since 1913. Maring was simply his Comintern alias. Sneevliet was in his mid-thirties at the time. He had been expelled from the Indies on 5 December 1918 and had returned to Holland.⁴⁶ After serving there for a short period as treasurer of the Transport Federation of the National Labour Secretariat, he travelled to Moscow to represent the ISDV and the Sarekat Islam.⁴⁷ He was the only delegate who had actually founded a revolutionary socialist party in Asia. In fact the ISDV (later the PKI) was the first communist party to be established in the East. His knowledge of colonial revolution was not exclusively theoretical, as Sneevliet had experienced at first hand the strength and weakness of the proletariat in the Indies and, faced with the challenge, he had developed a strategy of colonial revolution. Soon after his arrival in Moscow, Sneevliet met Lenin. The Bolshevik leader and the Dutch East Indies Marxist met many times to discuss developments in

⁴⁴ A. Reznikov, Bor'ba V. I. Lenin protiv sektantskikh izvrazhchnii v natsional'no-kolonial'nom voprose, *Kommunist*, Moscow, No. 5, Marh 1968, p. 40. See especially Preobrazhensky's and Chicherin's objection to Lenin's theses.

⁴⁵ *Der Zweite Kongress der Kommunishische Internationale*, p. 101.

⁴⁶ H. Sneevliet, *Mijn uitzetting, vergeefsch verweer tegen de eerste politieke externeering onder de nieuwe koers*, privately published, Semerang, n.d.

⁴⁷ *Voor Vrijheid en Socialisme*, p. 60.

Asia.⁴⁸ Sneevliet had prepared a detailed report about developments in the Dutch East Indies. In it he described in great detail the history of the nationalist movement in the Dutch East Indies.⁴⁹ He especially referred to the Sarekat Islam:

The nationalist movement of intellectuals was of lesser importance than the mass movement Sarekat Islam. As its name suggests, it was a religious movement but it was, in fact, mainly economic and political in nature ... The Javanese intellectual Tjokroaminoto became the leader of the organisation. He himself belonged to the aristocracy. In the space of one year it developed into a mass movement. This was mainly in middle and east Java. The peasants and the proletarians of the sugar factories and of the big cities joined the movement in great numbers. ... I arrived in the East Indies at this time and immediately tried to contact the leaders of the young organisation. ... The rapid development of the Sarekat Islam convinced the European socialists living in the Indies that they could not afford to remain idle or to be content with informing the Dutch movement. In May 1914 a number of socialists of different convictions came together. Revolutionary Marxists and reformists decided to found the Indische Sociaal Democratische Vereniging which was to be the forerunner of the Indies Communist party. ... The decision was made to approach the people of the Indies and to contact the association Insulinde and the leaders of the Sarekat Islam. ... Our comrades tried to foster the development of the unions and to transform already existing unions which had a European leadership into class conscious organisations. ... In the years 1917 and 1918 a forceful propaganda was carried on. ... Sarekat Islam and the Socialist Party led a common mass-action against the policy of the government. The masses were very excited and the Sarekat Islam which adopted the policy of battling against evil capitalism became even more definitely socialistic. ... After the October Revolution, Bolshevik ideas were naturally put forward in both socialist newspapers. ... The Congress of the Socialist Party of 1918 proved how great the influence amongst the natives had already become. A revolutionary programme was passed, establishing that the national independence of the Dutch Indies could only be achieved by socialist mass-action. The masses could be brought to act by means of these actions alone supporting the struggle of the international proletariat. At the congress of the Sarekat Islam of the same year it

⁴⁸ K. Graftdijk, Sneevliet's rijke rode leven, Vrijuit, *Het Vrije Volk*, No. 6706, 8 April 1967.

⁴⁹ *Berichte zum zweiten Kongress der Kommunistische Internationale*, pp. 391-410.

appeared also that good results had been achieved by means of forceful propaganda. Several revolutionary socialists were voted onto the executive of the Sarekat Islam.⁵⁰

Lenin himself had noted the amazing development of the Sarekat Islam in 1913.⁵¹ Sneevliet's reports about the relationship between the Sarekat Islam and the ISDV must have impressed Lenin very much indeed. When Lenin himself assumed the chairmanship of the Committee on the National and Colonial Questions, Sneevliet became its secretary.⁵² The Comintern leadership exercised tight control over the proceedings of the Congress and they were careful to place only Bolsheviks in important positions. It was exceptional to have a veteran non-Russian communist in a position of responsibility at the Congress and it was very rare indeed to have a relatively unknown Dutch East Indies delegate become secretary to such an important committee. It seemed that Lenin was very appreciative of Sneevliet's experience of the Asian scene and it is probably for that reason that Sneevliet was also allocated a seat on the Executive Committee of the Second Congress.⁵³

The other expert on Asian affairs, Manabendra Roy, had views on colonial revolution entirely contrary to those expressed by Sneevliet. Roy based his opinions on his experience in India. He felt strongly that the Comintern should only assist the setting up and development of a communist movement. Such a party should concern itself exclusively with the organisation of the broad masses to fight for their own class interests.⁵⁴ Unlike Sneevliet, Roy did not seem to have any confidence in the national bourgeoisie:

It was in the 1880s that the nationalist movement in India began to assume a more or less definite shape. This found its expression in the national Congress. In the course of its development, this movement extended its influence to large circles of student youth and the middle classes, but the nationalists' call to fight for India's independence found no response among the popular masses. The popular masses of India are not fired with a national spirit. They are exclusively interested in problems of an economic and social nature.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 403-9.

⁵¹ 'The Awakening of Asia', *Pravda*, No. 103, 7 May, 1913 in Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 19, pp. 85, 86.

⁵² *Der Zweite Kongress der Kommunistische Internationale*, p. 101.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 1661.

⁵⁴ *Vestnik Vtorogo Kongressa Kommunisticheskogo Internatsionala*, No. 1, 27 July, 1920, pp. 1, 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 1.

Roy's lack of confidence in the Nationalist movement in India was compensated for in his greatly exaggerated belief in the power of India's proletariat:

Eighty percent of the rural population has lost its property and have become hired labour. These millions live in poverty. ...These millions have no interest whatsoever in bourgeois-nationalist slogans. Only one slogan: 'Land to the tillers' can interest them. Compared with the rural proletariat, the industrial proletariat in India is small in number. It numbers only five million workers. The trade union movement is developing rapidly among these workers. ... The elements exist in India for creating a powerful communist party. However, as far as the broad masses are concerned, the revolutionary movement in India has nothing in common with the national liberation movement.⁵⁶

Roy, in his class analysis, came to the inevitable conclusion that no alliances should be made between bourgeois nationalist movements and communist parties. The young revolutionary went even further and concluded that 'the revolutionary movement in Europe depends entirely on the course of the revolution in the East.' He finally told his comrades in the Committee on the National and Colonial Questions:

It is essential that we direct our energies into developing and elevating the revolutionary movement in the East, and accept as our fundamental thesis that the fate of world communism depends on the victory of communism in the East.⁵⁷

There is no doubt that Roy's interpretation and proposals were contrary to anything Sneevliet had proposed and experienced. Apart from being so young (only 23 years of age) and relatively inexperienced, Roy had left India in 1915.⁵⁸ With Gandhi's return during the same year, the Congress Party started its rapid transformation from an upper-middle class to a nationalist mass organization. Unfortunately Roy did not seem to have been aware of these developments when he spoke in Moscow in 1920. Years later Roy claimed that 'Lenin ... proceeded to plead his ignorance of the conditions in the colonial questions. Therefore he needed my co-operation in the

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 1, 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 2.

⁵⁸ A. K. Hindi, *M. N. Roy: The Man who Looked Ahead*, Allahabad, 1938, p. 22.

preparation of a document which was destined to be a landmark in the history of the revolutionary movement.⁵⁹

It is not so surprising that Roy himself had overrated his importance in devising a theory of colonial revolution. Numerous Western historians of Asian communism have done the same and some have even claimed that Roy ranked with Lenin and Mao Zedong in the development of a fundamental communist policy for the underdeveloped countries.⁶⁰ These interpretations are not only exaggerated, but the contrary is actually true. It was not Roy but Sneevliet who played a significant role in the development of a colonial programme for the Comintern. It was Roy himself who recognised this in 1964:

The Dutchman was the only European Communist who had actually lived in the East Indies, acquired first-hand knowledge of the nationalist movement, and actively helped the development of the labour movement and a Socialist Party, until then the only in the colonial world. With his unique experience and a thorough understanding of Marxism, Sneevliet made valuable contributions to the discussion and was recognised generally as one of the most outstanding figures amongst all the delegates at the Congress.⁶¹

Indeed when Lenin submitted his draft Theses on the National and Colonial Questions, it did not reflect Roy's but Sneevliet's colonial strategy. Although most of Lenin's theses concerned the Bolshevik preoccupation with the national question, point eleven of the theses stated:

The Communist International must conclude a temporary alliance with the bourgeois democrats in the colonies and backward countries yet must not merge with them or fail firmly to maintain proletarian freedom of action however rudimentary.⁶²

This clause, reflecting the Dutch East Indies experience, was to become the basic dogma of the international communist movement. It would guide all the actions of the communist parties in Asia in the years to come.

⁵⁹ M. N. Roy, *Memoirs*, Bombay, 1964, p. 346.

⁶⁰ R. C. North and S. J. Eudin, *M. N. Roy's Mission to China*, Berkeley, 1962, p. 1.

⁶¹ Roy, *Memoirs*, pp. 381, 382. Roy must have realised that Sneevliet's appointment as secretary of the Committee on the National and Colonial Questions did not reflect the importance he had accorded himself. This seems to clarify his inaccurate statement in his memoirs, where he claims that Safarov proposed Roy to be chairman in the first place. Roy would have proposed Sneevliet himself instead with Safarov as secretary. In fact Lenin himself was chairman and Sneevliet his secretary.

⁶² V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 40, Moscow, 1963, p. 167.

There is no doubt that this new theory on colonial revolution was unorthodox in the extreme and in the plenary sessions of the Congress it was therefore still to encounter stiff opposition.⁶³ For the moment, however, Lenin and Sneevliet had to deal with the extreme leftist views of Roy.

On 25 July 1920 the Committee met to discuss Lenin's draft theses and also Manabendra Roy's. The latter had, upon Lenin's invitation, formulated his critical notes on Lenin's draft theses into a document of his own.⁶⁴ During the deliberations in the Committee Roy suggested that Lenin's paragraph eleven dealing with the duty of all communist parties to support bourgeois-democratic liberation movements in the Asian countries should be deleted.⁶⁵ Roy based himself on his analysis of the class-struggle in India.⁶⁶ He asserted that in India the Comintern should solely assist in the setting up of a communist movement. Such a communist party should occupy itself exclusively with the organisation of the broad masses and fight for their own class interests, according to Roy.⁶⁷ Lenin was naturally strongly opposed to Roy's views and within the four walls of the conference room he made that perfectly clear to the young revolutionary:

In Russia we supported the liberation movement of the liberals when it acted against tsarism. The Hindu Communists must support the bourgeois democratic movement, without merging with it. Comrade Roy goes too far when he says that the fate of the West depends entirely on the development and strength of the revolutionary movement in the Eastern countries. Though India has five million proletarians and thirty million landless peasants, the Hindu communists still have not succeeded in founding a communist party. This fact by itself shows that comrade Roy's opinions are to a large degree unfounded.⁶⁸

Roy's Theses were severely edited by the Committee. The final paragraph of Roy's point four was simply deleted. In it he had expressed his opposition to any support of nationalist movements: 'This alliance of the

⁶³ Recent Soviet account have claimed that such Bolsheviks as Kretinsky, Rafes, Preobrazhensky, Lapinski, Stalin, Chicherin and even several leaders from Bashkiria, Kirghizia and Turkestan were consulted by Lenin in the preparation of his Theses on the National and Colonial Questions. This seems to be part of the Russification programme by Soviet historians with regard to the theory on colonial revolution and the early years of the CCP.

⁶⁴ Roy, *Memoirs*, pp. 380-1.

⁶⁵ *Vestnik Vtorogo Kongressa Kommunisticheskogo Intrenatsionala*, No. 1., 27 July 1920, pp. 1-2. This is the only documentation available on the actual debates in the Committee.

⁶⁶ See notes 53, 54, 55 and 56.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Communist International with the revolutionary movement in the oppressed countries does not mean support for the theory of nationalism.⁶⁹

This most important and critical point in Roy's theses was his number seven. It virtually torpedoed Lenin's and Sneevliet's theory of Colonial revolution in its implacable hostility towards bourgeois nationalism:

The Communist International must not seek among the bourgeois nationalist elements any aid or support for the revolutionary movements in the colonies. The mass movement there is growing up independently of the nationalist movement.⁷⁰

That part was deleted also. The last sentence of the first paragraph of Roy's seventh thesis now came to read as follows:

In order to overthrow foreign capitalism which is the first step toward a revolution in the colonies, it would be useful to make use of the cooperation of the bourgeois national-revolutionary elements.⁷¹

There is no doubt that this meant a complete capitulation on the part of comrade Roy. Apart from these major operations on Roy's theses, the Committee also deleted theses ten and eleven and concluded with some minor incisions on his points 3, 4, 7 and 8. Roy's thesis ten had claimed that the national democratic bourgeoisie and the mass of peasants and workers were two hostile forces and would never be able to work together.⁷² The next day on 26 July, Lenin was able to report to the plenary session of the Second Congress that unanimity had been obtained on all issues.

Lenin, Roy and Sneevliet during the Plenary Debates

Lenin was careful not to humiliate the young Indian in the presence of the delegates and did not refer specifically to Roy when discussing differences of opinion in the committee. In fact Lenin pointed out that comrade Roy's theses submitted to the committee, although written mainly with regard to India and other British colonial dependencies, were very important indeed.⁷³ He naturally refrained from telling the delegates that the Roy theses that they

⁶⁹ A. Reznikov, V. I. Lenin, o natsional'no-osvoboditel'nom dvizhenii, *Kommunist*, No. 7, May 1967, p. 62.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁷¹ *Vtoroy Kongress Komintern*, Moscow 1934, p. 498.

⁷² *Der Zweite Kongress der Kommunistische Internationale*, pp. 145-50. These proceedings contain Roy's unedited theses.

⁷³ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 41, p. 241.

were to hear had been virtually rewritten by the Committee. When Roy himself addressed the delegates and propounded the edited version of his thesis, he indicated that 'certain of the alterations which the Committee has made in my theses have been accepted by me', but did not inform his audience that there had been major changes at tactical and strategic levels.⁷⁴ The Committee's decision to allow comrade Roy's edited theses to appear alongside Lenin's own and the latter's declaration that the Roy theses were of equal importance to his own had the expected results. Roy's opposition to Lenin and Sneevliet melted like freshly fallen snow in the sun. In fact, the young Roy was so susceptible to such flattery that during the debates in the plenary session he changed his opposition into outright support for Lenin and Sneevliet.⁷⁵

Lenin emphasised that the discussion in the Committee had been concerned with the question of support for the bourgeois-democratic movement in colonial and semi-colonial countries. There had been some disagreement as to whether it would be correct for the Comintern and communist parties to support such movements. Lenin then indicated that the disagreement had really been about a relatively minor matter: whether any distinction should be made between reformist and revolutionary nationalist movements. He informed his audience that they had decided only to support bourgeois liberation movements when these might prove to be really revolutionary. And it was for that reason that the Committee had decided to substitute the term 'nationalist-revolutionary' for 'bourgeois-democratic' in the theses.⁷⁶

It has been generally recognized that Lenin 'had given in on terminology in exchange for Roy's compromise on essential tactics'.⁷⁷ This point of view has become more or less definitive with Roy's own endorsement of this interpretation in 1964:

Pending the clarification of theoretical issues in the light of future experience the discussion in the Commission brought out one practical point of difference between Lenin and myself. I concretised his general idea of supporting the colonial national liberation movement with the proposal that Communist Parties should be organised with the purpose of revolutionising the social character of the movement under the pressure of organised workers and peasants. That, in my opinion, was

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 145-50.

⁷⁵ *Der Zweite Kongress der Kommunistische Internationale*, pp. 138-40.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 138-40.

⁷⁷ For example, see A. S. Whiting, *Soviet Policies in China: 1917-1924*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1954, p. 55.

the only method of concretely helping the colonial peoples in their struggle for national liberation.⁷⁸

It has already been noted that Roy did not in anyway ‘concretize’ Lenin’s and Sneevliet’s proposal of supporting colonial national liberation movements. On the contrary he was totally opposed to that idea. Writing 40 years after the events his memory must have plagued him. Lenin himself in his report on the committee’s discussions to the plenary session of the Second Congress did not indicate who had been responsible for making a distinction between reformist and revolutionary nationalist movements. A closer study of Lenin’s reports reveals that he may have referred to a discussion in Committee about the alliance of the ISDV with Insulinde:

It was argued that if we speak about the bourgeois-democratic movement all distinction between reformist and revolutionary movements will be obliterated; whereas in recent times this distinction has been fully and clearly revealed in the backward and colonial countries, because the imperialist bourgeoisie is trying with all its might to implant the reformist movement also among the oppressed nations. ... In the commission this was proved irrefutably and we came to the conclusion that the only correct thing to do was to take this into consideration.⁷⁹

In his report on the nationalist movement in the Dutch East Indies to the Second Congress, Sneevliet had specifically referred to the reformist-revolutionary problem:

Insulinde took part in the election and gained seats for two representatives. After the return of Douwes-Dekker in the spring of 1918, the nationalist propaganda once again came to be conducted in a more revolutionary spirit. The party also attempted by means of propaganda and the support of strikers to interest the masses in the struggle. These nationalist in the Dutch East Indies opposed the use of propaganda because they believed that the nationalist movement could suffer disadvantages from it. They contacted the Dutch Social Democratic Party and their representatives in the Indies in the hope of obtaining their help. The Dutch reformists and their colonial specialists

⁷⁸ Roy, *Memoirs*, p. 382. Roy does not at all refer in his memoirs to his original draft theses. His account does in no way reflect the evidence available in primary source material.

⁷⁹ *Dr Zweite Kongress der Kommunistische Internationale*, pp. 138-40.

were of the opinion that the Indies would have to go through a complete capitalist development.⁸⁰

It was because of these reformist tendencies in Insulinde that Sneevliet and his ISDV had turned away from Insulinde to the Sarekat Islam. If anyone in particular influenced Lenin to make this distinction between reformist and revolutionary nationalist movements it could have been Sneevliet, but not Roy.

The second part of Lenin's report concerned the peasant question in those countries where there was almost no industrial proletariat. He asserted that the committee had felt that the communist parties would be duty bound to organize peasant soviets in those backward countries and colonies. The Committee's conclusion had been that in these countries the capitalist stage of development could be by-passed.⁸¹ These parts of the debates are, of course, exceptionally interesting for they appear to be the first steps which were to lead Mao Zedong to his peasant communism. In 1920, however, Lenin made it perfectly clear that the peasant soviets could only be established with the aid of the proletariat of the 'most advanced countries'.⁸² Although these parts of the theses look extremely interesting in retrospect, at the time they were quietly ignored by most of the delegates of the Second Congress. The real debate on the floor centred on the support for revolutionary bourgeois nationalist movements. The new theory came under a barrage of criticism and it makes one wonder what really would have happened with the theses if comrade Roy had not been placated in advance.

The first opponent was the Persian delegate, A. Sultan-Zade. He claimed that the national revolutionary movement should only be supported in countries where 'this movement is barely getting under way'. He pointed out that in his own country, where bourgeois democracy was the foundation and mainstay of political power, the application of such tactics would mean pushing the masses towards counter-revolution. Like Roy had done in the committee, Sultan-Zade charged that in such cases it would be the task of the Comintern to set up and support a purely communist movement. Such a movement should be opposed to the bourgeois-democratic movements. 'Any other appreciation of the facts might bring deplorable results,' exclaimed Sultan-Zade.⁸³ Antonio Graziadei, one of the leading members of the important Italian delegation was the next speaker. Among a number of amendments to Lenin's theses proposed by the Italian was that of altering point eleven. Graziadei felt that any support for the bourgeois-democratic

⁸⁰ *Berichte zum zweiten Kongress der Kommunistische Internationale*, p. 403.

⁸¹ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 41, p. 246.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁸³ *Der Zweite Kongress der Kommunistische Internationale*, pp. 167-70.

national movement should be optional. He suggested that the theses be changed from 'should support' the national revolutionary movement to 'show an active interest in' it. Moreover the Italian delegate stressed that in those countries where a strong industrial proletariat was already in existence, the communist party should instigate an open and completely merciless struggle.⁸⁴ Most of the delegates simply did not realise the implications of the proposals they were discussing. Even the Chinese and Korean delegates failed to refer to the proposed alliance of the communists with the national revolutionary movement.⁸⁵ After the rather empty speeches of the Irish delegates, Connolly and MacAlpine, as well as Ismail Khakki Pasha of Turkey, the Italian delegation leader, Serrati, proposed to close the debate. He had done so before with the backing of the French delegate, Guilbeaux. This time another European delegate, the German Walcher, backed Serrati.⁸⁶ Nobody had as yet supported an alliance with revolutionary nationalism, for which Sultan-Zade and Graziadei had expressed their strong reservations. As became clear towards the end of the debate Serrati was in fact strongly opposed to any alliance with revolutionary nationalism. In trying to bring the debate to an early close, he and his seconders, Guilbeaux and Walcher, may have thought that the voting might have turned against the theses at that stage. Sneevliet must have sensed this and emphatically protested against drawing the debate to an end prematurely:

I must issue an emphatic warning against the acceptance of Walcher's proposal. It really makes no sense ... I should like to point out to you that the representatives of all the colonies have spoken with the exception of Java. Moreover, Java is the next in importance to British India and it is the only place which one can say has experienced Marxism. I should think that some information about a set-up about which we knew nothing would be of considerable interest to the German delegate.⁸⁷

Serrati was indeed too keen to prevent Sneevliet from addressing the delegates. Even after the Dutchman, Wijnkoop, and the Russian, Losovski, had come to Sneevliet's rescue, Serrati pressed on to terminate the debate and insisted on a formal motion. By a subsequent vote the Serrati/Walcher tactic was defeated. This gave Sneevliet his chance to address the delegates.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 172-3.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 173-6. Lui Shoa-chou (Laou Siou Tao) had also attended the First Comintern Congress in 1919 as the Chinese delegate. He was the president of the Union of Chinese Workers in Russia and out of touch with the developments back home.

⁸⁶ *Der Zweite Kongress der Konnumistische Interationale*, p. 188.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

He addressed the Congress in German, which he spoke fluently. From the platform of the Congress he denounced the bourgeoisie of his own country for the tyranny and outrages committed in the Indonesian colonies. It was a passionate speech. The Dutch are generally believed to be a stodgy people. Sneevliet was a typical Dutchman with a rather flabby figure, well-nourished with plenty of milk products and a pink and white face, round like the full moon. But on the platform he worked himself up the furious passion of the Spanish or Italian anarcho-syndicalists.⁸⁸

I present here only these facts, because I have the impression that with some exceptions this Congress of the Communist International also has not completely understood the great importance of the oriental question.⁸⁹

Sneevliet was careful to describe the development of the nationalist movement in the Dutch East Indies:

The mass movement which embraces approximately one and a half million members and which has united peasants and proletarians, has progressed very quickly since 1912. This organisation, in spite of having a religious name Sarekat Islam, took on a class character. If one realises that this movement is battling against evil capitalism and that this battle is directed not only against the government, but also against the Javanese aristocracy, then one can appreciate that it is the duty of the socialist revolutionary movement to form close ties with the Sarekat Islam. ... When finally the European socialists decided to do their duty in the Far East and developed a movement there, they succeeded in making contact with the local Sarekat Islam branches. A considerable number of mass organisations are not consciously socialistic. They are revolutionary in the same sense in which comrade Roy has pictured British India to be.⁹⁰

In describing the successful cooperation of the ISDV with the Sarekat Islam, Sneevliet in fact dismissed Sultan-Zade's and Graziadei's opposition as purely hypothetical. This was of course also an indirect attack on Roy's original position. In the course of his address it became also clear that the English delegation had also opposed Lenin and Sneevliet in Committee.⁹¹ Although neither Lenin and Roy, nor any of the other delegates had openly referred to the differences between the Lenin/Sneevliet and Roy position, it

⁸⁸ Roy, *Memoirs*, pp. 383-4.

⁸⁹ *Der Zweite Kongress der Konnumistische Interationale*, p. 192.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-3.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

seems that Roy's initial opposition together with the support of the other Asian delegate, Sultan-Zade, and the European group (Graziadei, Serrati, Walcher and Guilbeaux) cast considerable doubt on the future of the Lenin/Sneevliet stand. It must be for a reason like this that Sneevliet felt obliged to remind the delegates that the Lenin/Roy differences had been smoothed over in Committee. To make this once more perfectly clear Sneevliet thundered:

I don't make any distinction between the theses of comrade Lenin and Roy. They are basically the same. The difficulty lies merely in finding the right attitude toward the relationship between the revolutionary nationalist and the socialist movements in the under-developed countries and colonies. This difficulty does not exist in reality. Hence the necessity to work together with the revolutionary nationalist elements and our work would be half done if we negate this movement and play the dogmatic Marxists.⁹²

It was not merely Sneevliet's brilliant oratory which seemed to carry the day. He had made it abundantly clear that the theoretical problem discussed by the congress delegates had already been solved in practice in the Dutch East Indies. The Dutch delegate, Wijnkoop, obviously felt that from such a position of strength he could easily move against Graziadei's proposed amendments.⁹³ Even Zinoviev, the chairman of the Second Congress, feeling confident of the result, proposed a vote on the theses.⁹⁴

However, the unexpected happened. The Italian delegation leader, Serrati, who had already twice tried to block the debate now indicted why he was opposed to the theses. He launched an attack on several grounds. He declared that not only were contradictions to be found in the theses of Lenin and Roy, but he maintained that they also constituted considerable danger to the communist proletariat in the Western countries. He stated that the proletariat ought to be consistently opposed to any form of class compromise, especially in the pre-revolutionary period. Serrati emphatically denounced the proposed alliance with bourgeois nationalism. He exclaimed:

These alliances can only lead to a weakening of the class consciousness of the proletariat, especially in countries where the proletariat has not been tempered in the struggle against capitalism. The lack of clarity in the theses may serve as a weapon in the hands of the chauvinist pseudo revolutionaries of Eastern Europe against

⁹² Ibid., p. 194

⁹³ Ibid., pp. 200-4

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 216.

Communist International activity. For these reasons I shall have to abstain from the vote.⁹⁵

Sneevliet had twice prevented Serrati from stopping the debate. This time Wijnkoop and Zinoviev confronted Serrati. The shocked Dutchman exclaimed: 'What we just heard is not at all in order!' He charged that Serrati had termed the carefully considered theses 'counterrevolutionary'.⁹⁶ Serrati retorted that his reasoning was based on the political situation in Italy: 'For six years I have fought in my country against the nationalist movement and if I were to vote in favour of such a resolution a contradiction would appear between my position in Italy and my voting here.'⁹⁷ It seems that comrade Serrati referred specifically to a possible alliance with the fascists. After loud protests by Zinoviev and Roy, Serrati clarified his stand:

My idea is very simple. Instead of saying that the Communist Party and the proletariat may, in certain cases, under certain circumstances and with certain guarantees, unite with the petty bourgeois movement, I say no. The working class can take advantage of a petty-bourgeois revolutionary movement in the interest of the social revolution. But it must not, above all in the backward countries, support the bourgeoisie. Otherwise it runs the risk of losing its class position and its class orientation.⁹⁸

Serrati's objections were similar to those Roy himself had at first voiced. To those Committee members present who now had to listen to Roy's protest against Serrati, the situation must have appeared rather strange. After Sneevliet's thunder speech, the Congress chairman, Zinoviev, felt confident in putting the theses to the vote. They were adopted unanimously with three abstentions.⁹⁹ Serrati and Graziadei did not change their mind.

Lenin's theses became the accepted basis of communist theory on the colonial question. His prestige and Sneevliet's Dutch East Indies experience had carried the new Theory on Colonial Revolution through the Second Congress against considerable opposition. The new Comintern programme for Asia was to have an almost immediate impact on developments in China and reverberations from the debates in Moscow were soon to be felt in Shanghai.

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 216-17.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 217.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 218.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 220-2.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 232.