



A photo of Vladimir Lenin (center) with M.N. Roy (black tie & jacket), among others.

# The Roy-Lenin debate on colonial policy

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Before the opening of the Second World Congress of the Communist International (July 19-August 7, 1920) [which met on the first day in Petrograd but subsequently in Moscow], Lenin prepared a draft thesis on the national and colonial question. M. N. Roy, a young Bengali attending his first international Communist gathering, eagerly responded to Lenin's request for criticisms. As a result, Lenin invited him to write an alternative thesis. Both theses were modified as a result of discussions within the National and Colonial Commission, and both were subsequently adopted by the Congress. After his encounter with Lenin, Roy rose rapidly in the Comintern hierarchy. In 1922 he was elected a candidate member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), and a full voting member in 1924. He became a member of the Presidium in 1924. It was in the

year 1926, however, that Roy attained the peak of his influence in the Comintern. In February of that year he was appointed to the editorial staff of the Communist International\* and in the following December he was reelected to the Presidium and joined the Political Secretariat of the ECCI. At the time of the Seventh Plenum of the ECCI (November 12-December 16, 1926), Roy became Secretary of the Chinese Commission, a post he held jointly with Petrov, and a member of the Agrarian Commission. The Plenum, convened for the purpose of considering the China problem, adopted a thesis on the question and Roy was sent to China as a representative of the Comintern to carry it out. Following the events in China in 1927, Roy's influence declined precipitately, though he was not formally expelled until December, 1929.

Though there were several points of

disagreement between Lenin's and Roy's original draft theses on the national and colonial question, the main issue revolved around Lenin's assertion that Communist parties in all colonial areas must assist "bourgeois-democratic liberation" movements. In his draft theses and in discussions with the National and Colonial Commission, Roy opposed alliances with certain bourgeois-democratic movements—it was evident that he had the Indian National Congress in mind—which might desert to the imperialist camp in a revolutionary situation. According to official Russian newspaper summaries, Roy argued that in countries such as India, which are characterised by the absence of "reliable" nationalist movements, the Comintern, rather than supporting such movements, should "assist exclusively the institution and development of the communist movement..." and the indigenous Communist parties, or groups, avoiding entanglements with these potentially reactionary bourgeois-nationalist leaders, should "devote themselves exclusively to the organisation of the broad popular masses for the struggle for the class interests of the latter." It is evident that Roy was making a distinction between two different types of bourgeois-democratic nationalist movements—the precise nature of which will be explained below—with only one of which were alliances for the Communists practical. As a result of Roy's criticisms, Lenin's theses on the national and colonial questions were modified; the Comintern was counseled to support "revolutionary movements of liberation" rather than "bourgeois-democratic liberation movements."

Much confusion has arisen among practicing Communists and disinterested scholars alike over the interpretation of these theses because of a failure to keep in mind the distinctions which were evolved at the Second Comintern Congress between different categories of the bourgeoisie—(a) feudal remnants and militarists, (b) compradores, (c) national bourgeoisie, and (d) petty-bourgeoisie. The first two groups were considered to be unambiguously reactionary, but it was believed that the petty-bourgeoisie, though fickle, could be induced to support the proletarian cause if given a firm lead. The question of the "reliability" of the national bourgeoisie was, however, a much more difficult matter. Lenin felt that they could be a progressive force, particularly in the early stages of the nationalist movement when anti-imperialist fervour was strong, but that continued alliance with them, once their revolutionary potential had been exhausted, would be self-defeating. But how to determine the point at which

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MN Roy submits a programme of action with the following demands:

(1) Minimum wages in all the industries will be fixed by legislation. (2) Eight hours a day for five and a half days a week will be fixed by law as the maximum duration of work for male adults. Special conditions will be laid down for woman and child labour. (3) Employers will be obliged by law to provide for a certain standard of comfort as regards housing, working conditions, medical aid, etc. for the workers. (4) Protective Legislation will be passed about Old Age, Sickness and Unemployment Insurance in all the industries. (5) Labour organisation will be given a legal status and the workers' right to strike to enforce their demands will be recognized. (6) Workers councils will be formed in all the big industries to defend the right of labour. These councils will have the protection of the State in exercising their function. (7) Profit sharing will be introduced in all big industries.