The Complexities of Proletarian Internationalism: Mexican Communism and the Communist International, 1919-1943

Research Thesis

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by

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Introduction

Out of chaos, hunger, instability, war, and imperialism, the Bolshevik Party\(^1\) of Russia overthrew the Provisional Government and declared the world’s first socialist state in November 7, 1917. From the very beginning, Bolshevik leaders, such as Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Gregory Zinoviev, recognized that they could not achieve their aims in Russia alone. The Russian Revolution was a spark; a spark the Bolsheviks hoped could ignite a fire across the entire world. As “Orthodox Marxists,”\(^2\) the Bolsheviks recognized that socialism could not be built in a country without a well-developed capitalist system. Without the material abundance produced by mass industrialization and the centralization of capital, socialism only could mean the socialization of poverty. However, the Bolsheviks, unlike their Menshevik\(^3\) rivals, recognized that a socialist revolution in Russia, led by the working class and peasantry, could break the chain of capitalism at its weakest-link: that is, in semi-feudal Russia.

Therefore, the immediate task of the Bolshevik Party was to help speed up the revolutionary process throughout the world. To accomplish this task, the Bolsheviks convoked the first congress of the Third, or Communist, International in March of 1919. The Bolsheviks invited all of the anti-war socialist parties, as well as left-wing elements within the Social-Democratic parties and the Syndicalists unions. From its inception, the Communist International (Comintern) argued for the primacy of splitting the Socialist movement: to bring about proletarian revolution in Western Europe, it would be necessary to break from the elements of the

\(^1\) The Bolsheviks (literally majority) were a Marxist party in Russia which held that the revolution in Russia would be led by an alliance of the working class and the peasantry.

\(^2\) In contrast to revisionists, orthodox Marxists believed that the broad tenets of Marxist ideology still applied to early 20\(^{th}\) century capitalism. Orthodox Marxists advocated revolutionary strategy whereas revisionists advocated reformist strategies.

\(^3\) The Mensheviks (minority) were a Marxist party in Russia which held that the revolution in Russia would be led by the capitalist class with the support of the working class and the peasantry.
socialist movement which clung on to reformism, nationalism, and imperialism.

In this vein, the Second Congress of the Communist International drafted a list of “21 Conditions” which would serve as a stringent guideline for admission.\(^4\) Included among the 21 conditions were radical planks, including systematic propaganda in the military; practical work against imperialism and colonialism; strong centralization nationally and internationally; and changes in party name to “Communist Party” to reflect the new ideological orientation. Most notably, and controversially, the bulk of the document concerns the need to split with the parties of the Second International. As point 7 reads: “It is the duty of parties wishing to belong to the Communist International to recognize the need for a complete and absolute break with reformism and “Centrist” policy, and to conduct propaganda among the party membership for that break. Without this, a consistent communist policy is impossible.”\(^5\)

Before 1914, it appeared unthinkable even to the far-left of the socialist movement to break from the Second International. This international organization had recruited millions of working class people, mainly in Europe, to programmatically Marxist organizations. However, a gradual transformation had taken place in these parties over the first decade of the 20th century.\(^6\) These transformations came to a head in 1914 when the First World War broke out across Europe. The Second International had predicted the impending war and had put forward various declarations vowing to transform the imperialist war into a class war which would vanquish capitalism once and for all. But to the Left’s surprise, both the Rightists and the Centrists within the Second International lined up, in some instances enthusiastically and other instances

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\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) A reformist trend, initially established by the German Marxist, Eduard Bernstein, rejected the concept of socialist revolution and put forth slow, electoral work as the means of transforming the capitalist state into a socialist one. While this theory was roundly rejected by both the Center and the Left of the Second International, verbal denunciation masked larger changes happening within these member parties.
begrudgingly, behind their own ruling classes. This abandonment of proletarian internationalism left the whole socialist movement in tatters. Slowly, the Left began to recompose itself, notably at the Zimmerwald conference\(^7\), where anti-war socialists met to denounce the war and formulate strategies of resistance. As Leon Trotsky later described in his autobiography, “The thread of history often breaks – then a new knot must be tied. And that is what we were doing in Zimmerwald.”\(^8\) The betrayal of the Social-Democratic parties generated significant hostility among these Left elements within the socialist movement. And out of this disillusionment came the base for the new Communist International.

While ambitious and risky, the foundation of the Comintern produced the intended groundswell of revolutionary Marxist thought and organization. A number of parties immediately affiliated with the International, and after splitting the Social-Democratic parties, these parties often numbered in the tens or hundreds of thousands of members.\(^9\) Simultaneously, in contrast to the Second International, the Comintern immediately began to establish links with militants outside of Europe. Few countries were left untouched by the example of Soviet Russia. From China, Japan and Indo-China, to Cuba and the United States, working-class radicals were inspired by the first instance of the oppressed and exploited taking power into their own hands.

The call of the Communist International did not fall on deaf ears in Mexico. In fact, key figures in the Mexican Revolution quickly drew links between their struggles and that of revolutionary Russia. The peasant radical Emiliano Zapata proclaimed that: “We would win much, human justice would win much, if all the peoples of our America and all the nations of old Europe understood that the cause of revolutionary Mexico and the unrepentant cause of Russia,

\(^7\) A Congress of left-wing socialists who opposed the Second International’s support of the First World War on nationalist grounds.


are and represent the cause of humanity, the supreme interest of all oppressed people."^{10}

Similarly, the anarchist and leader of the Mexican Liberal Party (Partido Liberal Mexicana), Ricardo Flores Magon, described the Russian Revolution as:

“…a movement that has to spark, whether those ingratiated with current system of exploitation and crime like it or not, the great world revolution that is now knocking on the gates of all the peoples; the great world revolution that will introduce important changes in the way in which human beings live with one another.”^{11}

Another set of figures, from the Indian nationalist M.N. Roy, to the U.S. draft dodger Frank Seamen, to Mexican trade-unionists and indigenous radicals, gathered in 1919 at the National Socialist Congress with the aim of drawing a concrete link between Mexico and the nascent Russian Revolution.^{12} Initiated by the miniscule Mexican Socialist Party, this congress in its majority agreed with the principles of the Communist International and resolved to send a delegate to upcoming Comintern Congress. The Mexican Socialist Party affiliated officially soon thereafter, rebranding itself as the Mexican Communist Party (Partido Comunista Mexicana, PCM.)^{13} From these humble beginnings, a party emerged in Mexico which has played a significant role in the development of Mexico up until today.

Flowing from this context, my aim is to examine the relationship between the Mexican Communist Party and the Communist International from the formation of the PCM in 1919, until the dissolution of the Comintern in 1943. Throughout this period, both the PCM and the Comintern experienced profound transformations in theory and practice. Of particular note is the

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^{11} Ibid, 19.
changing nature of proletarian internationalism, the guiding force of the Communist International in all of its iterations. While many of the significant debates within the Comintern took places between the European parties, analyzing the Comintern from the periphery, and particularly Mexico, sheds significant light on the shifting strategies of the Comintern and the effects of these changes of course on the development of revolutionary movements in these countries.¹⁴

Much of the literature on the Comintern-affiliated parties in periphery countries during this period highlights the domineering behavior of the Comintern apparatus and its array of mainly Soviet apparatchiks. In the context of the Cold War, Western researchers tended to emphasize the manipulation of these parties as fronts for Soviet foreign policy.¹⁵ Given the anti-Communist bias of many of these accounts, there is often little consideration of the genuine aspects of internationalism within the Communist International or of the genuine appeal these parties had in peripheral countries.

When the Soviet Union collapsed, archives which had been closed to the world for decades were opened en masse to researchers. With this new source of information, and the gradual dissipation of Cold War hysteria, researchers have re-examined the Mexican Communist Party and the Communist International during this early period. Scholars like Barry Carr and Daniela Spenser have published works on the Mexican Communist Party which emphasize the party’s independence and its real attempts to root itself within the Mexican working class and adapt Marxism to their specific context.¹⁶

Accounts such as these have opened ground for fruitful work in the study of the Mexican

¹⁶ See: *Marxism and Communism in Twentieth Century Mexico* and *Stumbling Its Way Through Mexico: The Early Years of the Communist International*. 
Communist Party and the evolving concept of proletarian internationalism.

In the course of this study, I will utilize a Marxist historiography to illustrate the evolution of the PCM, the Comintern, and the theory of proletarian internationalism. The words of the Czech Marxist Karl Kautsky in his classic work, *The Foundations of Christianity*, summarize the essence of this approach to studying the PCM. Kautsky observes that: “…the same words may in the course of centuries alter their meanings, that ideas and institutions resembling each other externally have a different content, having arisen from the needs of different classes and under different circumstances.”

In the case of the PCM and the Comintern, rather than taking centuries, words altered their meanings in a matter of years. The practice of proletarian internationalism in the periphery during the early years of the Comintern was a flawed, but genuine, attempt to disseminate the theory of Marxism worldwide with the aim of organizing and arming the toiling classes of the periphery to liberate themselves. However, a process of degeneration in the Soviet Union, marked by the replacement of working class rule by the rule of the Bolshevik bureaucracy, shattered the old content of the term “proletarian internationalism” while maintaining its form.

During this process of “Stalinization,” proletarian internationalism came to signify a defense of the interests of the Soviet Union, instead of those of the working classes of the whole world. In Mexico, this distortion of Marxism did not create the near-immediate catastrophic failures which much of the rest of the world Communist movement suffered during this period. However, through the course of the late 1920s, and the 1930s, the constant vacillations in Comintern strategy, the forcible replacement of core Mexican Communist leaders, and the declining rootedness of the party in the Mexican context, led the PCM to lose more and more its independent life as a party. This degeneration prepared the ground for the party crisis of 1940.

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which marked the end of the PCM as a meaningful force in Mexican politics for two decades.

Throughout this thesis, I will consult the Comintern Archives’ Files of the Mexican Communist Party, the content of the numerous Comintern congresses and the decisions of the Comintern Executive, as well as secondary literature to construct a chronological narration of the development of the PCM and the Comintern. While the Mexican Communist Party assumed a life independent of the Communist International, it is impossible to understand its course of development without understanding how it related to the Comintern and the world Communist movement. By examining these two inter-linked histories in-tandem, it becomes possible to understand concretely the trajectory of both the Mexican Communist Party and the Communist International.

The Bolshevik, and later anti-Stalinist Communist Victor Serge, provides an outlook which has proved integral to my approach to understanding the Mexican Communist Party and the Communist International:

“It is often said that ‘the germ of all Stalinism was in Bolshevism at its beginning’. Well, I have no objection. Only, Bolshevism also contained many other germs, a mass of other germs, and those who lived through the enthusiasm of the first years of the first victorious socialist revolution ought not to forget it. To judge the living man by the death germs which the autopsy reveals in the corpse—and which he may have carried in him since his birth—is that very sensible?”

In line with Serge, my aim is to examine the PCM and the Comintern in their totalities; both the germs which led to their political marginalization, and the forward steps they took in the struggle for human liberation.

Chapter 1 – The Beginnings of the Mexican Communist Party 1919-1921

While the revolution was just beginning in Russia, Mexico was still undergoing a revolutionary process nearly a decade old. Since 1910, Mexico had undergone a protracted revolutionary after the overthrow of the Porfirio Diaz dictatorship. At its onset, this conflict expressed itself as a struggle between pro-Diaz forces and a variety of revolutionary groups. However, over the course of the revolution, the pro-Diaz forces were more and more marginalized, and the struggle for power manifested itself as a conflict between a variety of armies with various visions of what the new Mexican state ought to look like. Towards its end, the primary forces of the revolution were the Constitutionalist faction, led by the wealthy landowner Venustiano Carranza, the middle-class and peasant army of Pancho Villa, and the revolutionary peasant movement of Emiliano Zapata. Ultimately, the Constitutionals were able to consolidate power, defeating Pancho Villa and assassinating Emiliano Zapata.

The revolutionary period also marked the birth of a worker’s movement in Mexico. While working class and peasant struggle had taken place in Mexico before 1910, the revolution created space for the development of formal workers’ and peasants’ organizations, from unions to left-wing parties. While Marxism remained confined to small study circles before 1917, other strains of radical thought made their first inroads during the revolutionary period. The formation of the Socialist Workers Party (Partido Obrero Socialista, POS) in 1911 provided the first legitimate example of socialist organizing in Mexico. Formed by the German ex-patriate Paul Zierold and the Mexico City lawyer, Adolfo Santibáñez, the majority of this relatively small organization adhered to a reformist politics. Though short-lived, the POS supported and began collaborating with Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata during the Civil War. In 1912, libertarian

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19 Carr, Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico, 15.
and anarchist elements split from the POS to form the “Light” Group (El Grupo “Luz”).\textsuperscript{20} In the same year, the Light Group took initiative in forming the first national workers organization, House of the World Worker (Casa del Obrero Mundial, COM) on anarcho-syndicalist lines.\textsuperscript{21} This organization helped compose a national Mexican left, becoming the springboard for the development of a plethora of unions and political groups. COM also played a vital role in the Constitutionalist army, forming the Red Brigades which aimed to build a left pole of attraction within the mixed political and class forces of the Constitutionals.\textsuperscript{22} While the workers of COM believed their activity in the Constitutionalist army of Carranza would guarantee them some rights as a class, Carranza quickly proved to be no friend of workers’ struggle. From May to July of 1916, two general strikes occurred, the second of which “…paralyze[d] electricity and all public services and businesses in the capital of the Republic.”\textsuperscript{23} In response, Carranza, now in power in Mexico City, declared martial law and threatened all strikers with the death penalty.

This betrayal of the strikers by the Carranza government surprised most elements of the organized working class in Mexico. One of Carranza’s key base-building strategies was to use the rhetoric of socialism to win the sympathy of the workers’ and the peasants’. In fact, Carranza and other liberal leaders of the revolution motivated the formation of socialist parties to raise their legitimacy among the peasantry and the working class.\textsuperscript{24} These groups typically functioned as local electoral fronts for the liberal parties and failed to maintain a meaningful independent existence or radical program. The reputation of these socialist parties was so low among workers, that an early leader of the Mexican Communist Party, Frank Seaman remarked that one of the

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Arnaldo Martínez Verdugo, \textit{Historia del Comunismo en México}, 16.
\textsuperscript{24} “Socialist Parties in Mexico and the Development of the Communist Parties,” 18 January 1920, CA, Fond 495, Opis’ 108, reel 1, file 4.
key strengths of the early PCM was that it did not have the term “socialist” in the name and thus actually proved attractive to working class people.\(^\text{25}\)

According to the Comintern archives, the most important outlier to these contrived socialist parties during the revolutionary period was El Partido Socialista de Yucatán (Socialist Party of Yucatán.) During the revolution, indigenous Mayans formed self-defense groups known as Leagues of Resistance which came together to form El Partido Socialista de Yucatán on a radical basis.\(^\text{26}\) Thus, the initial thrust behind the party did not reside in the upper classes, as with the Carranza backed parties, but instead in the self-activity of the oppressed and exploited. The party soon became dominant electorally in the region. However, this success led to a general conservatization of the party, an adaption to the existing system, and the disenchantment of much of its indigenous peasant base. A notable exception to this process was party leader, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, who pursued a radical program as governor of Yucatan from 1922 to 1924 and flirted with the emerging Communist movement of the time.\(^\text{27}\)

Ultimately, during the Mexican revolution, the main radical forces present gravitated towards various forms of reformist socialism, anarchism, and peasant radicalism. According to the historian of Mexican Communism, Barry Carr, “Marxist social democracy was not widely disseminated among Mexican workers and intellectuals”\(^\text{28}\). The beginning of the World War and the eventual triumph of the Bolshevik Revolution created the first major groundswell of Marxist thought and organizing in Mexico.

Though the ideological influence of the Bolshevik Revolution played a significant role in the growing interest in Marxism in Mexico, Marxism would not have become so influential

\(^{25}\) Ibid.
\(^{26}\) Ibid.
\(^{27}\) Ibid.
within the working class if not for some of the other international conditions shaping Mexico. Similarly, to Russia and other countries in Europe, the beginning of World War I created a wave of radicalism in Mexico. In particular, the entry of the United States into the War in April 1917 raised nationalist and radical sentiment. The U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's insisted on Mexican involvement in the war, causing layers from all classes of Mexican society to balk at the imperialist attitude of the United States’ government. At the same time, the US war effort and the institution of the draft then led many American radicals to evade the draft by fleeing to Mexico. Furthermore, the success of the Russian Revolution of October that year moved Mexican and émigré radicals to consider Marxism beyond small study circles for the first time.

The first visible organizational expression of this new curiosity about Marxism was demonstrated in the National Socialist Conference of August 1919. Convened by the Mexican Socialist Party, a largely irrelevant study circle of 5-6 Kaustskyians, the National Socialist Congress ended up attracting representatives from various trade unions, newspapers, and socialist parties.

The National Socialist Conference represented the first attempt to build a nationwide party on Marxist principles in Mexico. During this Congress, the politics of the Mexican Socialist Party gravitated closer and closer to that of the Third International. At the onset, the Congress attracted a rather heterogeneous set of figures, including Luis Morones, the leader of the Confederacion Regional Obrera Mexicana (CROM) the largest union federation in the country and Linn A. E. Gale, an American Communist and draft dodger. Ultimately, the

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30 Ibid., 18.
31 Followers of the orthodox Marxist, Karl Kautsky, who was considered a centrist within the German Social Democratic Party between the revisionists on the right (Eduard Bernstein) and the revolutionary socialists on the left (Rosa Luxemburg.)
Congress voted to expel both of these leaders and their followers, the former for his reformism and opportunism, and the latter for his sectarianism.\textsuperscript{34} Linn A. E. Gale, after the conference, organized his small group of followers into a competing Communist Party known as the Partido Comunista de Mexico, which he used to try to garner favor from the Communist International and sew skepticism against the party formed at National Socialist Conference. Eventually, this paper-only party would fade into obscurity after Gale’s deportation in May, 1921.\textsuperscript{35}

While much of the party aimed to join the Communist International, its politics were not a graft or a complete reflection of the politics of the International. Many members of the party gravitated to the Third International because of the seeming similarities to the rhetoric and theory of anarchism which had been a dominant force in the Mexican left for the last decade.

Though the Congress finished without a vote to affiliate to the Comintern, the leadership of the party began moves to that effect.\textsuperscript{36} This leadership consisted of a number of unexpected characters. One of the key figures leading the party to affiliation with the Comintern was the Indian-born radical, M.N. Roy. Under threat of persecution for his role in the early Indian nationalist movement, Roy fled to America where he soon got introduced to Marxism, slowly breaking from his cultural nationalist past.\textsuperscript{37} Then the United States authorities began to close in on Roy for his extensive contacts with Indian revolutionaries and German radicals, as well as for his initial illegal entry into the United States. Thus, in June 1917, Roy escaped to Mexico\textsuperscript{38}. In Mexico, Roy made contact with the small Mexican Socialist Party and met Michael Borodin, a Comintern official who would play a decisive role in Roy becoming a Marxist, and for the whole

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{35} “To the Small Bureau of the Executive Committee,” 1921, CA, Fond 495, Opis’ 108, reel 1, file 10.
\textsuperscript{36} Carr, \textit{Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico}, 25.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 8.
Mexican Socialist Party to affiliate to the Communist International.\textsuperscript{39}

On November 28, 1919, the Mexican Socialist Party held an extraordinary session which changed the party's name to the Mexican Communist Party and began assembling a list of delegates to the Comintern to gain affiliation.\textsuperscript{40} With this decision, the new Mexican Communist Party took its first steps. Unlike many of the affiliate parties of the Comintern during this period, the Mexican Communist Party had significant work to do to root themselves and the ideas of Marxism within the Mexican working class and peasantry.

Therefore, the struggle to build the Communist Party in these early years was of a two-fold nature. The first was to root themselves in difficult and contested conditions. With the legacy of the Mexican Revolution and the new state apparatus hovering over their heads, the Mexican Communists struggled to differentiate themselves from this government which expressed sympathy with the workers and peasantry.\textsuperscript{41} Simultaneously, the state physically repressed the Party numerous times during the early years. And then, on the Left, the Communists had to struggle against the twin-poles of reformism and anarchism within the labor movement.

An even greater barrier to the rootedness of the Communist Party was the predomination of non-Mexicans in its leadership and rank and file. As the American Agency of the Communist International observed in 1921, the PCM was little more than a party of foreigners up until that point.\textsuperscript{42} The presence of non-native elements in a Communist group is not an inherently negative feature. However, the dominance of foreigners created a distorting effect in the party until it finally gained greater roots among the native working classes. The participation of M.N. Roy in

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 9.
\textsuperscript{40} Carr, Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico, 27.
\textsuperscript{42} “To the Small Bureau of the Executive Committee,” 1921, CA, Fond 495, Opis’ 108, reel 1, file 10.
the Second Congress of the Comintern serves as an indication of this distorting factor. Despite being the formal representative of the PCM at the conference, he used his credentials to argue on the “National Question,” specifically its theoretical implications and its relation to his home country, India. Partially due to his omissions, no Latin American representatives spoke specifically about Latin American conditions. In the first three Congresses of the Comintern, only John Reed and Louis Fraina spoke to issues in Latin America, and even then, briefly.43 Compounding the issue of representation, communication with the Comintern proved difficult for the handful of cadre and leaders who spoke only Spanish. Until 1924, very few Comintern documents were translated into Spanish.44 Without documents in Spanish, many native Mexican PCM leaders were disadvantaged in their participation in the international movement. In these early years, the PCM was neither large enough nor rooted enough to play a role in the formation of Comintern perspectives, becoming at most a subject of these decisions rather than an agent of them for the duration of the first few congresses.

Simultaneously, developing a Marxist praxis to guide work in Mexico proved difficult. The late arrival of Marxism as a real social force in Central and South America as well as a lack of concern for the area among European Marxists in the Second International made it necessary for Marxists in Mexico to start developing their theory from scratch. The low level of engagement with the Latin American context was reflected even in the early period of the Third International. World perspectives documents such as *The Manifesto of the Communist International to the Proletariat of the Entire World* failed to reference struggles in the Americas outside of the United States.45 This early lack of interest in Latin America from international

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Marxists, combined with a weak indigenous Marxist tradition, created difficulties for the Mexican Communist Party in these years. At its formation, members had difficulty differentiating between anarchism and Marxism, advocating positions such as principled boycott of elections which cut against majority-thinking in the Communist movement worldwide.\textsuperscript{46} Simultaneously, their failure to produce a clear analysis which engaged with the reality of Mexico in the period led the Communist Party to vacillate in the implementation of their policies and orientations. These quick changes in policy often alienated party members and the party periphery and allowed the party to be influenced too decisively by the Comintern perspectives and operatives. Particularly, the failure to develop a clear analysis on the nature of the Mexican state and how Marxists ought to relate to it was key at various points in preventing the PCM from becoming a mass party. The vacillation between opportunism and ultra-leftism on this question prevented them from developing a significant layer of committed cadre.\textsuperscript{47}

The question of “centralism\textsuperscript{48}” in the Communist International too only added to the theoretical weakness and lack of independence of the Mexican Communist Party. Only once did the Communist International host a conference where Communists from the America’s were allowed a semi-autonomy in the formation of perspectives and the organization of their parties in the Americas.\textsuperscript{49} In February of 1920, a conference was held in Amsterdam to form an American Bureau of the Communist International. Due to the difficulties in travel and the weakness of the Latin American Communist Parties, very few delegates from Latin America even attended this conference. In fact, the “Mexican” representative to the conference was actually Mikhail Borodin,

\textsuperscript{46} Caballero, \textit{La Internacional Comunista y La Revolución Latinoamericana 1919-1943}, 48.
\textsuperscript{47} Carr, \textit{Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico}, 39.
\textsuperscript{48} Members of the Comintern debated how much authority the Comintern Executive and the Congresses should have over the member parties.
a Russian.\textsuperscript{50} Beyond the lack of Latin American representation, the conference was a disaster. The Dutch police, aware of the conference, raided it and arrested and expelled the foreign Communists. Only a handful of delegates escaped, reconvening the conference in secret. Out of these much smaller discussions, the Latin American Bureau of the Third International was created by the Amsterdam Conference.\textsuperscript{51} This Latin American Bureau was supposed to be based in Mexico and was tasked with convening a conference of the Latin American Communist Parties, in an attempt to coordinate perspectives and orientations across borders. However, the Latin American Bureau was ultimately formed pre-maturely. None of the Latin American Communist Parties were on strong footing, and the Bureau melted into obscurity quickly without having accomplishing even modest tasks.\textsuperscript{52}

Shortly thereafter, Borodin issued a manifesto for the new body. It gave a sketch analysis of conditions in Latin America. However, these perspectives offer more for a histography of how the Comintern thought of Latin America than a real analysis of Latin American conditions. It states:

"…modern industrial capitalism, the powerful enemy of the working class, has not yet acquired much strength among the native bourgeoisie of the Latin-American countries; it is mainly in the hands of foreign capitalists and as the imperial policy of the Great Powers, especially of the U.S. aims to make foreign capital the only sovereign power in these regions, it is clear that the interests of the workers are in dangers."

This analysis overemphasized the role of imperialist capital in Latin America at the time, which, while significant, obscures the independent role played by the national bourgeoisie. At the

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\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{51} Theodore Draper, \textit{Roots of American Communism}, 264.
\textsuperscript{52} Caballero, \textit{La Internacional Comunista y la Revolución Latinoamericana 1919-1943}, 49.
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same time, the document hyperbolizes the role of the reformists in preventing the development of revolutionary class consciousness. Though Borodin’s analysis was arguably correct in a number of European countries, Latin America generally lacked a developed Left, specifically of the social-democratic variety. Thus his arguments represent a vulgar attempt to superimpose European reality onto Latin American conditions which were alien in many major respects.⁵⁴

A key component of the internationalism of the PCM during this period, as evidenced already by Borodin’s contributions to the foundation and the early analysis of the party, was the fundamental role played by Comintern agents. The Comintern sent agents to Mexico to aid the party’s early development, most notably Sen Katayama, Louis Fraina and Charles Phillips to continue the work of organizing the Communist Parties in the hemisphere.⁵⁵ They were tasked with training the first layer of cadre within the PCM and putting the group in line with the directives emanating from the Comintern. Katayama’s primary contribution was to help establish the Provisional Mexican Bureau of the Red Labor International which was an international scheme to build a large Communist union movement.⁵⁶ Louis Fraina, a foundational member of the Communist Party of the United States, played a more hands on role in the PCM. He helped develop one of the first applied Marxist analyses of Mexican conditions in his pamphlet, “The Conquest of Mexico” which outlined the growing threat of U.S. imperialism in Mexico, the contradictory, but ultimately bourgeois nature of the post-revolutionary Mexican government, and the need for a Pan-American revolutionary movement against U.S. imperialism.⁵⁷ Additionally, Fraina played an important role in the recomposition of the PCM in December of 1921, where he argued against Diaz Ramirez’s adventurist notion that a new Mexican Revolution

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⁵⁶ Letter from Sen Katayama dated 26 May 1921, CA, Fond 495, Opis’ 108, reel 1, file 11.
as on the immediate horizon and that the PCM ought to be arming the workers, as well as against the anti-parliamentary attitudes within the party.\textsuperscript{58}

The end of this period of the PCM began with the deportation of foreign-born Communists in 1921. The Constitution of 1917, though one of the most progressive constitutions of the period, contained an article, Article 33, which stated: “Foreigners may not in any way participate in the political affairs of the country.”\textsuperscript{59} This article granted the government the right to deport any foreigner who participated in politics in the country. Agitated at the participation of foreigners in the anarchist-led Industrial Workers’ of the World and the Communist Federation of the Mexican Proletariat (Federación Comunista del Proletariado Mexicano, FCPM), Obregón employed Article 33 in 1921, deporting a number of leading members of the PCM and Comintern agents, while forcing others to go into hiding or to flee the country. According to the American Agency of the Communist International’s report to the Comintern, the deportations revealed that the PCM was not a real party, but a “personal affair run by foreigners.”\textsuperscript{60} In reality, the only genuine Communist group in the country was the Mexican Federation of Communist Youth which had around 500 members, and published a paper called “International Youth” with a circulation of about 2000.\textsuperscript{61} The deportation of these founding Communists then played a contradictory function in the development of the movement; on the one hand, it was a momentary setback in the organization of the party. On the other hand, it forced the Mexicans in the party to take definitive leadership in the building of their own party. In many respects, 1921 thus marks the real start of the Communist movement in Mexico.

Despite the problems hampering the Mexican Communist Party in these early years, the

\textsuperscript{58} Spenser, \textit{Stumbling Its Way Through Mexico: The Early Years of the Communist International}, 130.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
party managed to build modest bases among a few layers of the working class as well as some sections of the peasantry, the intelligentsia, and artists. Though the 1920s started off slow for the Marxist movement in Mexico and Latin America, the developments from the mid 1920s to the mid 1930s would prove decisive on the trajectory of the communist movement, and really most of the Latin American Left, for decades to come.
Chapter 2 – From the United Front to the Third Period 1921-1928

With the refoundation of the Party on firmer lines in 1921, the Mexican Communist Party was set for the first time to play an active role in Mexican politics. This new seriousness in the PCM coincided with a change in line which would challenge many of the dominant trends and orientations of the PCM’s early years and lay the groundwork for the growth of the Party during the 1920s. This period in the Comintern, known in later Communist histories as “the second period” and dominated by the strategy of the United Front, initiated the first deep penetration of Marxist ideas into the Latin American political environment, especially among the intelligentsia, the working class, and the peasantry. At the same time, the growth of the PCM and most Communist parties internationally concealed the increasing political degeneration of the Communist International. By the end of the 1920s, new germs had developed in the body of Bolshevism, ones which would kill the old conceptions of proletarian internationalism.

The overriding directive preceding from the Comintern beginning in 1921 was the strategy of the United Front.62 After the heady years immediately following the Russian Revolution, where it appeared to the communists that world revolution was just over the horizon, the Comintern started to sober up. Before the Third Congress of the Communist International in 1921, the leaders of the Bolshevik Party and other leading figures in the Communist movement internationally reassessed the prospects for revolution and the proper strategies to be pursued by the Comintern. These discussions culminated in the adoption of the United Front tactic, a strategy which promoted concrete actions across organizations to build hegemony for the Communist Parties during a period of revolutionary retreat. The Comintern recognized that in no

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country did a Communist Party have an influence over the majority of the working class. After the defeat of the Spartacist Uprising, led by the nascent German Communist Party, and the destruction of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic in the same year, the Comintern began to recognize the overall weakness of the communist movement internationally. The communist revolution would not occur just by pushing Communist Parties with little real influence to plan armed insurrection. The Bolshevik Party then recognized it would need to reorient tactically to address this real weakness and cut against ultra-left tendencies which drove many of the Parties, large and small.

United Front policy consisted of the communist parties engaging in struggles with groups outside of themselves, namely labor organizations and the old Social-Democratic Parties. The object of this policy was not, however, to merge with these other groupings or to build a false sense of unity. Rather, the Comintern argued that to engage in concrete struggle with other groups would demonstrate to the working class more broadly the commitment of the Communists to struggle, and at the same time *expose* the reformists in the workers’ movement for their lack of commitment. The predictable hesitancy by reformists to work with the Communist Parties and their reluctance to pursue any given struggle to its end would make clear to the broader working class that the Communist Party represented the most revolutionary and pro-working class element in the movement. Thus, the United Front functioned both as a recognition that the Communist Party must dedicate itself to base-building and as a means of wrestling hegemony away from the reformists.

In Mexico, many of the directives of the Fourth Congress cut against the Mexican

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63 Ibid., 1.
64 A failed attempt by the German Spartacists (later known as the Communist Party of Germany) to launch a socialist insurrection which was quickly crushed.
65 Ibid., 2
66 Ibid., 2.
Communist Party’s existing praxis. Since the PCM was still a very small party, no specific mention was made about the party from the floor of the Congress. However, Lenin’s *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, a polemic against the ultra-left currents in the Communist movement which was distributed at the start of the Fourth Congress, read as though it were written about the PCM. Given the dominance of libertarian and anarchist currents in the U.S. and Mexican political scenes that most of the members were trained in, the PCM held on to positions such as principled boycott of elections and abstention from reactionary trade unions and the creation of alternative revolutionary unions. Even at their National Congress of 1922, PCM delegates agreed with Comintern directives on these questions in the abstract but refused to apply them due to the perceived corruption of the Mexican electoral system.

In Mexico, the Communist Party was initially reluctant to apply the United Front strategy fully. In particular this reluctance manifested in the PCM’s hesitancy to relate to the CROM, the most significant trade union federation in Mexico. In an early document analyzing the history of the Mexican labor movement, the PCM argued that the CROM was formed by the government in order to demobilize workers. Much like the Communist Party in the United States, the PCM saw the primary union federation in their country as a reactionary, opportunistic, and corrupt institution. Of course, there was some credence to this analysis; the CROM’s leadership fostered ties to the American Federation of Labor and pursued a national policy of kicking Communists out of the unions. However, libertarian tendencies within the party masked the key function of the United Front to the PCM: to break workers from the leadership of the reformists. The Communists aimed not for unity through the United Front, but for hegemony. Only by the mid-

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67 Ibid.
68 Vladimir Lenin, *Left Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1964)
69 “To the Small Bureau,” 2 January 1922, CA, Fond 495, Opis’ 108, reel 2, file 22.
1920s did the PCM start attempting to consistently apply the United Front perspective emanating from the Comintern.

Between 1920 and 1929 the PCM grew from fewer than a hundred members to more than fifteen-hundred by 1929. However, this growth did not occur incrementally throughout the decade. The impending election of 1924 raised the problems of transition in the Mexican state forcefully. Despite the end of the Revolution and stabilization under Obregon, the formally democratic state of Mexico still had not broken from an undemocratic system of appointments. Obregon had chosen Elias Calles as his successor, but presidential polls showed the former agrarian revolutionary Pancho Villa and the Treasury Minister Adolfo de la Huerta outstripping Calles and the anti-revolutionary businessman Carlos B. Zetina in the lead. Recognizing his support from other Mexican generals and confident that the United States would back him, de la Huerta launched a rebellion in December of 1923. Finally convinced of the Comintern’s position on electoralism, the PCM went as far as to forcefully endorse the Calles’, shifting from a position of endorsing him to “…expose the bankruptcy of bourgeois politics and enable the party to come into contact with the masses on a national scale,” to making “optimistic predictions” about the progressive aspects of a Calles government given his links to the organized labor movement. The PCM ultimately took up arms in the states of Veracruz and Michoacán to repress the uprising and the violent suppression of their locals seriously disorganized the party, ripping asunder their already over-stretched national organization and leading to a leadership purge for perceived opportunistic maneuvers, leaving only one member on the Executive

72 Carr, Marxism and Communism in Twentieth Century Mexico, 37.
74 Ibid, 201.
75 Carr, Marxism and Communism in Twentieth Century Mexico, 40.
Committee of the PCM.\textsuperscript{76}

Fortunately for the Party, a number of other more positive developments also characterized this period. By 1922, Mexican intellectuals and artists such as David Alfaro Siqueiros, Frida Kahlo, Fermin Revueltas, Diego Rivera, Xavier Guerrero, Jose Clemente Orozco, and Graciela Amador began to gravitate to the party, and quickly took up roles in the national leadership.\textsuperscript{77} Notably, the paper, \textit{El Machete}, a handful of these artists had published originally as an organ of their union, the Syndicate of Worker Technicians, Painters, Sculptors, was adopted as the organ of the Communist Party in 1925.\textsuperscript{78} The presence of Mexican celebrity figures within the party gave the group a new attraction, and the creative and artistic form of their paper drew a wide readership, raising its distribution to 7000 copies a week by 1927.\textsuperscript{79}

As with many Communist organizations in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the party newspaper played an integral role in the life of the party and its identity. The name “El Machete”, proposed by Graciela Amador, was accompanied by a slogan which adorned every issue and testifies much to the PCM’s radical self-conception: “The machete serves to cut cane, to open up paths in shady woods, to decapitate snakes, to cut down weeds, and to humble the pride of the impious rich.”\textsuperscript{80} The Communist Party aimed to emphasize its radicalism through the machete metaphor. Simultaneously, the use of the machete, the tool of the peasant and agricultural worker, demonstrated the PCM’s concern for struggle on the agricultural plane. In a significantly rural country like Mexico, it was important for the Communist Party to theorize and organize beyond the traditional of subject of Marxism: the proletariat. Furthermore, the fundamental role played

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 41.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{79} “Resolución sobre la situación actual y las tareas del partido,” 10 August 1927, CA, Fond 495, Opis’ 109, Reel 8, File 73.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid.
by the artists in the party made the newspaper particularly attractive; creative illustrations adorned many of its pages, functioning both as a propaganda method to increase interest in the party, and to give oftentimes illiterate workers a sense of the content of the paper. Testifying to the successes of the paper, the sales of the paper far outstripped the number of registered members of the party. By 1929, the PCM reported internally that “El Machete” distribution was up to 15,000 weekly, with an estimated 175,000 people interacting with the paper due to information sharing patterns in Mexican towns. The paper in these days also demonstrated the conceptions Mexican Communist Party members held about internationalism.

Looking at any one issue of El Machete demonstrates how the PCM viewed itself as one branch of an international movement. For example, the issue from 26 March 1925 gives a sense: scattered among articles analyzing Mexican politics, such as the Railway Workers’ Strike and the nature of the Mexican government, are a variety of articles outlining the international situation and specific developments in Latin American politics. There are articles on the 54th anniversary of the Paris Commune, the Bolshevization of the Comintern, a rally to free Sacco and Vanzetti, the struggle against dictatorship in Cuba, and a promotion for “El Libertador: Organ of the Pan-American Anti-Imperialist League.” These articles display not just a focus on the Russian Revolution, as was the case early in the PCM’s history, but also an interest in building a Pan-American identity. A key part of the PCM’s conception of internationalism in this period was the importance of building this Pan-American consciousness. Barring immediate international socialist revolution, the task of the Latin American proletariat was to unify the countries of the New World to form a bulwark against the United States’ attempts at colonizing the continent. The Mexican Communists helped to build the Pan-American Anti-Imperialist

82 “El Machete” issue dated 13 March 1924, Ca, Fond 495, Opis’ 109, Reel 29, File 222.
League (Liga Antiimperialista Panamericana, LAP) which constructed a transnational working body across the continent.

While the Mexican Communist party was slowly sorting out its praxis, profound transformations were taking place within the Soviet Union and the Communist International. In 1924, Vladimir Lenin, the primary leader of the October Revolution and the Bolshevik Party, died. His death created a power vacuum in a Soviet Union bowing under the difficulties of reconstruction and the lack of revolutions internationally. From its onset, the Bolsheviks had argued that socialism in Russia could only be possible if the revolution spread to more developed capitalist countries. Without this, Russia was left isolated, with a working class decimated from war, and a weak and disorganized industrial base. The Bolsheviks inevitably drifted towards substitutionism in this context, utilizing the Bolshevik Party apparatus as a substitute for the decimated working class which could not rule in its own name under these conditions. Lenin’s death exacerbated the crisis in the Soviet Union and produced a leadership conflict between Leon Trotsky on one side, and the Triumvirate of Gregory Zinoviev, Josef Stalin, and Nikolai Bukharin on the other.

With this struggle raging in the Bolshevik Party, the Fifth Congress of the Comintern served as a platform for the Triumvirate to internationalize its positions. Zinoviev and the other leaders of the Comintern denounced Trotsky's policies as petit-bourgeois and counter-revolutionary, motivating a transformation in the structure of the Communist International to combat such perceived deviations as Trotsky's from gaining influence anywhere in the world.

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83 From 1925, known as the Anti-Imperialist League of the Americas (Liga Antiimperialista de las Americas)
86 Ibid., 129.
This orientation concretely took the form of the “Bolshevization” of the Communist Parties. Zinoviev, the head of the Comintern, and the primary speaker at the Congress, defined and motivated this policy of Bolshevization. According to Zinoviev:

“The Comintern must be monolithic … There can be no question that the right wingers will continue to act as before and actually become a faction. The Communist International will not allow this ... Bolshevization means the formation of a strongly cemented, monolithic, centralized organization which in a friendly and brotherly manner, eradicates all differences in its ranks.”

If this undemocratic impulse had been the only aspect of Bolshevization, it seems unlikely that the Comintern Parties would have accepted it so unanimously. However, there were many positive directives coexisting with the cynical maneuvering playing out among Bolshevik leaders. In fact, the Bolshevization’s immediate impacts in Mexico were resoundingly positive. A report written by the General Secretary of the PCM in 1928 outlines the achievements of the Bolshevization of the party. Bolshevization in Mexico meant moving towards a more serious party structure based upon active membership and concerted effort within the labor movement. The party pushed union members to take up leading roles in their unions, asked non-union members to pursue unionization in their workplaces, called for the building of student socialist societies, created space for women and children in the development of cultural centers, engaged foreign-born Communists in concrete anti-imperialist work, and formed systematic routines for the writing and distribution of “El Machete.”

While these developments in Russia would cause serious repercussions in the Mexican

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Party in the 1930s, the period from 1924-1928 proved positive for the PCM. In 1924, The PCM while still small, began to build its roots within the working class and peasantry and develop an applied Marxist analysis of Mexican society. On the former point, the PCM helped to establish the National Peasant League (Liga Campesina Nacional, LNC) granting it an important base in the peasantry, and the party, softening its stance towards the CROM, worked within the labor movement as revolutionary socialists, successfully building small bases among workers in communications, mining, and the railways.\textsuperscript{89} On the latter point, the internal document put out by the Central Committee of the Mexican Communist Party, “Resolution on the Current Situation and the Tasks of the Party” displays an advance in the theoretical clarity within the PCM. This piece puts forward an analysis of the significance of the Mexican Revolution 10 years on, provides an examination of the dominant class forces in Mexico, and suggests strategies for the PCM to adopt in regard to the agrarian problem, the threat of U.S. imperialism, and the correct application of the United Front method. The Central Committee initiates the document with an argument that, “…Mexico’s development conforms with the capitalist type.”\textsuperscript{90} They continued:

“The politics that successive dictatorial petty-bourgeois governments have followed until now, although it has been a vacillating and incoherent politics, a politics of half-measures, of bargaining, of zig-zags, of maneuvers, of concessions, has favored the development of capitalism in the country.”\textsuperscript{91}

This perspective presents an original look into the class dynamics of the Mexican state following the revolution. The early presidents of Mexico, Carranza, Obregón, and Calles,

\textsuperscript{89} Carr, Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico, 31-32.
\textsuperscript{90} “Resolución sobre la situación actual y las tareas del partido,” 10 August 1927, CA, Fond 495, Opis’ 109, Reel 8, File 73.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
represented a form of “petit-bourgeois” politics, in this view. Their politics appeared revolutionary and progressive given their formal sympathies with the workers and peasants, as well as their anti-imperialist and nationalist stances. However, as the Central Committee argues, this appearance masks the course of the revolution that, despite its “zig-zags,” is following a path of capitalist development.

Given this vacillating nature, the Central Committee recommended supporting and pressuring the government to go through with land redistribution and resisting U.S. imperialism, but warned against following the government without criticism. Without a critical line, the Mexican Communist Party would fail to take advantage of the political opportunities opened up by the vacillating petit-bourgeois government. Without constructing a strong left pole of attraction, the PCM feared that the clerical right and the U.S. capitalist class would pressure the revolution into Thermidor and erase the already mixed gains of the Mexican Revolution. The Central Committee of the PCM argued to continue work among the peasantry given the high-degree of struggle and the potentials of counter-revolutionary campaigns in the countryside. According to the Party, the rural aristocracy, the clerical class, and U.S. capital were building an alliance in the countryside to crush the Mexican revolutionary process. In response, the PCM was instructed to arm the peasants and rural workers to both fight off the emerging counter-revolution and push forward positive programs such as land expropriation without compensation. While some of these pronouncements on the part of the Party leadership overestimated the real ability of the party to intervene in the prevailing conditions in Mexico, the nuanced theoretical approach to understanding and orienting towards the post-revolutionary Mexican state demonstrated an important shift away from the out-of-touch theoretical ambiguity

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92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
and revolutionary rhetorical flourishes of the early days.

These advances unfortunately would prove short-lived, however. The year 1928 marked a massive shift in the strategy of the Communist International and thus the orientation of the Mexican Communist Party. The Fifteenth Party Congress of the Bolsheviks, held in December of 1927, crushed the Left Opposition and expelled them from the party, consolidating Joseph Stalin’s personal rule and thus enshrining the bureaucratization of the revolution and elevating it to the level of principle.\(^\text{94}\) This shift in leadership altered Soviet domestic policy, Comintern strategy, and fundamentally transformed the concept of internationalism within the Communist movement worldwide. In short, the Comintern transformed from a body which aimed to distill the lessons of the Bolshevik Revolution and impart them to communists operating in different contexts, to a transmission belt for Soviet foreign policy.\(^\text{95}\) The first four Congresses of the Comintern set an example for democratic debate and coordination among revolutionaries worldwide. Sharp debates occurred around a variety of subjects, and the Bolshevik Party’s were frequently contested by other Communist Parties. Communists grappled with application of the United Front strategy, interpreting nationalism and self-determination, analyzing the links between exploitation and oppression, and many other topics.\(^\text{96}\) By 1928 however, dissent was almost completely stifled and the Comintern acted as a rubber stamp for the positions of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Politically, the Sixth Congress of the Comintern made a sharp, “left” turn as part of an analysis of a new, “Third Period.” In this analysis outlined in, “The Theses on the International Situation and the Tasks of the Communist International” the Comintern leadership argued that, in


\(^{95}\) Caballero, *La Internacional Comunista y la Revolución Latinoamericano 1919-1943*, 37.

\(^{96}\) Riddell, *Towards the United Front*, 4.
this Third Period, “the contradiction between the growth of the productive forces and the contraction of markets becomes particularly accentuated, will inevitably give rise to a fresh era of imperialist wars among the imperialist States themselves; wars of the imperialist States against the USSR; wars of national liberation against imperialism; wars of imperialist intervention and gigantic class battles.” This analysis informed a variety of perspectives which broke from the practice of the early Comintern. The rejection of the United Front represented the most radical and reprehensible of these changes. The Comintern Executive argued that capitalism would reach a terminal crisis soon and that other left tendencies such as social-democracy and anarchism constituted the main bulwarks against successful proletarian revolution. Rather than breaking workers from reformist leadership through concrete action, the Comintern Executive advocated a combative policy against alternative workers’ organizations and the construction of movements free of reformist trappings. No longer vacillating allies, the other Left forces were now “social-fascists.”

These “class against class” and “social-fascism” theories proved catastrophic for the Mexican Communist Party. Up until 1928, the PCM had built bases in the CROM, the National Peasant League, and had developed a complex but generally coherent relation to the Calles government, acting as an anti-capitalist pressure on the vacillating post-revolutionary Mexican government. Now, during the Third Period, the PCM formed the Worker-Peasant Bloc (Bloque Obrero-Campesino, BOC) to pursuit electoral campaigns free of collaboration with other left forces, and the Unitary Trade Union Confederation of Mexico (Confederación Sindical Unitaria

de México, CSUM) to act as a counter-weight to the CROM. The PCM hoped to establish hegemony in the workers’ and peasants’ movements in opposition to all other left forces. Quickly, the Communist Party’s sectarianism erased the work of years, particularly through its alienation of the National Peasants’ League. Leading members of the Communist Party and the LNC, such as Ursulo Galvan and Diego Rivera, expressed open dissatisfaction with the new, sectarian, line emanating from Moscow, leading to a wave of expulsions and resignations from the PCM. 99 These blunders effectively destroyed the PCM’s peasant bases for half a decade.

While the Third Period sectarianism of the PCM weakened it severely, the retraction of the Party’s strength was not the fault of the PCM alone. The disastrous new line coincided with catastrophic national events, marginalizing the Communist Party even further. Under the presidency of Emiliano Portes Gil starting in 1929 and continuing under Pascual Ortiz Rubio, the leadership of the Mexican government took a right-turn. Consequently, the Communist Party faced severe repression, nominally due to the false accusation that they participated in the Escobar Revolt. In reality, the party actively fought off the Revolt, facing intense violence to defend the government. As Karl M. Schmitt succinctly puts it, the PCM, “…called for support of Calles (the real power behind Portes Gil) to suppress the Escobar rebellion, and then for an attack on Calles to overturn the government.” 100 The National Revolutionary Party government stopped this plan in its tracks, murdering and imprisoning leaders and cadre of the Mexican Communist Party. 101 By 1930, an anti-Communist hysteria gripped the ruling elite, culminating in the imprisonment of Communists on Isla Tres Marias and the growth of the fascist paramilitary Gold Shirts (Camisas Doradas) which terrorized Jews and Communists with

99 Carr, Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico, 44.
100 Schmidt, Communism in Mexico: A Study in Political Frustration, 15.
101 “Against Fascist Reaction in Mexico,” 7 July 1929, CA, Fond 495, Opis’ 109, Reel 12, File 97.
impunity. The conditions of illegality for the party and government repression made the earlier united front policy which the PCM had carried out throughout the earlier parts of the 1920s appear impossible. To the illegal Communist Party, stagnating in illegality until 1934 the analysis coming from Moscow then was highly attractive. The growing crisis of capitalism meant that the final struggle for socialism was on the horizon, and for a small, embattled party, such a vision gave them hope in facing a bleak immediate existence.

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Chapter 3 – The Popular Front and the Crisis in Communist Internationalism

Despite increased interest in Latin America within the Comintern and an explosive increase in membership across the continent, the balance sheet for Communism in Latin America by the end of the 1930s was grim. From aloof criticism of the Honduran Communist Party’s insurrection and abortive insurrections in Brazil and Cuba, to rank opportunism in Chile and Venezuela during the Popular Front period in the name of anti-imperialism, the Latin American Communist Parties seemed to make a fetish out of catastrophic failure in the potentially promising political moment of the 1930s. Why did the Communist movement fail so outstandingly in Latin America during this period?

The root of Communist crisis in the late 1930s derived from the concept which had birthed the movement in the first place: proletarian internationalism. But the internationalism of the early 1920s and the internationalism of the 1930s were in fact two different internationalisms; a product of two different material realities. The proletarian internationalism of the early Comintern, formed out of the experience of the Bolshevik Revolution, shook up the deterministic linearity of Social-Democratic Marxism and birthed a world movement obsessed with the coming world Communist revolution. This internationalism rejected the notion of the “primacy” of the Russian Revolution. Instead, the Russian Revolution would appear as a footnote to the accomplishments of the Soviet system in Western Europe and worldwide. As Lenin observed in his “Letter to the American Workers,” “We [Russians] are now, as it were, in a besieged fortress, waiting for the other detachments of the world socialist revolution to come to our relief.”

With the revolutionary period temporarily snubbed out by the mid-1920s after the defeat of revolution in Germany, Italy, and Hungary, and the physical destruction of the Bolshevik’s

working class base, a new internationalism took hold in Stalin’s Bolshevik Party. In Latin America this new internationalism, consolidated in the Popular Front policy of the Seventh Congress of the Comintern, was in reality a combination of two nationalisms: an “anti-imperialist” nationalism which consisted of subordination to the national bourgeoisie, and a Russian nationalism which entailed subordination to the directives of the Soviet-dominated Comintern.

In 1934, the Mexican Communist Party was still holding on to its ultra-left sectarianism against the government and other Left forces. Lazaro Cadenas’ ascendancy to presidency of Mexico in that same year thus proved disorienting to a party accustomed to illegality and ritual denunciations of their “social-fascist” government. His presidency marked a sharp reversal in government policy on a plethora of issues; a turn back to the Left after years of right-wing leadership of the post-revolutionary Mexican government. During his presidency Cardenas ran afoul of the U.S., pursued agrarian reform, granted concessions to labor, promoted socialist educational programs, nationalized the oil, and legalized the Communist Party, ending 6 years of persecution.105 Even after it had become evident that the tides had turned in their favor under Cardenas, the party hesitated to change their approach, holding on to the sectarian approach that both their experience under previous presidencies and the Third Period ideology of the Comintern seemed to confirm. During the struggle for power between Cardenas and Calles in 1935, they put forward the slogan, “Neither with Cardenas nor with Calles; with the Cardenista masses,” which largely equated the politics of these two leaders.106 In an internal document from August of 1935, a party member offered a scathing criticism of Cardenas’ socialist education program. The writer argues that, "[t]his program with its 'radical' appearances is intended to

make the National Revolutionary Party, which had rapidly been losing the confidence of the masses, 'revolutionary.' It is intended to check the growing disillusionment among the masses, and among the younger generation in particular, in the ‘Mexican Revolution.’” 107 The author continues, citing the program’s focus on societal ills such as religion and alcoholism rather than capitalism, as representing the ultimately “fascist” agenda of the bourgeoisie and the large landowners. 108

This sectarian attitude did not win the Communist Party many allies among workers and peasants who generally professed enthusiastic support for the popular and progressive Cardenista programs. With a weak capitalist class and a largely unorganized peasantry and working class, Mexico’s government was directed by competing layers of the petit-bourgeoisie during the 1920s and 1930s, fueling the intense zig-zags to the left and right which characterized the period. In this context, “Cardenismo represented the most radical expression of the revolutionary potentials of the petit-bourgeois layer that had risen during the revolution as the hegemonic sector inside the new revolutionary government.” 109 For the first year of Cardenas’ presidency, the PCM refused to grasp the significant shift to the left in the ruling party. The PCM would not, however, alienate itself from Cardenas much longer. Only months after labeling the machinations of the Cardenas’ government as “fascist,” the Mexican Communists would reverse their line completely, giving significant political support to Cardenas and the National Revolutionary Party government in the name of building an “anti-imperialist united front.” 110 At the end of a speech at an anti-war convention hosted by the Communist Party of the United States of America in Cleveland in 1936, Hernan Laborde, the general secretary of the PCM, demonstrated this new

108 Ibid.
line, proclaiming: “¡Todo el pueblo con Cardenas! ¡Todo el pueblo contra callismo reaccionario!
Todos latino-americanos con México! ¡Toda América Latina contra el imperialismo!”

This about-face derived from the new perspectives developed in the Seventh Congress of the Communist International. Recognizing the growing threat of war against the Soviet Union and the explosion of fascist power in Europe, the Comintern reoriented the whole Communist movement to prepare for the defense of the Soviet Union. The new strategy of the “Popular Front” shifted the Communist Parties from sectarian ultra-leftism to rank opportunism astoundingly quickly. The main report to the Conference, drafted by Georgi Dimitrov, instructed all Communist Parties to build alliances with all anti-fascist forces to stymy the growing fascist threat and move capitalist governments towards alliance with the Soviet government against the fascists.112 Simultaneously, the Comintern argued that Communists in colonial and semi-colonial countries needed to unify with their “national reformists” in the struggle against imperialism.113 The Popular Front then in form appeared to be a reembrace of the United Front perspective outlined by the Comintern of the first Four Congresses. In content, however, the Popular Front rejected the essence of the United Front; the struggle for hegemony in the working class through concrete action. Instead, the Popular Front in practice mandated a subordination to bourgeois and petit-bourgeois forces. Inside Europe, the Comintern argued that the struggle for socialism must wait until the defeat of fascism, a theory most notably (and disastrously) followed in Spain.114 Outside of Europe, the struggle for socialism must wait until the development of capitalism, thus

113 Ibid., 367.
requiring the Communists to support the “progressive” national-bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{115}

Alejandro Martinez Cambero, a theoretician of the PCM, summarized this logic behind the PCM’s strategic orientation: “The objective and subjective conditions in which we find ourselves do not permit the immediate inauguration of socialism in Mexico. Have the productive forces in our country developed to the point that a break with those capitalist relations of production that currently exist is both necessary and possible? We think not.”\textsuperscript{116} Such statements represented a sharp break from the very politics which helped to form the Mexican Communist Party in the first place. The hallmark of the Bolshevik contribution to Marxist theory and the component of the Russian Revolution which made revolutionary socialism imminently appealing to radicals in Latin America was the repudiation of the “stage theory” which dominated Marxist theory during the period of the Second International. In this conception, the development of society followed a linear path from feudalism to capitalism to socialism: Only in the advanced capitalist countries was socialism an immediate possibility since the working class could only run society with developed forces of production.

In practice this theory created two primary results: a passivity or waiting for the objective seizure of power by the working class, and a sharp prioritization of the most-developed Western European countries in conceiving the transition to socialism. The key flaw in the stage theory, which the Bolshevik leader Nikolai Bukharin recognized in 1925 before his move to the Right, was that it ignored the totality of world social relations. The productive forces of capitalism, though uneven, were fully developed and “ripe” for socialist revolution on a world-scale, laying

\textsuperscript{116} Alejandro Martinez Cambero, “Perspectivas del socialismo en Mexico,” \textit{La Voz de Mexico}, 25 November 1945, 7.
the ground for socialist revolution even in under-developed countries.\textsuperscript{117} Leon Trotsky systematized this analysis with his theory of combined and uneven development which demonstrated how the unevenness of material development in the age of imperialism allowed underdeveloped countries to “pass over” the bourgeois or democratic revolution and move directly into socialist revolution.\textsuperscript{118} With these developments in Marxist praxis, revolutionary socialism procured a truly international audience for the first time in its history. Instead of waiting passively for the heroic working class of the West to liberate them, workers and peasants in the colonized and underdeveloped nations were for the first time seen as active agents of their own liberation. Communist Parties arose across Latin America precisely because so many were inspired by this vision of the potentially imminent transition to socialism worldwide. Starting in 1927 with the elaboration of the theory of the “bloc of four classes” and consolidated during the popular front period, the theory of stages and political subordination to the national bourgeoisie pushed socialist revolution in Latin America to an undetermined point in the future.\textsuperscript{119} In this theoretical context, the Mexican Communist Party marched inexorably towards uncritical support for Cardenas, encapsulated in their slogan “Unity at All Costs.”\textsuperscript{120}

Initially, however, the switch from Third Period radicalism to Popular Frontism greatly benefitted the Mexican Communist Party, at least superficially. Acting as the Left face of the Mexican Revolution, the PCM garnered its highest ever membership numbers, played a key role in the formation of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (Confederación de Trabajadores de Mexico, CTM) which unified the Mexican labor movement, greatly expanded its sale of “El


\textsuperscript{120} Manuel Aguilar Mora, \textit{La Crisis de la Izquierda en México: Orígenes y Desarrollo}, 69.
Machete,” systematically fought off the insurrectionary right, linked up with political refugees from the Spanish Civil War, led the socialist education movement, and pressured the Cardenas government into direct conflict with U.S. imperialism and Mexican capital.121 The Cardenas period fostered a mass labor upsurge which provided fertile ground for Communist expansion and consolidation. In particular, the Communist Party built an important base among the agricultural workers of the Laguna region and established a significant base among teachers’, representing over 30% of their total membership in the late 1930s.122 Strong Communist presence in the rural schools allowed teachers to inculcate peasant youth with radical ideas such as anti-clericalism, sex education, indigenous pride, class consciousness, and practical skills.123 Exemplifying their approach, the Marxist historian Luis Chavez Orozco and other radicals produced textbooks which, “…portrayed Mexican history as a constant struggle of the oppressed masses against the capitalist classes, imperialist interlopers, and the Roman Catholic Church.”124 These interventions in the schools expanded the Party’s influence far beyond its official membership, and positioned the Party into direct conflict with the far-right and the Church which held great strength in the countryside.

Ultimately though, the party was far weaker than it appeared at first glance, and the latent weaknesses in this period would ultimately come to a head by the turn of the decade. In 1939, the Party reported an inflated total membership of between 30,000 and 35,000, but the organization’s collection of dues was exceedingly low.125 At the same time, the PCM maintained a high rate of membership turnover and generally failed to fully integrate its members in an era

121 Carr, Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico, 47-48
122 Ibid., 52, 57.
124 Ibid., 241.
125 Carr, Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico, 51.
of relatively rapid recruitment. By 1939, the party was entering a protracted crisis. The crisis of organization was compounded by three issues which culminated in the calling of an Extraordinary Congress: the relationship between the Party, Lombardo Toledano, and the Cardenas government, the response to Trotsky, and the shifting politics of the Comintern.

During the Cardenas presidency, Toledano had established himself as an important Marxist intellectual with influence among significant layers within the working class while maintaining an independence from the Communist Party. During these years, relations between the Party and Toledano were typically cold and often hostile, culminating in a brief split between the Lombardistas in the Communists in the CTM. Quickly, the CPUSA, even more unwaveringly committed to the Popular Front policy than the PCM, forced the Party to smooth out relations with Toledano. In a confidential memo, a leader in the CPUSA blamed the split fully on the PCM, declaring that it was a result of “…certain dangerous left-sectarian tendencies within the leadership of the Mexican Party.” Though the split was temporarily resolved, Mexican Party leadership grew increasingly disgruntled over the present situation. Hernan Laborde privately began expressing even deeper concerns with the PCM’s application of the Popular Front, questioning whether they should continue to fully subordinate themselves to the National Revolutionary Party and Cardenas.

Another factor fueling the crisis was the Party’s handling of Trotsky. After Trotsky’s expulsion from the Bolshevik Party, Stalin continually ramped up anti-Trotskyist rhetoric and campaigns to snuff out a Left challenge to his rule and maintain an unchallenged ideological

126 Ibid., 52.
127 Manuel Aguilar Mora, La Crisis de la Izquierda en México: Orígenes y Desarrollo, 68.
129 Ibid.
hegemony in Russia and in all of the Communist Parties. This factionalism became more and more violent when Stalin increasingly invoked the specter of Trotskyism to encourage the imprisonment and executions of his perceived political rivals in the Soviet Union. This process reached its absurd height during the Moscow Show Trials which saw a majority of the original leaders of the Bolshevik Party during the revolution found guilty of outlandish crimes such as Trotskyist wrecking, which in nearly all cases led to summary execution. Given the constant threat of violence against Trotsky and his followers, Trotsky was forced into hiding, shifting countries often. Finally, Trotsky, with the aid of Diego Rivera, gained the sympathy of Cardenas himself and took residence in Mexico. Firmly anti-Trotskyist, the Mexican Communist Party acted concertedly to have Trotsky deported. Railing against Trotsky’s “fascist” beliefs and declaring his followers the, “…fifth column in the revolutionary movement,” the Communist Party literature of the period presented universally scathing critiques of him and his residence in Mexico. There was no disagreement in the Party that Trotsky needed to be politically opposed. However, sections of the leadership did not want to orchestrate, as Stalin wished, the murder of Trotsky out of fear, particularly of harming their relationship with Cardenas.

And finally, tensions grew in the Party over the sharp shifts in policy of the Soviet Union nearing the Second World War. The Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 shocked Communists across the world who had spent years pursuing any tactic in order to combat fascism. The short-lived pact threw the legitimacy of Communist politics into doubt generally and sparked fundamental

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questions about the Popular Front policy which had guided the Parties for years but would have to be abandoned if the Nazis and the Communists maintained good terms.\textsuperscript{135}

In this context of stagnation and growing political discontent in the Mexican Communist Party, the Comintern delegation in Mexico, led by Victorio Codovilla, intervened decisively by calling an Extraordinary Congress in 1939. Before the Congress itself, the delegation led a “house cleaning” to expel “…Trotskyites, chambistas, and dishonest elements…” in the Party.\textsuperscript{136} The Congress itself led to even more extraordinary measures. Though the proceedings of the Congress itself are still generally shrouded in a layer of secrecy, it ultimately culminated in the expulsion of the majority of the existing Party leadership.\textsuperscript{137} The Comintern cleared house, leaving little more to see. Staggering from hundreds of expulsions, the party continued its drift to the Right, extending its slogan of “Unity at all Costs” to support for the candidacy of Avila Camacho in 1940.\textsuperscript{138} In August of 1940, the successful assassination of Trotsky by a Comintern agent brought direct criticism from Cardenas himself onto the Party.\textsuperscript{139} A year later, the Party, according to its own figures, had declined 800\% in membership.\textsuperscript{140}

The Camacho years were marked by growing anti-Communism, a sharp shift to the Right of the course of the Mexican Revolution, and conscious rejection on the part of the government of the legacy of Cardenas. In the meantime, the devastated Communist Party concentrated its energies in trying to convince the government to enter the Second World War on the Soviet side. From the Extraodinary Congress until 1943, the Party accomplished little besides another purge led by the new, ineffectual, general secretary of the Party, Dionisio Encima, which destroyed

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{135} Ibid. 109.
\bibitem{136} Carr, \textit{Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico}. 71.
\bibitem{137} Ibid., 77.
\bibitem{139} Carr, \textit{Marxism and Communism in Twentieth-Century Mexico}, 78
\bibitem{140} Ibid. 79.
\end{thebibliography}
whole working class cells of the Party. By the time the Communist International was dissolved in May of 1943, the Party was in great disarray.\textsuperscript{141} Twenty years after the birth of Communism in Mexico, the PCM was relegated to a significantly weakened state. It would be another 20 years before Communism came in vogue again in Mexico, but it ultimately resembled much more closely the blind Communism of the 1940s than the prophetic Communism of the 1920s.

Conclusion

The experience of the Mexican Communist Party in its first two decades encapsulates both the appeals and the dangers of proletarian internationalism. At the Communist International’s foundation, it was motivated by a renewed sense of internationalism birthed out of the struggle against the First World War and for socialist revolution in Russia. The Bolshevik Party saw Communism as a necessarily international vision and recognized that their project was doomed if the revolution did not spread across borders. On the other hand, radicals looked to Russia in their millions out of an internationalist impulse, seeing the key to their own struggles. The Comintern confirmed their internationalism by bringing in Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans into the Marxist movement systematically for the first time. Mexican radicals, like radicals of many other countries, heard the call.

The internationalism of these days in Mexico comprised a number of aspects. The fundamental idea behind proletarian internationalism is that working people of all countries have a common interest, and that that common interest can only find its fruition within international socialist revolution. The practice of Communist internationalism in time created new meanings. To be an internationalist meant, to be in the Comintern. With the Comintern came its agents who helped to guide, and at times, misguide, the Communist Parties. But the construction of internationalism did not only take place within the halls of the Communist International or the pronouncements of its agents.

The Mexican Communist Party put forward its own contributions to internationalism. In its first days, the internationalism of the PCM was peculiar and, in some respects, problematic. The Indian nationalist turned Communist, M.N. Roy, and a number of U.S. draft dodgers played
a leading role in the formation of the Party. In these first years, the Party could not build strong roots in large part due to this unintended drawback to its internationalism. Though the Communists in Mexico struggled to build roots initially, they regrouped by 1921 with a Mexican leadership and an eye towards building concrete organization among the working class and the peasantry under the Comintern’s United Front policy. At the same time, the Mexican Communists looked closer to home, establishing connections with the Communist Party of the United States and the newly forming Communist Parties in Latin America. Here they offered a unique contribution in the form of Pan-Americanism. The Mexican Communists argued that the only way to defeat U.S. imperialism in the region was to unify working people across Latin America and even in the United States itself, a concept which would form the core of the Cuban Revolution. La Liga Antiimperialista created the first real expression of radical Pan-American consciousness. The struggles of the Mexican Communist Party helped put radicalism in Latin America on the map of Communists worldwide.

Unfortunately, the golden period of proletarian internationalism proved short. The crisis in the Soviet working class allowed Stalinism to take hold, leading to authoritarian bureaucratization and the resurrection of class in Soviet society. The degeneration of the Russian Revolution reverberated throughout the world, spreading a new internationalism in the name of the old. Stalin and the bureaucracy reverted back to a Eurocentric analysis of the world revolutionary process, upholding the old “stages” theory of revolution which the Russian Revolution itself disproved. This change in theory proved profoundly significant throughout the underdeveloped world. The designation of the key task of these Communist Parties as aiding their national bourgeoisies in a “bourgeois-democratic” or “national-democratic” revolution pushed these parties uniformly towards a policy of class collaborationism and often-time

142 “Bolshevizacion,” 2 February 1928, CA, Fond 495, Opis’ 108, Reel 10, File 86.
explicitly counter-revolutionary policies. This new internationalism represented a defense of the Soviet Union by the member countries of the Comintern at all costs.

The inauguration of the “Third Period” marked the first step in this faux-internationalism, wrecking the Mexican Communist Party’s hard-built roots in the working classes. Following the directives of the Comintern and its agents, the Mexican Communist Party chose to give up its independence repeatedly, with disastrous roots again and again. Without regards to the national conditions of Mexico, the Comintern imposed a shift from the ultra-leftism of the Third Period to ultra-opportunism under the Popular Front. The Party moved away from its knee-jerk internationalism of its early days and towards an unflinching Mexican nationalism. With the ultimate aim of proletarian internationalism, the Mexican Communist Party gave itself over willingly to both Russian nationalism, and by directive, Mexican nationalism. This unquestioned internationalism laid the groundwork for the crisis of the 1940s and the increasing marginalization of Communism in the national consciousness. The force which had helped the Mexican Communist orient themselves and grow politically, ultimately dealt the biggest blow against it during the Extraordinary Congress in 1939, when the agents of the Comintern summarily expelled the party’s long-time leadership and hundreds of its cadre. The experience of the Mexican Communist Party thus demonstrates how proletarian internationalism was weaponized and crafted into a tool not for the overthrow of world capitalism, but for the perpetuation of Soviet foreign policy interests.

The dissolution of the Communist International in 1943 functions as a formal end to an organization which in content had ceased to function for its original aims in 1927. At its foundation, the leaders of the Comintern believed that their organization would only disband once their ultimate goal had been accomplished: world Communist revolution and the end of
class society itself. In reality, the capitalist world had not fundamentally changed; only the
Communist world had. The Communists themselves did more damage to proletarian
internationalism than the capitalist class ever could. But, despite all that history has thrown up to
obscure the roots of internationalism, with a machete, it is still possible to find it.
Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


