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New Revolutionary Agenda: The Interwar Japanese Left on the “Chinese Revolution”

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Abstract

To achieve socialist revolutions in Asia, the Third Communist International (Comintern) recommended to Asian revolutionaries the strategy of a united front comprising the proletariat and the national bourgeoisie, which would prioritize the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle. The early Japanese Communist Party (JCP) (1922–1926) resisted this recommendation, which lumped together colonized India and semi-colonized China with the only empire in Asia, Japan. The JCP insisted on the priority of the domestic national struggle, arguing that without toppling the imperial government at home by means of a socialist revolution, there could be no dismantling of Japanese imperialism and therefore no Chinese Revolution. After the outbreak of Japanese aggression in China in 1927 (the first Shantung intervention in May of that year) and the rise of popular nationalist support for the empire at home, members of the Japanese Left recognized that they had failed to properly engage with Japanese imperialism in Asia. Based on Comintern archives and the writings of leading Japanese Communists, this article argues that, as a strategy to rebrand and redeem itself in the new critical situation in Asia, the Japanese Left began to regard the Chinese Revolution as the only path to liberation, not only for Asia but for Japan as well.

Keywords: Japanese Communism, Chinese Revolution, Comintern, Japanese imperialism

Introduction

The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) was established in the summer of 1922 in the midst of the ongoing Russian Revolution, Russian Civil War (1918–1922), and Foreign Intervention into the Revolution, which included Japanese interventionist forces (White 1950; Ullman 1961). With the aim of expanding its formal and informal control over the territories formerly under the Russian imperial sphere of influence, Japan deployed considerable armed forces to the Russian Far East, eastern Siberia, and northern Manchuria between January 1918 and 1925.¹ Consequently, the Russian Bolsheviks viewed imperial Japan as a major threat to the survival of the Soviet state and the world proletarian revolution, most importantly in China and Mongolia, and regarded the struggle against Japanese imperialism as the main objective of the Communist movement in East Asia. The Russian Bolsheviks

hoped that Japan, as the only industrially advanced country in Asia, would be a receptive environment for a Communist and anti-imperialist revolution because the Japanese proletariat—“the best organized and strongest force” among the Eastern countries—would strike “the first decisive blow against foreign and predatory imperialism and imperialist coercion.”² At the same time, the Russian Bolsheviks offered ideological and financial support to Korean and Chinese national liberation movements against Japanese imperialism, and encouraged revolutionary networks between Japanese and Asian radicals. Intent on escalating such movements into a world revolution, the Soviet government created the Third Communist International (Comintern) in March 1919, which became instrumental in establishing Communist parties in Japan in 1921–1922, China and Outer Mongolia in 1921, and Korea in 1925.

The fact that the JCP was officially created as a Comintern branch has led historians, both inside and outside of Japan, to argue that the JCP depended from the start on Comintern instructions, which were not, however, based on adequate knowledge of Japanese society and history. Japanese historians explained the collapse of the prewar Japanese Communist movement by referring to Japan’s initial lack of independent Marxist theorists and experienced domestic agitators. Consequently, they argued, the Communist movement failed to develop indigenous roots, remained alien to Japanese society, and did not succeed in organizing a significant resistance to the authoritarian state.³ This opinion was echoed by Soviet scholars, who used to point out that, given the low level of societal development and paucity of socialist thought in Japan, the establishment of the JCP in 1922 might have been premature (Kovalenko 1979). Western scholars have also described the creation of the JCP as a case of forced importation of revolution from Soviet Russia, with the JCP functioning as an obedient subsidiary of the Comintern. Political scientist Robert Scalapino has argued that the ideological heterogeneity of JCP members and their immaturity as “true Marxist-Leninists,” combined with the ignorance among Soviet and Comintern authorities regarding the situation in Japan, resulted in the collapse of Japan’s Communist movement (Scalapino 1967; Swearingen 1968; Beckmann and Okubo 1969). Recently, Japanese historians have renewed their interest in the history of the prewar Japanese Left, while moving away from the previous national perspective to the imperial context (Kurokawa 2014). In Anglo-American scholarship, however, the perception that the Left in Japan was theoretically unoriginal and practically insignificant is still prevalent, and thus little work has been done on Japanese leftist thought in recent decades.⁴ The Japanese Communist movement is still treated in

Western scholarship as marginal in comparison to the liberal-democratic movements of the interwar period.



Figure 1. Group of young Japanese socialists. Yamakawa Hitoshi is in the upper row, third from left. *Source*: Nihon Kindaishi Kenkyūkai (1964, 12:44).

But a close look at Russian Comintern archives and the writings of the JCP's main theoretician, Yamakawa Hitoshi (1880–1958), suggests that, in fact, the early JCP (1922–1926) retained a degree of independence from the Comintern (figure 1). Early Japanese Communists concluded that the Russian model of socialist revolution was not applicable to Japan's conditions and therefore resisted the Comintern's guidance, which, they rightly suspected, was tailored for semi-colonial China and unsuitable to the conditions in imperial Japan. By tracing the evolution of the JCP's agendas of the early and late 1920s, I demonstrate that, despite the Comintern's instructions to prioritize the anti-imperialist struggle, the early JCP had a different understanding of the nature and goals of their social and political struggle. The Japanese Communists sought to engage with the national capitalist and political system in order to bring about social and moral regeneration as well as economic and political justice—but in the metropole rather than in the colonies. In other

words, they maintained that the Japanese Revolution should take precedence over revolutions in the Asian colonial and semi-colonial world. However, in the late 1920s the JCP's revolutionary priorities changed, in part due to the departure from the JCP of its early theoretician Yamakawa, and in part because of Japan's growing commitment to imperialism on the Asian continent. Assistance to the Chinese Revolution—one of the Comintern's main international slogans—emerged in 1927 as the primary objective of the JCP. Faced with the new critical situation in Asia, the Japanese Left began to regard China and the Chinese Revolution as the only path for liberation, not only of Asia but of Japan as well.

The Comintern's View on Japan

The Comintern exhibited an ambivalent attitude toward Japan. Traditionally Asian, with a large agrarian sector and imperial institutions, Japan was also industrially developed, had never been colonized, and was the biggest imperialist threat to the Soviet Union. The Comintern's difficulties in assessing the nature and degree of Japan's capitalist development stemmed largely from the fact that Japan was regarded by the Bolsheviks simultaneously as an *imperialist* country, on par with advanced Western countries, and as a *semi-feudal* state with an Asiatic despot as its head. At the Fourth Comintern Congress in November 1922, a Comintern Commission on Japan concluded that the Meiji Revolution of 1868 was an incomplete bourgeois revolution, and that “Japanese capitalism still demonstrates characteristics of the former feudal relationships. The greater part of the land is today in the hands of semifeudal big landlords, and the biggest of all is the emperor.”⁵

The conclusion that Japan was a backward and semi-feudal country enabled the Comintern to propose virtually the same strategy for Japan, India, and China, Japan's clearly superior economic development notwithstanding. The Comintern thus envisioned that the completion of a bourgeois revolution would be the first necessary step, which would result in the emergence of a sufficiently powerful proletariat and revolutionary peasantry. Only after the bourgeois revolution was complete, and the bourgeoisie had established its domination, would a proletarian revolution aimed at the realization of proletarian dictatorship be in order. Known as the two-stage revolution, this model presupposed the revolutionary character of the bourgeoisie and its leading role in the upcoming revolution in Japan. It was also expected that, in Japan as well as in China and India, the first stage would involve collaboration of all other “oppressed” classes with bourgeois revolutionaries, and that this would take the form of a united anti-imperialist front. The policy, therefore, assumed corresponding interests among

proletarian, peasant, and national-bourgeois classes. Once the Japanese bourgeoisie was in power, the Comintern hoped, Japanese imperialism—a product of the military, big landowners, and semi-feudal Asiatic absolutism—would crumble. In other words, in the eyes of the Comintern, the JCP's task was to reinforce the Japanese peoples' and workers' opposition to Japanese imperialism and to cooperate with the Japanese progressive bourgeoisie in the promotion of democracy and the anti-imperialist struggle.⁶

Furthermore, the Comintern's position was that in the colonial and semi-colonial world—to which Japan belonged, in the Comintern's somewhat convoluted view—no socialist revolution would succeed without the destruction of the colonial system in the region as a whole. In the Comintern's understanding, the domestic revolutionary struggle of the Japanese socialists would therefore need to go hand in hand with their struggle against Japanese imperialism in Korea and China. In a letter dated May 27, 1920, Sebald Rutgers, a high-profile Comintern member, remarked to the Japanese socialist Sugiyama Shōzō that Japanese socialists must collaborate with Chinese socialists and assist them in their anti-Japanese struggle. Rutgers insisted that the task of the Japanese socialists was to prevent the spread of Japanese imperialism by creating a united front with Chinese activists (Yamanouchi 2009, 133). Indeed, there were numerous leftist organizations, such as the Socialist League (Shakaishugi Dōmei, 1920–1921) and the Cosmo Club (1920–1923), that provided a platform for Chinese, Korean, and Japanese leftist radicals and students to meet and collaborate. But as historian Ishikawa Yoshihiro has pointed out, it was Chinese and Korean anti-imperialist socialists, rather than Japanese Communists, that forced issues of Japanese imperialism and national liberation to the forefront of Japanese domestic leftist debates (Ishikawa 2013, chap. 1). The issue of anti-imperialist struggle was therefore borne out of the cooperation with the Asian radicals, whose role in the internationalist character of the JCP has long been overlooked.

Yamakawa Hitoshi on the First Tasks of the JCP

From the start, Japanese Communists challenged the Comintern's proposal for a unified course of action for China and Japan (Kishimoto and Koyama 1962). Yamakawa Hitoshi's understanding of Japanese political and economic development provided the theoretical grounds for such a challenge and had far-reaching implications for the JCP's revolutionary strategy at home and in Japan's colonies. Concerned with understanding the logic of the capitalist development of the Japanese state and society, Yamakawa in the end

rejected the view that foreign capitalism was superimposed on the internal contradictions of Japanese feudalism. In his view, the country's internal trajectory of economic development would provide solutions to Japanese imperialism abroad. Yamakawa claimed that the Meiji Revolution was in fact a bourgeois revolution, which had been already completed by the great capitalist development in Japan during World War I. His disagreement with the Comintern's view of the incompleteness of the Meiji Revolution, and his subsequent insistence on the existing political and economic domination of the powerful capitalist class in Japan, was the beginning of a decade-long debate about the nature of that event, culminating in the late 1920s in a series of seminal debates over Japanese capitalism (*Nihon shihonshugi ronsō*).

Yamakawa outlined his perspective in the *Manifesto of the Preparatory Committee of the JCP* (April 1921) and in the *Program of the Communist Party of Japan* (September 1922). In the 1921 *Manifesto*, Yamakawa proclaimed that the Meiji Revolution of 1868 was a bourgeois-democratic revolution, and that it had laid the foundation for capitalist development in Japan. He observed that, particularly after World War I, Japanese industry and trade were growing steadily, the bourgeoisie were gaining more economic and political power, and the country was moving surely toward greater democratization based on its rapid capitalist development. The new bourgeois generation began to demand more political rights and to break with existing bureaucratic-military political structures. In the aftermath of the Great War, Yamakawa argued, a modern capitalist state was finally coming into existence in Japan, bringing with it the completion of the bourgeois democratic revolution. In his scheme, the imperial institution, military, big landlords, and oligarchy were merely “feudal remnants” (Yamakawa [1920] 1967e, 2:159). Therefore, Yamakawa insisted, the primary task of the JCP was to foment a proletarian revolution that would overthrow the capitalist system at home. He remarks in the *Program*: “The Communist Party [of Japan] takes upon itself the task of organizing these proletarian masses into a powerful fighting body, leading them on to the Proletarian Revolution—the seizure of political power and system of production in the hands of the proletariat.”⁷ Yamakawa here explicitly rejects the two-stage revolution thesis offered by the Comintern, rightly suspecting that the Soviet leadership had merely exported its plans for China to Japan. Instead, he called for a one-stage proletarian revolution that would “establish the Proletarian Dictatorship based on the Soviet of the workers, peasants and soldiers.” His one-stage revolution implied that the main target of the Japanese proletarian struggle was the modern Japanese bourgeoisie. Yamakawa completely rejected

the Comintern's proposal of a united front and declared that any collaboration or cooperation—even with the progressive bourgeoisie—would be detrimental to the Japanese proletariat. He pointed out that even the well-meaning leaders of the universal suffrage movement, Yoshino Sakuzō and Ōyama Ikuo, who claimed to represent the interests of the whole nation, did not understand the antagonistic class nature of society—the continuous oppression of one class by the other. In his view, the cooperation (*kyōdō*) of national interests, which Yoshino was hoping for, really meant the interests of only one class: the bourgeoisie (Yamakawa [1922] 1967b).

Furthermore, Yamakawa pointed out, it was the bourgeoisie that, in tandem with the military, had pushed for imperialism abroad (Yamakawa [1920] 1967a). Noting the entanglement of capitalism, imperialism, and militarism, Yamakawa argued that big business and the military had carefully orchestrated popular nationalist and patriotic sentiments among the masses, and that the proliferation of such sentiments had enabled Japanese capitalist imperialism to carry out its objectives. Addressing the issue of anti-Korean sentiments among Japanese workers during the economic recession in the post–World War I period, when many Korean laborers were hired in Japan, albeit at lower wages than those for Japanese, Yamakawa called for a union of the Japanese and Korean proletariat against the Japanese and Korean capitalist class. He appealed to Japanese workers to abandon their prejudices and nationalism, and to embrace Koreans as their brothers, because Japanese, Korean, and Chinese masses were all victims of the Japanese capitalist imperialist state (Yamakawa [1922] 1967b, 4:280, 356–376).

However, Yamakawa was highly suspicious of what he perceived as virulent Korean nationalism, which he felt was not in sync with internationalist and modern socialist movements. In the *JCP Program* of 1922, he remarks:

The most infamous of all the crimes of Japanese imperialism has been the annexation of Korea and the enslavement of the Korean People. The Communist Party of Japan not only condemns this act but is taking every available step for the emancipation of Korea. The majority of the Korean patriots, fighting for the independence of Korea, is not free from the bourgeois ideology and nationalist prejudices. It is necessary that we act in cooperation with them—necessary not only for the victory of the Korean Revolution but also for winning them over to our Communist principles.⁸

Yamakawa maintained that the Korean national independence movement should abandon its aim of national liberation and instead rise up against Korea's own capitalist class under the guidance of the more progressive Japanese socialist movement (Yamakawa [1933] 1967d,

6:259–260).⁹ Years later, Yamakawa would argue that the Chinese Revolution, too, had a major flaw, namely that it was driven by nationalist rather than proletarian aims.¹⁰ Japan, on the other hand, as the only modernized country in Asia, possessed an industrial proletariat that had attained an advanced level of proletarian and internationalist class consciousness. Therefore, he argued, the Japanese socialist movement alone was capable of leading and representing other colonial workers. Yamakawa did not see himself or the Japanese people as aggressors against Korea and China, since he did not identify the Japanese masses with the imperial state.

The primary goal of the JCP, as Yamakawa envisioned it, was the dismantling of the capitalist system and the imperial government at home by means of a socialist revolution. This implied, however, that the anti-imperialist struggle in the colonies was a matter of secondary importance. In other words, for Yamakawa there could be no Chinese Revolution without a Japanese Revolution first (Nomura 1970). He firmly believed that the proletarian struggle in Japan must be independent from and not subsidiary to the revolution in China or Europe. The Japanese proletariat, he argued, must formulate its own goals and fight for its own demands. Despite the Comintern's early call to prioritize the anti-imperialist struggle in Japan and East Asia, under Yamakawa's guidance Japanese socialists insisted on the priority of the domestic national struggle, which they believed would eventually benefit all of colonized Asia. The downside of this position, however, was a certain indifference on the part of the early JCP regarding the question of imperialism and the role of Japan's empire in Asia.

The Reorganization of the Party and the 1927 Theses on Japan

In June 1923, the police arrested more than one hundred socialists and members of the JCP. Thirty party members, including Yamakawa in 1924, were brought to trial under the Public Peace Police Law. Yamakawa's case was dismissed for lack of evidence, but the other men were found guilty and received sentences from eight to ten months in length. Another blow to the Japanese socialist movement occurred in the aftermath of the Great Kantō Earthquake of September 1, 1923, which killed around 120,000 people. In the ensuing chaos, Japanese army reservists and civilian volunteers murdered several thousand Korean and Chinese residents in a kind of pogrom fueled by rumors that the Koreans and Chinese, aided by Japanese anarchists, were burning houses, killing people, and stealing money and property. The murders accomplished by the working-class mob sent shock waves among

Japanese socialists, forcing them to reconsider the readiness of the Japanese proletariat for an internationalist socialist revolution. Adding to the shock were the murders of a number of known leftists, including the anarchist Ōsugi Sakae, by the military police. At a meeting on October 22, 1923, the remaining members of the JCP, demoralized by the arrests, murders, and general devastation of the city, decided to disband the party. In March 1924, members of the JCP who managed to escape to Vladivostok and Shanghai established the foreign bureau of the Japanese Communist party in Vladivostok, which acted as an intermediary between Moscow and the remaining Communists in Japan.¹¹



Figure 2. The early JCP on trial, February 17, 1925. *Source:* Nihon Kindaishi Kenkyūkai (1964, 13:60).

The first reaction of the Comintern to the disbandment of the JCP was issued not by the Moscow headquarters but by Grigory Voitinsky (1893–1953), head of the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern in Shanghai between 1920 and 1927 (figure 2). In the so-called *Shanghai Theses* of 1925, Voitinsky criticized the JCP's decision to ignore the Comintern's recommendations, thus missing an opportunity to launch a broad anti-imperialist movement in tandem with Chinese revolutionaries. On the other hand, Voitinsky had some criticism for the Comintern's headquarters in Moscow, too. He urged the Comintern decision makers to distinguish between conditions in China and Japan, and to modify their recommendations accordingly. He declared that Japanese capitalism had reached its ultimate stage and that its emerging crisis would soon establish preconditions for a proletarian revolution.¹² In other

words, Voitinsky diverged from the Comintern's vision of a two-stage revolution in Japan and endorsed Yamakawa's call for a Japanese socialist revolution. However, for complicated reasons that had to do with lack of information about the political and economic situation in Japan, the Comintern's commitment to the alliance of the Chinese Communists with the Guomindang nationalists, and an ongoing inner-party struggle within the Russian Communist Party, the Comintern did not pass a new resolution on Japan.

The Comintern's ambivalence in regard to Japan is particularly well reflected in the following incident. In February 1926, at the 6th Enlarged Plenum of the ECCI [the Executive Committee of the Communist International], the Japanese delegation proposed to move Japan to the Anglo-American regional secretariat because, they argued, Japan's conditions were different from those in colonial and semi-colonial countries and more closely resembled the advanced capitalist stage of Western European countries.¹³ The Japanese delegation, led by Kazuo Fukumoto (1894–1983), the new leader of the Japanese Communists, insisted that Japanese capitalism had entered its final stage, characterized by the creation of a fascist dictatorship. However, the Comintern leadership chose to keep Japan under the eastern branch of the Comintern. Voitinsky's suggestions, outlined in the *Shanghai Theses* of 1925, were not taken into consideration.

The Japanese Communist Party was formally reestablished in December 1926. To coordinate the program of the JCP and resolve internal struggles, a delegation of the JCP visited Moscow starting in February–March 1927, where it stayed for approximately six months. In Moscow, a committee on Japan was formed—including Nikolai Bukharin (chairman), C. Kuusinen, Bela Kun, J. T. Murphy, Sen Katayama, O. Piatnitsky, B. Vasiliev, and Karlis Janson—and mandated to write a new program for the reorganized JCP. The JCP issued its official request for a new program in a letter dated June 10, 1927, to Bukharin, a member of the political secretariat of the Comintern and its de facto leader (figure 3). The following is the letter in its entirety:

Dear Comrade Bukharin! Knowing well that you are very busy with many important matters to attend, nevertheless we, on behalf of the CP of Japan, kindly ask you to write the Political Theses on the Japanese question. We make this comradely request because the Theses must lay down the very foundation upon which the CP of Japan shall be established. And, secondly, because the Japanese question is not only very complicated but also closely related to the Chinese question. With Communist greetings, Moscow, June 10, 1927. Sen Katayama, Seki, Y. Kawasaki, Asano, Akita, Chiba, Mori, Kuroki, Yamane.¹⁴

The letter suggests that Japanese Communists recognized the interdependence and, in fact, the priority of the Chinese Revolution for the Japanese socialist movement. Within a month, Bukharin was ready to present his theses—which came to be known as the “1927 Comintern Theses on Japan”—to the Executive Committee of the Comintern. The most curious feature of the *Theses* is that they acknowledged the political and socioeconomic distinction between Japan and China, and between their revolutionary strategies and goals, but still recommended that the JCP prioritize assistance to the Chinese Revolution.

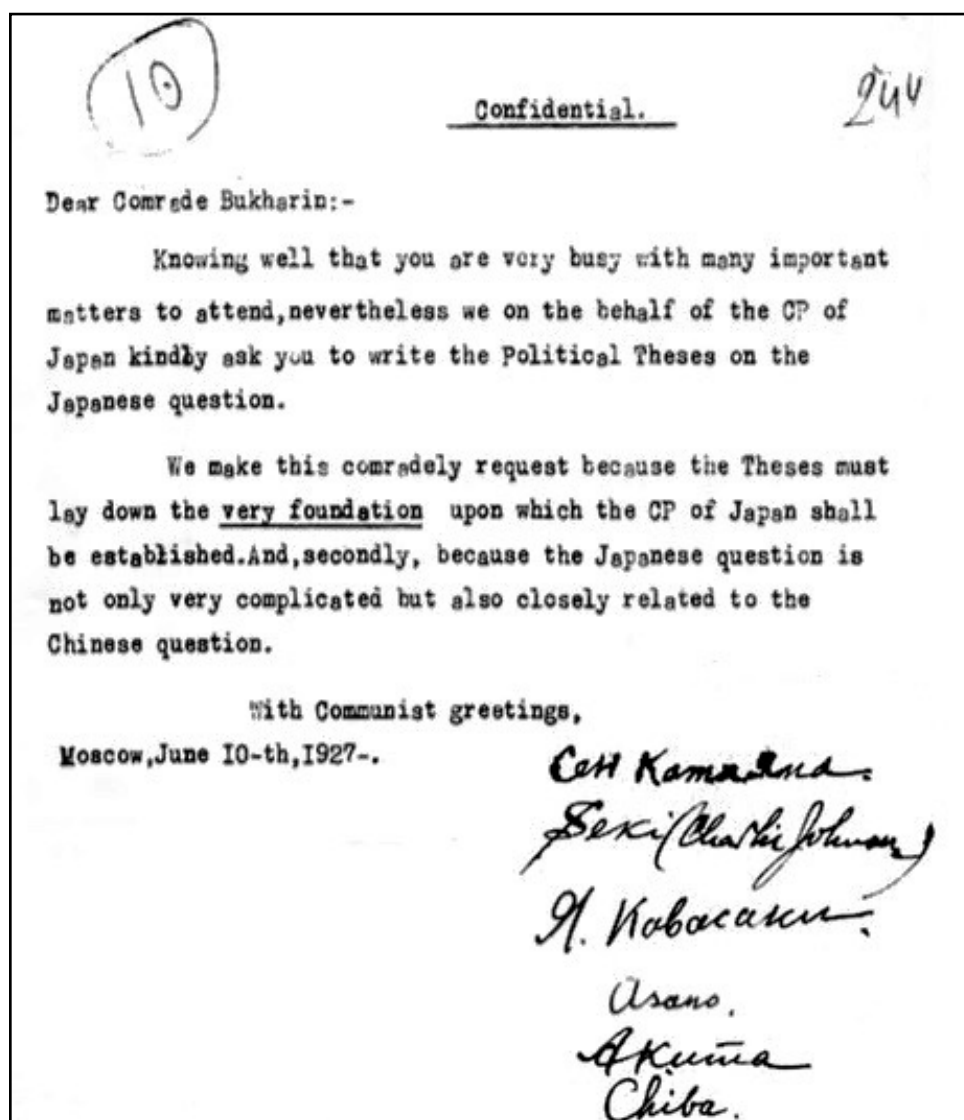


Figure 3. Letter to N. Bukharin from the Japanese Communist delegation, June 10, 1927. *Source:* Adibekov and Wada (2001, 408).

The *Theses* reflected the worsened Soviet-Japanese relations and geopolitical situation in China. The establishment of diplomatic relations between the USSR and Japan in January 1925 to a certain extent lifted the tension in the region, but the relations deteriorated as soon

as the known anti-Communist general Tanaka Gi'ichi was appointed prime minister in April 1927. From that time on, the Soviet leadership began to receive more frequent reports through various channels about Japanese plans to attack the USSR, and also about a new course of the Japanese government aimed at the “unification of the peoples of Asia... against the USSR” (Adibekov and Wada 2001, 20). Japan’s direct involvement in the Chinese Revolution—when it sent military forces to Shantung in May 1927 in order to stop the Chinese Northern Expeditionary forces, led by Guomindang (GMD), further antagonized the Soviets against Japan.

On the other hand, since 1925, the Chinese Revolution had been gaining momentum with anti-Japanese strikes in Shanghai (the May Thirtieth Movement) and anti-British strikes and boycotts in Canton and Hong Kong. In April 1927, the new prime minister, General Tanaka Gi'ichi, initiated an aggressive course in China that would “separate Manchuria and Mongolia,” confirm Japan’s special position in both areas, and prevent the Chinese Revolution from spreading to Manchuria (Hata and Coox 1989, 287). In May 1928, Japanese and Chinese forces clashed at Tsinan (in the so-called Tsinan Incident), and in June 1928 officers of the Kwantung Army assassinated Chang Tso-lin, warlord of Northeast China, paving the way for the future takeover of Manchuria by Japanese forces. In 1931, the Japanese seized all of Manchuria; in January 1932, Japan virtually annexed the Hongkew and Yangtzepoo districts of Shanghai. These were the first salvos in the Sino-Japanese struggle that, in 1937, led to a full-scale Japanese invasion of China.

The Soviet leaders, even more so in 1927, saw in Japanese imperialism an urgent threat to the world revolution and to the Soviet state, so knowledge of Japanese society and the correct interpretation of Japanese imperialism were thrust to the forefront of their concerns. The *1927 Theses on Japan* were designed therefore in accordance with new domestic and international developments, as well as with the practical concerns of the Soviet state. The most important message of the *Theses* was that the main task of the JCP was the struggle against Japanese imperialism in China, on the one hand, and against Japan’s preparation for war against the USSR, on the other. In his speech at the meeting of the Presidium of the ECCI on July 15, 1927, Bukharin articulated the Comintern’s new vision of Japan’s role in East Asia and accordingly formulated the new goal of the JCP. The speech outlined the main points of the *Theses on Japan*, which were adopted the same day.¹⁵ In his speech and in the *Theses*, Bukharin focused on two issues: Japanese imperialism and the nature of the Japanese state. He claimed that Japanese imperialism had a peculiar nature that

made it different from the more familiar Western version. Japanese imperialism, Bukharin argued, was getting stronger and more aggressive largely due to the wide support of the Japanese masses, who were being duped by the government's promises of land and job opportunities for them in mainland China.

The second issue raised by Bukharin in his speech pertained to the nature of the Japanese state. Importantly, Bukharin overturned the Comintern's previous assessment that Japan was a semi-feudal state and that a bourgeois-democratic revolution was consequently in order. Bukharin perceived that the recent rapid growth of capitalism and imperialism had propelled Japan's bourgeoisie to power, and that the country's feudal absolutism had developed into a bourgeois monarchy. Therefore, insistence on a two-stage revolution and a united front with the bourgeoisie was no longer a valid strategy. Bukharin acknowledged that the two-stage revolution tailored for China was being mechanically—and perilously—applied to Japan. In his remarks, he went on to outline the differences between China and Japan. Whereas semi-feudal China still had to go through a bourgeois revolution under the guidance of the national bourgeoisie, develop its industrial proletariat, and actively engage the peasantry, Japan was facing a completely different situation. Japan, Bukharin argued, had all conditions in place for a social coup and a dictatorship of the proletariat. Immediate political takeover, and subsequent building of socialism, was feasible, although “subjective” obstacles, such as the overt nationalism and patriotism of the Japanese masses, would need to be overcome first.¹⁶

The *Theses* acknowledged that Japan had a mature proletarian class that was steadily moving toward a proletarian revolution. And yet the Comintern insisted that the revolutionary struggle in Japan be led not by a legal proletarian party, but by the illegal, militant JCP. The new JCP, as Bukharin put it, would have to be “steel-like, ideologically mature, Leninist, disciplined, centralized, and a mass Communist party.”¹⁷ So, despite Bukharin's acknowledgment of Japan's advanced capitalist stage, the political and socioeconomic differences between Japan and China, and Japan's readiness for a proletarian revolution, the Comintern kept the JCP's strategy and goals subservient to its policy for China. The priority of the Chinese Revolution for Japanese Communism was reflected in the hierarchy of its designated tasks. In the text of the *1927 Theses*, the first four tasks listed had to do with Japanese imperialism, while only the fifth task pertained to the dissolution of the Diet, followed by the abolition of the monarchy. The Chinese Revolution was the key to the success of the Japanese Revolution.

The JCP's new course was part of the Comintern's policy for the defense of the Chinese Revolution, which culminated with the Sixth Congress of the Comintern (July–September 1928). At the Congress, three representatives of the Japanese delegation—Sano Manabu (figure 4), Kenzō Yamamoto, and Ichikawa Shōichi—outlined the three main tasks of the Japanese proletariat: the struggle against a new imperialist war, the defense of the Chinese Revolution, and the defense of the Soviet Union. The JCP, proclaimed Sano, had an “especially great responsibility in carrying out these tasks in view of the active role played by Japanese imperialism in the Pacific.”¹⁸ As a strategy, Japanese Communists proposed to transform the imperialist war into a civil war in Japan, which would evolve into a world proletarian revolution. At the conclusion of the Congress, a resolution on the tasks of the JCP was adopted, which was written together by the Russian and Japanese members of the Comintern Committee on Japan and approved by the Eastern Secretariat of the Comintern.¹⁹ The resolution maintained that the struggle against the future Japanese imperialist war must go hand in hand with the struggle against the monarchy and the bourgeois dictatorship at home, and that, among other things, the JCP must assist the League against Intervention in China (discussed below). Moreover, the resolution stated that:

The Party [JCP] must widen its work aimed at liberating colonial people by establishing a very close relationship with and the total support of the Communist parties in the Japanese colonies (Korea and Formosa). The most serious tasks [of the JCP] are systematic and tireless agitation for the right of self-determination and even independence of the colonial people, fight against chauvinism, which still has deep roots among Japanese workers, selfless [Communist] work among Japanese soldiers and workers in the colonies to demand the immediate withdrawal of the Japanese troops, defeat of the imperialist homeland, fraternization with the revolting colonial people and the revolutionary armies of the colonies. (Adibekov and Wada 2001, 473)

Thus, by the late 1920s, Japanese and Russian Communists finally agreed that the Chinese Revolution would have a significant impact on Japan's domestic situation; therefore, the future of the revolution in Japan would need to be discussed in relation to the Chinese Revolution. Both reasoned that if the Japanese empire could be brought down in the colonies, the Chinese Revolution would rapidly gain strength and its success would inspire socialist movements worldwide, including in Japan. In other words, the socialist movement in Japan would be aided by the success of the CCP's struggle on the mainland.



Figure 4. Sano Manabu. *Source*: Nihon Kindaishi Kenkyūkai (1964, 13:60).

The Turn to China

Japanese Communists accepted without reservation the *1927 Theses*, with their stress on the Chinese Revolution and insistence on the illegal status of their party. Several factors contributed to the JCP's acceptance of this new course. First, starting in the mid-1920s, and due to the extremely complex situation within the Soviet Union's leadership, the Comintern began increasingly to demand that its members conform ideologically and organizationally to the ruling party of Russia (McDermott and Agnew 1996, 41–80). The Comintern's increased centralization and bureaucratization left little space for Japanese and other foreign Communists to voice their opposition. The JCP's diminished independence was also the result of the departure from its ranks of its main theoretician, Yamakawa Hitoshi. In December 1926, Yamakawa publicly opposed the decision to reorganize the JCP, which amounted to a public critique of the Russian Communist Party ([1933] 1967d, 59).

Yamakawa had two bones of contention with the new direction of the Japanese Communist movement. First, the enactment of universal male suffrage in 1925 raised Yamakawa's hopes that the workers' legal struggle was becoming possible; however, his

expectation was counterbalanced by the enactment of the Peace Preservation Law (Chian iji hō) in the same year, which targeted leftist radicals and criminalized the expression of any ideas that aimed to alter the national polity (*kokutai*). Nevertheless, Yamakawa put great effort into radicalizing legal leftist organizations, unions, and parties, and saw them as the main conduit of the future proletarian revolution. Yamakawa's main concern was that the illegal JCP would endanger the whole proletarian movement by provoking intense state and police repression. The repression would drive the entire proletarian movement underground and make it harder for Japanese Communists to organize and recruit new members.

Secondly, Yamakawa disagreed with prioritizing the Chinese Revolution and continued to hold the position that, because Japan's historical condition and capitalist development was different from China's, its revolutionary program and strategy could not be subsumed by the latter. In fact, Yamakawa believed that the Japanese Revolution must emulate an advanced Western European socialist revolution rather than that of backward Russia or China. That is, the proletarian struggle in Japan should be legal, mass-based, and not ancillary to proletarian developments in other countries, be they in Western Europe or China.

Historian Sandra Wilson has argued that after Yamakawa and his faction (which included Arahata Kanson, Sakai Toshihiko, and Inomata Tsunao, among others) were expelled, the core members of the JCP were "by definition loyal to the Comintern" (Wilson 1998, 285–286, 290). It is true that, due to Yamakawa's departure and the centralization of the Comintern, the critical impulse within Japanese Communism diminished. However, I want to emphasize that the JCP's increasing loyalty to the Comintern was seriously affected by the escalating imperialist actions of the Japanese government in China. The subsequent intense pressure on the leftist opposition at home by the police and the government, the proliferation of radical and conservative right-wing organizations, and the changing economic and political structures at home dictated by the demands of Japan's intervention in China made it obvious to the JCP that the futures of China and Japan had become intertwined.

Starting in 1927, the JCP adopted initiatives aimed at opposing the dispatch of troops to China. It published handbills and pamphlets and sponsored antiwar meetings. One of its most visible successes was the creation of the League against Intervention in China (Taishi hikanshō undō) in April 1927. The league was officially formed by three legal proletarian parties: Shakai Minshū tō (the Social Democratic Party), Nihon rōnō tō (the Japan Labor-

Farmer Party), and Rōdō nōmin tō (the Worker-Farmer Party). All three parties had ties to the illegal JCP. The league organized a commission to investigate Japanese military actions in China. Its twelve members were, however, arrested in Fukuoka en route to Shanghai in August 1927.



Figure 5. Women distributing the Communist newspaper *Musansha shinbun* on the streets of Osaka, January 9, 1926. *Source*: Nihon Kindaishi Kenkyūkai (1964, 13:63).

The Japanese League against Intervention in China also had international ties. In February 1927, the First Congress against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism was convened in Brussels, Belgium, by various anti-colonial activists with the support of the Comintern, marking the official establishment of the League against Imperialism and for National Independence (LAI). One Japanese and four Korean delegates attended the Congress. Three delegates from Japan attended the first general council meeting of the LAI in December 1927: Yosano Yuzuru (Japan Labor-Farmer Party), Senda Koreya (Worker-Farmer Party), and Katayama Sen (JCP). Inspired by the international network, in 1927–1928 the League against Intervention in China merged into the League against the War (Hansen Dōmei), later renamed the League against Imperialism (known in Japanese as Kokusai Hantei Dōmei), which operated as an official branch of the LAI. The guiding principles of the

League against Imperialism were to oppose Japanese imperialism, endorse colonial independence movements, and protect Soviet Russia. In particular, the league focused on supporting independence movements in Korea, Taiwan, and China. By the fall of 1931, the league had twelve hundred active members in Tokyo, in addition to several hundred members in other cities, and was justifiably listed by the Japanese government as “Communist-dominated” and “subversive” (Tanaka 1994).

The Chinese Revolution also caused mass conversion to Communism among the Japanese students of the Tōa Dōbun Academy, a Japanese university in Shanghai and one of the main suppliers of future colonial administrators and staff members of the South Manchurian Railway. By the late 1930s, Tōa Dōbun had become a major recruiting ground for Japanese members of the Chinese Communist Youth League; they were also members of the Japanese Communist Youth League and acted as conduits between the two organizations for coordinated activities. Japanese students of Tōa Dōbun participated in the creation of the Japan-China Struggle League (Nisshi Tōsō Dōmei) in December 1930, which also included Chinese, Koreans, and Europeans. The Japan-China Struggle League was short lived, but its members went on to become prominent Communists in China and Japan. Needless to say, it was one of the organizations that physically brought together Chinese and Japanese leftists (Johnson 1990, 55–59). On the other hand, the Chinese Revolution, and the place of Japanese imperialism in it, also boosted interest among Japanese youth in Communism and Marxism in the metropole.

The JCP’s internationalist activities were cut short by mass arrests of Communists in order to quell opposition to the army’s actions in China. In March 1928, 1,500 people—JCP members and Communist sympathizers—were arrested and 450 were indicted. Sano Manabu escaped to Shanghai but was captured and deported to Japan in August 1929. In 1932–1933, many Korean members who occupied executive posts in the League against Imperialism in Japan were arrested, and by 1935 the league was nearly defunct (Yoshida 2017, 19–20). The JCP went deep underground; its top leaders found themselves either in prison or in exile in Russia and China. The JCP’s activities since the late 1920s make it obvious that the Chinese Revolution in particular, and the anti-imperialist struggle in general, had become the main purpose of Japanese Communism.

Being a Communist in Japan in the 1930s was different than being a Communist in the early 1920s. The motives for joining and the goals of the struggle were distinct. While the early JCP fought to expand the political and social rights of the Japanese people, Japanese

Communists of the 1930s set their sights on curbing Japanese imperialism abroad. The Chinese Revolution of 1924–1927 was a struggle that many people, including Westerners and Chinese nationalists, interpreted primarily in economic, Marxist-derived terms. Thus, in order to understand the Chinese Revolution, it was considered proper to also study Marxism and the pronouncements of the Comintern (which had guided the CCP into an alliance with the Guomindang). To leftist revolutionaries, idealists, and intellectuals everywhere, the Chinese Revolution of the late twenties was the single greatest movement of the Comintern period until the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). The JCP itself became committed to the Comintern more than ever, as its members came to believe that only the Comintern could provide a framework for international cooperation and struggle.

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Notes

- 1 Out of 125,000 soldiers belonging to armies from ten countries, Japanese forces constituted 72,000 troops (one-third of all of Japan's active service troops). In addition, Japan deployed 60,000 troops to northern Manchuria. See, in Japanese, Hosoya (1955) and Hara (1989); in English, Morley (1958).
- 2 "The Interrelation between the National Revolutionary Movement and the Revolutionary Proletarian Movement" (Safarov's statement at the Tenth Session of the Congress of the Toilers of the Far East on January 27, 1922) (Joukoff Eudin and North 1957, 229).
- 3 In Japanese the literature is extensive, but for some classic studies see Iwamura (1977) and Inumaru (1982; 1993).
- 4 Exceptions are Harry Harootunian's *Overcome by Modernity* (2002) and the recent volume edited by Joyce C. H. Liu and Viren Murthy (2017).
- 5 "Draft Platform of the Japanese Communist Party, November 1922" (Beckmann and Okubo 1969, 279).
- 6 For the whole English text of the 1922 draft platform, see Beckmann and Okubo (1969, 279–282).
- 7 "The Program of the Communist Party of Japan" (Katō 1998, 45). See also Doc. 284 (Adibekov and Wada 2001). The document was signed by the top leaders of the Japanese socialist movement, Arahata Kanson and Sakai Toshihiko, but the historian Katō Tetsurō has persuasively argued that the draft was written by Yamakawa.
- 8 "Program of the JCP," Doc. 284 (Adibekov and Wada 2001, 282–285).
- 9 In the same fashion, Yamakawa called on the outcasts of the anarchist-leaning Suiheisha (Outcast) movement to abandon their "instinctive" approach and create instead a centralized organization (Yamakawa [1924] 1967f, 5:453–456).
- 10 See Yamakawa's first publication on China, "Shō Kaiseki wa fukkatsu suru ka?" [Shall Chiang Kai-shek come back?] (1927).
- 11 Doc. 303 (Adibekov and Wada 2001).

- 12 The authors of the *Shanghai Theses* were Grigory Voitinsky, Sanō Manabu, and other members of the Japanese Communist Bureau in Vladivostok (Doc. 303 in Adibekov and Wada 2001). Katō Tetsurō argues that the Japanese were not included in the writing of the Theses, and that it was solely authored by Voitinsky. For the text, see Beckmann and Okubo (1969, 84).
- 13 Doc. 321, 379, note 2 (Adibekov and Wada 2001).
- 14 Letter from the Japanese Communists to N. I. Bukharin. Moscow, June 10, 1927. Doc. 333 (Adibekov and Wada 2001).
- 15 The *Theses* were written in Russian and published on August 19, 1927, in *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The Japanese translation of the full text appeared in February 1928 in the journal *Social Thought* (*Shakai shisō*). See Doc. 338 (Adibekov and Wada 2001, 450–461). The *Theses* were published in English in a faulty translation in *International Press Correspondence* (no. 2, 1928). For the full text in English, see Beckmann and Okubo (1969, 119–125).
- 16 “Bukharin’s report at the meeting of the Presidium of the ECCI on the Japan Question,” Moscow, July 15, 1927. The text is in German. Doc. 335 (Adibekov and Wada 2001, 436–448).
- 17 Doc. 335 (Adibekov and Wada 2001, 436–448).
- 18 Beckmann and Okubo (1969, 166–167).
- 19 For the whole text of the resolution (original in Russian), see Adibekov and Wada (2001, 471–479).

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