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The Projection of Stalinism at the Comintern Congress in the 1930s

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The Projection of Stalinism at the Comintern Congress in the 1930s

Junya Takiguchi*

Introduction

The Soviet regime sought to project its authority through celebratory events, quasi-ritualised political gatherings and everyday practice of festivities at various scales. Especially in the early period of the regime, the political gatherings were one of the most crucial forums where the legitimacy of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Soviet regime was displayed for Soviet citizens and the broader world. These political events, however, functioned not only in one direction, i.e. from the government to society, but it were reciprocal communicatory occasions at which regional and local Party leaders as well as non-Party members voiced their demands, needs and feelings about the present politics and society (cf. Takiguchi 2009, 2016). Recent historiography on Soviet festivals has also highlighted this aspect (Petroni 2000; Rolf 2013). Malte Rolf, for example, argues that the Soviet regime and mass celebration were intertwined in sustaining power and that the Soviet Union was not only “a propaganda state” as Peter Kenez once described it but also a “staging dictatorship” (Kenez 1985; Rolf 2013, 1).

Despite the significant development in the study of the Soviet political and celebratory events since 1991, historians have paid less attention to this aspect in regard to the Communist International – hereafter the Comintern – particularly those conducted in the 1930s. The Comintern was founded in 1919 as the main institution to export the Revolution from Soviet Russia and to “internationalize” the socialist order based upon interests of the working class. The Comintern also underlined the link with its predecessors – the First International and the Second International – although severe criticism of the Second International was issued for its support of WWI (Vatlin and Smith 2014, 187-202). From its predecessors, the Comintern inherited a tradition of demonstration culture through which the ideals, aims and ends of movements were spread to the workers across the world. Kevin Callahan explores the demonstration culture of the Second International arguing that, through the demonstrations, performances and ritualistic events at political gatherings, the Second International sought to represent itself as “impressive, spectacular, credible, legitimate modular, and intimidating” with workers of the world as constituents of “imagined communities” (Callahan 2010, xi-xxxii). Callahan also points out the significance of pre- and post-Congress activities that subsequently had a huge influence upon the experiences of the Congress *per se*. In particular, “the ritual of reception” – the means of welcoming the delegates by a host institution – constitutes an important element in producing the meaning of the event for participants. It was meant “for all of the representatives

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to experience collectively the importance of the congress and to envision their central role in the unfolding drama of world history” (Callahan 2010, 111).

Although it is uncertain whether it was intentional, Bolshevik leaders certainly inherited these features of the Second International in their orchestration of political gatherings. Political and cultural practices of the Comintern, from its foundation in 1919, were drawn extensively from the demonstration culture of the Second International. Although there was an absence of ceremonial events for delegates attending the Bolshevik Party Congress until the early 1920s, the Comintern Congress as well as other celebrations such as May Day and anniversaries of the Revolution adopted mass spectacles on a huge scale in the 1920s.¹ One of the most notable of these was the open-air stage primarily presented for the delegates of the II Congress of the Comintern in July 1920. The delegates of the II Congress conducted sessions in Moscow, but in the middle of the Congress they all left for Petrograd to view the open-air stage, *Towards the Worldwide Commune*, presented by around 4,000 Soviet performers. This stage, as well as a series of ceremonial events, inspired one delegate of the II Congress with solemnity, symbolic images and “full of emotion” towards the Congress and the October Revolution (Rosmer 1971, 201-207; Geldern 1993, 201-207).

An interesting shift in Soviet festival culture took place in the mid-to-late 1920s. The Party Congress became a showcase of unity and the greatness of Stalin and other leaders whilst diminishing the function of intraparty debate (Takiguchi 2012, 55-76). On the contrary, the Comintern Congress, which had once been the centre of the festive culture of Soviet-sponsored events, became a mere tedious congregation of communist leadership from across the world. In the early 1930s, this contrast is very apparent if we compare the Bolshevik Party Congress in the 1930s (the Sixteenth Congress in 1930 and the Seventeenth Congress in 1934) and the VII Congress of the Comintern in 1935.

The VII Congress has been studied by many historians not only because it was the final Congress of the Comintern but also because it adopted “the Popular Front” policy against fascism, which marked a radical shift from the “class against class”. E.H. Carr’s study on the VII Congress is traditional. He regards the VII Congress as “a turning point in the history of Comintern” as it demonstrated the Comintern’s loss of foundation for its existence (Carr 1982, 424-427).

While an extensive examination of the political aspect in the strategic turn in 1934- 35 has become possible, there has been scarce attention paid to the way in which the VII Congress was orchestrated: who initiated the organization of the VII Congress? Which Soviet, Party or Comintern institution did play the central role in arranging the scenes at the VII Congress? To what extent did Stalin play a significant role? Archival documents on the VII Congress, which few historians have deeply investigated, illuminated some clues to these questions.

This paper argues, in addition, that we ought to examine the organization of the VII Congress of the Comintern from a comparative perspective. The two major political events for the Bolsheviks in the 1920s and 1930s were the Congresses of the Party and of the Comintern. At each Congress, different representations of power were presented to different audiences by means sometimes similar and sometimes different. In order to highlight the particular means of representing Stalinism at the Comintern Congress in the 1930s, it is essential to examine it in a different context, i.e. by comparing the ways in which Stalin was represented in each political spectacle.

¹ The Party Congress before 1924 had a characteristic of non-celebratory atmosphere. The Bolshevik leadership even rejected the proposal to convene the opening session of the Tenth Party Congress (1921) at the Bol’shoi Theatre. RGASPI, f. 45, op. 1, del. 37, l. 1. On the early years of the festivity culture of the Bolshevik government, see (Deák 1975, 7-22; Piotrovskii 1926, 55-84; Geldom 1993).

Since 1991, the historiography of the Comintern and national communist parties outside the USSR (as well as that of the Soviet Communist Party itself) has shown great development. Nevertheless, a recent book, edited by leading historians of Communism, on the comparative study of non-Soviet Communist Parties notes that exclusive attention so far has been paid to “particular national cases or on the Comintern itself” and argues it is imperative to launch a sound comparative study of the variants of Stalinization in each national Communist Party (LaPorte et al. 2008). Nevertheless, this paper intends to demonstrate that there remains much fruit to be born concerning the Comintern from a fresh perspective. This paper thus focuses on the Comintern Congress at the early stage of the Stalinist regime to shed light on the ways in which Stalin and his authority were represented in an international forum, using the domestic forum as a comparative reference.

1. Projecting Stalinism at the Bolshevik Party Congress in the early 1930s

1-1. *Setting the Scene*

Before looking into the way in which Stalinism was represented internationally at the Comintern Congress, it is important to investigate how it was shown in different contexts in the same period.

The Bolsheviks convened the Party Congresses twice in the first half of the 1930s: the Sixteenth Congress in 1930 and the Seventeenth Congress in 1934. These were undoubtedly the largest Party events in this period: the authority of Stalin and the Party were projected in them through various means, creating a profound influence upon the participants.²

There is a long-lasting historical debate over Stalin’s ascendancy in the middle of the 1930s. During the 1960s, some argued that there had been many votes against Stalin at the Seventeenth Party Congress in the course of the election of a new Central Committee (*Izvestiia TsK KPSS* 1989, 114-121). During the period of perestroika, A. Mikoian and N. Khrushchev retold this version of events; and some historians, such as Roy Medvedev and Robert Tucker, upheld the argument that Stalin was nearly overthrown by other Party leaders at the Seventeenth Congress (Mikoian 1987, 5-7; Medvedev 1972, 155-157; Tucker 1990, 249-250). Documents in the Party archive negates this contention, however. Indeed, there were a few votes against Stalin at the election of a new Central Committee, but this was not dissimilar to previous occasions. The argument that the counting committee fabricated votes against Stalin also lacks credibility, since this group was beyond the reach of Stalin’s and other Party leaders’ control and supervision (RGASPI, f.59, op.2, del.46). Recent historiography, based upon archival materials from this period, also shows how powerful Stalin’s authority remained throughout the 1930s (Khlevniuk 2009; Lenoë 2010). The projection of Stalinism in 1934 was thus a prearranged orchestration by Stalinist leadership.

In the first place, the date of the convention of the Congress constituted a symbolic representation of Stalinism in the 1930s. The opening day of the Seventeenth Congress in 1934 is the best example of it. “The Congress of Victors” opened on 26 January 1934 soon after the end of an inner-party struggle (*Pravada* 26 Jan. 1934, 1). The choice of this day for the opening may appear odd in light of the consideration that 21 January (5 days before the opening) was the tenth anniversary of Lenin’s death. According to the rituals of Soviet culture, it would seem reasonable to open such an important congress on a symbolic day connected to Lenin. However, there were few celebratory campaigns on the tenth anniversary of the death of Lenin, with the exceptions of tributes in newspapers.

² This section is an extract from my paper published earlier in Japanese (Takiguchi 2012, 21-42).

From the very beginning, the Party had no intention to commemorate the Seventeenth Congress with the tenth anniversary of the death of Lenin. The Politburo meeting in November 1932 set the opening of the Seventeenth Congress for December 1933. However, in November 1933, the Politburo agreed to postpone the Congress until 25 January 1934 (RGASPI, f.59, op.2, del. 41, l. 91; del. 44, l. 1a.). It is to be assumed that the political report of the Central Committee by Stalin was planned for the second day of the Congress (26 January) because it had to be done on that day.³ A further delay occurred and the Congress finally opened on 26 January. At the opening session, the Congress hectically selected the executive committee of the Congress and agreed on the agenda in order to make room for Stalin's speech.

Exactly 10 years ago on that day (26 January 1924), Stalin made a speech at the Second All-Union Congress of Soviets in mourning of Lenin who had died days before. In that speech, Stalin said "We vow to you, Comrade Lenin, we shall fulfil your behest with honour!" (*Pravda* 21 Jan. 1934, 1). In other words, the opening of the Seventeenth Congress was meant to represent not Lenin's death but Stalin's speech ten years previously in order to highlight Stalin's contributions to Soviet government.

Not only the opening day but also many aspects of the Congress turned into propaganda tools to promote the ascendancy of Stalin and his circles within the Party hierarchy. One such was the delegate number assigned to each delegate. Before the 1930s, delegate numbers were allocated automatically with no political meaning, according to an alphabetical order. In the 1930s, however, this number came to represent order within the Party hierarchy. At the Sixteenth Congress in 1930, Stalin was given delegate "No. 2", followed by Molotov, G. Orzhonikidze, and M. Shkiryatov (RGASPI, f.58, op.1, del.17, l.1; del.18, l.1). There was no delegate No. 1 at the Sixteenth Congress, implying that no one but Lenin was suited for it. The Seventeenth Congress adopted this as a Party ritual in a more explicit way. No.1 was given to Lenin, and Stalin took No.2. This clearly meant that while Lenin was positioned as the perpetual leader of the Party, Stalin was represented as the legitimate heir of Lenin. In order to formalize this orchestration, the questionnaire given to all delegates was prepared for Lenin, although the only column on name was written (RGASPI, f.59, op.1, del.8, l.30).⁴ L. Kaganovich, Molotov, M. Kalinin and K. Voroshilov, in order of delegate number, followed Lenin and Stalin. The custom of this numbering continued to represent the hierarchy up to delegate No.10 (RGASPI, f.59, op.1, del.15, l.2; del.16, l.1).

Historians have argued that the Seventeenth Congress was the first occasion where the canonization of Stalin was underway. However, as the example of delegate number attests, Stalin was not yet depicted as the only and the greatest leader of the Party. His prominence was represented in terms of his being the model student of Lenin (Getty 1999, 56). Stalin's performance at the Congress shows he consciously took this role. His only speech at the Congress gave all credit to the founders of Communism, i.e., Marx, Engels and Lenin (*XVII s"ezd* 1934, 36).⁵

On the other hand, other speakers at the Congress hailed Stalin in many ways. Sergey Kirov's speech, which Anna Kirillina calls "a hymn to Stalin", was entitled "Stalin's speech gives us the direction to all tasks and problems we are facing". Whenever Stalin's name was mentioned by any delegate during a speech, all delegates were instructed to give "stormy applause" (Kirilina 2001, 308).

Indeed, Stalin controlled most aspects of the Congress, including the agenda, proceedings, speakers

³ At the Sixteenth Congress too, the political report by Stalin was scheduled at the second day of the Congress. (*XVI s"ezd* 1930, 17- 57).

⁴ Lenin attained No.1 in the Party card since 1927 (LHASC, CP/IND/DUTT/33/4).

⁵ At the same time, Peter Clement points out the decline in the number of mentioning Lenin's name at the speech by Stalin at the Seventeenth Congress (Clement 1998, 50-51).

and so on (RGASPI, f.59, op.2, del.41, l.93). However, he did not play a main role at the Congress. Through choreographed performances emphasizing his achievements and contributions to the Party and the USSR by all other participants, Stalin was represented as a central figure of the Party and the state. The Party Congress thus elaborated much more intricate means of representation of Stalinism than historians have so far assumed (Antonov-Ovseenko 1995; Fainsod 1963).

1-2. Propaganda, Hospitality and Entertainment

The Party revived mass propaganda events as an important part of the Congress in the 1930s. The primary characteristic of propaganda in the 1930s was the Party's devotion to the air and the technology of the aircraft (Bergman 1998, 139; Gerovitch 2007, 138). At the Sixteenth Congress in 1930s, the air show intended to show "achievements of aero technology" at the Petrovskii Park. All delegates to the Congress were allowed to enter the exhibition hall where airplanes were displayed (RGASPI, f.58, op.2, del.38, l.135.).

Mass parades also played an important role at Bolshevik political gatherings. At the Sixteenth Congress, a physical culture parade was held at the Dynamo stadium, devoted to the Party Congress. Several Moscow organizations made up the main components of the parade but young people from across the USSR (including Ukraine, Leningrad, the Caucasus and Uzbekistan) also joined in. As recent historians have pointed out, physical performances represented not only wisdom and health but also their devotion to the labour and defence of the nation (RGASPI, f.58, op.2, del.38, l.13; O'Mahony 2006; Petrone 2004, 187-211). In the 1930s, the improvisation characteristic of the 1920s went underground while choreographed mass performances showed "discipline" (Sartorti 1990, 41-77). The physical-culture parade flourished as Soviet mass performance in the 1930s, and the one at the Sixteenth Congress was the harbinger of this.

A demonstration parade by workers was also a recurrent event at the Party Congress. At the Sixteenth Congress, workers visited the venue of the Party Congress in order to commemorate the opening after the demonstration (*Ogonyok* 19, 1930, 3). At the Seventeenth Congress, the workers requested strongly to have the demonstration and the Party interpreted this as an expression of devotion to the Party and the state. The Party leadership arranged to have no congress session during the parade, and participants to the Congress, including the delegates and the guests, were urged to witness it (RGASPI, f.59, op.2, del.41, l.124; *XVII s'ezd* 1934, 260).

Furthermore, gift-giving to the Party leadership became an orchestrated performance. At the Fifteenth Congress, this was done in somewhat cosy atmosphere. But, by the 1930s, the gifts were dominated by labour-related products. At the Sixteenth Congress, workers of the Stalingrad Tractor Factory brought special products and gave them to the Congress. Citizens of Nizy-Novgorod gave 25 trucks to the Congress as their gift to the event.⁶ One featured gift at the Seventeenth Congress was the first Soviet-made trolley bus manufactured by workers in Moscow. It was especially devoted to Kaganovich, the first secretary of the Moscow Party organ and named LK-1 (for Lazar' Kaganovich) (Borisenko 2008, 123-127).

Workers brought their gifts to the Party Congress as a symbol of the economic growth of the state and to glorify their "labour", an act testifying to their commitment to the Bolshevik government (Brooks 2006, 355-375; Ssorin-Chaikov, 361). In the 1930s, gift-giving to Stalin became an act of "counter-gifts" by which people thanked Stalin for giving Socialism to Soviet citizens. The scenes of gift-giving were filmed and broadcast time and again during post-Congress propaganda (RGASPI, f.59, op.2, del.40, ll.60- 63.).

⁶ *Ogonyok* ran the pictures of these products (*Ogonyok* 19, 1930, 1; *Ogonyok* 20, 1930, 3).

Along with the propaganda, the hospitality and entertainments provided to delegates were no less essential elements of the Party Congress although few historians have paid attention to this aspect of the political event. In fact, the Bolsheviks were very keen to provide as many varied types of services as possible. From the mid-1920s, the Party began to offer a wider array of assistance to delegates at each Congress. All delegates were met at the railway station and taken to their accommodation upon their arrival in Moscow.⁷ During the Congress as well, shuttle buses delivered delegates to and from the Kremlin (RGASPI, f. 56, op. 2, del. 50, l. 5). Moreover, delegates were now eligible for medical care during their stay. A list of surgeries, including ones in the Third House of the Soviets, the Kremlin and some other clinics in Moscow, was distributed to all delegates, and delegates were also notified that the hospital in the Kremlin would remain open day and night during the Congress. All delegates were entitled to free medical examinations, including X-rays at some Moscow clinics. The delegates did not need to make a prior appointment nor to queue up when they showed their tickets for the exam (RGASPI, f. 56, op. 2, del. 50, ll. 18-21). The baths at the Third House of the Soviets and the Kremlin were reserved for delegates only (between 2 and 10 pm at the Third House of the Soviet, and between 3 and 5 pm at the Kremlin) whenever the Congress was in session (RGASPI, f. 56, op. 2, del. 50, l. 21).⁸

Delegates were privileged to experience various entertainments for free during their stay in Moscow. At the Seventeenth Congress, delegates watched theatrical performances at the Bol'shoi and the Vakhtangov theatres with all seats reserved for delegates only (RGASPI, f. 59, op. 2, del. 45, l. 5). Temporary libraries with the Lenin's works, notes of Stalin's speeches and other important Party documents were also arranged exclusively for them. *Pravda*, *Izvestiia* and *Economicheskaiia Zhizni* and so on were given to each room for free (RGASPI, f. 59, op. 2, del. 45, ll. 36-37).⁹

Having considered contemporary discourses on tourism, hospitality and entertainments played an important role as an enlightenment and political education towards local Party leaders (Koenker 2006, 127). The services at the Congress were thus visual and non-visual representations of the Soviet standards of the time.

2. Representing Stalinism at the VII Congress of the Comintern in 1935

2-1. Politburo Control over the Comintern

The VII Congress was the first Comintern Congress in the 1930s – and became the final one in its history. It took place in July and August in 1935 during the apex of the first phase of the Great Terror. In comparison with the Bolshevik Party Congress, the Comintern Congress in the 1930s was notable for its lack of festivity. While Stalin and his allies of the time did not allow themselves to lose organizational and political control in preparing for and conducting the Congress, they seem to have lost their interest in elaborating on its experiences for participants.

As was the case at the Bolshevik Congresses from the late 1920s, Stalin and the Politburo members of the Party dominated the orchestration of the political aspect of the Comintern Congress in the 1930s. At the VI Comintern Congress in 1928, intervention by the Politburo was very limited. The Politburo only enabled Bukharin to concentrate on the preparation for the VI Congress in June 1928 (*Politbiuro i komintern*

⁷ Information boards for the Congress delegates were placed at train stations (*Ogonyok* 50,1927, front cover).

⁸ At the Third House of the Soviets, the delegates were also allowed to take a bath between 6 pm and midnight by sharing with students.

⁹ The distribution of newspapers began at the Eleventh Congress in 1922 (RGASPI, f. 48, op. 1, del. 31, l. 35).

2004, 532). The Plenum of the ECCI (executive committee of the Communist International) before the VI Congress argued about and decided the agenda, the divisions of the working commissions, the means of electing delegates at each Communist Party and so on (RGAPSI, f.493, op.1, del.3, ll. 21- 37).

Around 1930, the Politburo took over complete control of the Soviet state from other Party bodies and the Soviet institutions (Khlevniuk 1995, 30-31). Since then, the Politburo, *inter alia* Stalin, played a central role in arranging the Comintern Congress as well. On 26 May 1934, the Politburo discussed the agenda of the VII Congress based upon the draft presented by the ECCI on 17 May. The Politburo meeting decided that Kaganovich, Stalin and Kuibishev were entrusted with the discussion of the matter and that their decision would be issued in the name of the Politburo (*Politbiuro i komintern* 2004, 701). In the end, some portions of the agenda were amended from the original by Kaganovich, Stalin and Kuibishev who also re-nominated speakers for each agenda, including the relocation of Manuil'skii from the ECCI report to the one on the USSR. Georgi Dimitrov was appointed to the ECCI report anew. The ECCI Presidium officially resolved the agenda on 28 May, with no changes, entirely but in line with the Politburo version (*Politbiuro i komintern* 2004, 702).

On the personal level, Stalin fully involved in designing the contours of the VII Congress, appointing his trustworthy allies to the key posts. He asked Dimitrov to get involved in the ECCI on 7 April 1934. Dimitrov subsequently joined in the leading organ of the ECCI and, only a month later, became a member of the Presidium of the ECCI (*Dimitrov and Stalin* 2000, 12).

At the same time, Stalin was not a supreme and omnipotent leader with whom no one could argue. One of the most important agendas at the VII Congress was the introduction of a new policy into the Comintern, that is, the adoption of "Popular Front" in order to prevent the rise of fascism in Western Europe. This crucial transformation of the Comintern policy did not derive from Stalin but from Dimitrov, who passionately appealed to Stalin. Dimitrov urged Stalin to change his mind and to adopt the strategy of the Popular Front, in line with the changing political and international situations (*Dimitrov and Stalin* 2000, 13; Haslam 1979, 673-691). Stalin seems not to have been entirely convinced but decided to leave the issue to Dimitrov and the VII Congress.

This change of Comintern policy affected the arrangement of the VII Congress. First of all, it necessitated a delay in the opening of the VII Congress in order to ensure sufficient time to reach an agreement in advance and to arrange appropriate scenes at the forthcoming Congress. Dimitrov maneuvered this by appealing to the Politburo. In early September 1934, the Politburo decided the postponement of the VII Congress from 1934 until March 1935, and it was resolved at the ECCI Presidium soon afterwards. The ECCI Presidium explained the delay by saying "the exceptional difficulty of the present international situation demands a comprehensive preparatory discussion about the political and strategic problems of all sections of the Comintern" (*Politbiuro i komintern* 2004, 709). This decision, however, came at the very last moment of the convention and caused great confusion among some delegates from abroad. For example, several British delegates had already left for Moscow when the deferral was announced (Thorpe 2000, 212). In February 1935, the ECCI leadership again asked Kaganovich, Stalin and Kuibishev to suspend the VII Congress until late May. The Politburo meeting on 5 March agreed to open the VII Congress on 15 July 1935 which was subsequently resolved upon by the ECCI Presidium three days later (*Politbiuro i komintern* 2004, 719). The VII Congress finally opened on 27 July, while no Politburo document explained the delay.

In the course of preparations, Dimitrov requested assistance from Stalin and the Soviet leadership to manage the VII Congress well. After he was appointed the task of reporting as a representative of the ECCI,

Dimitrov wrote to Stalin asking his personal endorsement and much more intervention by the Politburo: “I became convinced that such a change [the change of the Comintern’s policy with regard to the Popular Front] is impossible without intervention by and assistance from you and the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Party”. In his reply, Stalin assured Dimitrov that “I have no doubt that the Politburo will support you” (*Dimitrov and Stalin* 2000, 13-22).

While the political aspect of the VII Congress was being prepared, the Comintern leadership attached a particular atmosphere to the Congress and sought to promote an image of Stalin as the great leader of world Communist movements. The residents of the Hotel Lux, where ECCI representatives from Communist parties around the world resided, engaged with the visual representations of the Comintern before the VII Congress opened. They and the other Congress staff, including journalists of the Communist press from many countries, gathered at one room next to the hall of the Congress to display all published materials about Communism across the world and to produce photo-montage narratives about the victims during the struggle for internationalism, which were shown to all participants in the VII Congress (Mayenburg 1985, 205-206).¹⁰ The Hotel Lux usually provided an important forum for each Communist party to discuss and to agree upon the issues discussed at the forthcoming Congress. Those who arrived in Moscow from outside the USSR first visited the room of their own representatives at the Hotel Lux and were given lecture about how to behave at the Comintern Congress.¹¹ The Hotel Lux again acted as a bridging step between the representatives of each Communist party and Moscow.

Each delegate obtained one’s delegate card when they responded to the questionnaire and registered for the VII Congress. The delegate card at the VII Congress included the image of four people, Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin from left to right. The decoration of the Congress hall adopted the same representation. The back of the presidium seat and of the speakers’ rostrum was decorated with huge pictures of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin, along with the Communist slogans in several languages (RGASPI, f.494, op.1, del.679, l. n/ a.). Manuil’skii spoke at the Congress to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the death of Engels by describing Engels as a great contributor to Marxist theory, succeeded by Lenin and Stalin (Carr 1982, 410). Such practices show that, as at the Party Congress in the 1930s, Stalin still retained his status as the foremost student of “Marx-Engels-Leninism”, not completely a canonized figure as some historians have argued before.

2-2. “The Congress of Inertia”

As we have seen, Stalin and his circles held a strong grip on the organizational aspects of the VII Congress from the preparatory stage. Also, Stalin was clearly represented as the legitimate successor of Marx-Engels-Leninism in the narrative of the Communist International.

However, as at the Party Congress of the 1930s, once the VII Congress began Stalin himself never came to the central stage. Even more, he appeared to be absent at the VII Congress as he did not speak publicly during the sessions. Stalin certainly appeared at the hall of the Congress and took his seat as a member of the presidium until the middle of the opening session (Mayenburg 1985, 211; *VII Congress of the Communist International* 1939, 1-14).¹² He also registered for the Congress, answering all questions in the questionnaire provided to the delegates at the VII Congress (RGASPI, f. 494, op.1, del. 460, ll. 64-66). Yet, it

¹⁰ The author is only able to refer to the Japanese translated version of the book, published by Shobun -sha in 1985. All page numbers indicated are therefore that of the Japanese version.

¹¹ On the 1920s, see LHASC, CP/IND/MURP/01/02, J.T and Molly Murphy Papers. ‘Nurse Molly’.

¹² This scene was also pictured by the official camera clue (RGASPI, f. 494, op.1, del. 682, l. n/a).

seems that he left the Congress in the course of the opening session and never came back (*VII Congress of the Communist International* 1939, 1-14). Stalin was thus mostly absent at the VII Congress, which misled E.H. Carr into stating that Stalin was absent *throughout* the VII Congress because “his lack of enthusiasm for the Comintern and for foreign communists was notorious” (Carr 1982, 403).

Carr’s observation about Stalin’s attitude towards the Comintern is oversimplified. Stalin’s tactic was to supervise it via Dimitrov and other trusted comrades as actual executives. While the VII Congress was still in operation (5 August), Stalin wrote to Molotov:

“The Congress of the Comintern went not badly. It will become more interesting after the reports by Dimitrov and Elkoli. The delegates produced good impressions. The draft resolutions looked not badly. I think it is time to establish a first secretary (general secretary) in the system of the Comintern. I propose to appoint Dimitrov as the first secretary. Piatnitskii, Manuil’skii and others (among foreign communists) would be introduced as secretaries into the secretariats of the ECCI” (Kosheleva et al. 1995, 252).

Behind the scenes of the VII Congress, there was a Politburo meeting discussing the plan of the next ECCI leadership. Along the lines of a draft plan Stalin had provided, including his nomination of the Soviet representatives into the new ECCI, the Politburo designated the need to establish the post of the General Secretary in the ECCI and put forward that Dimitrov would take this post (*Dimitrov and Stalin* 2000, 23; *Politbiuro i komintern* 2004, 722-723). On the other hand, Piatnitskii, Knorin and Béla Kun lost their positions in the ECCI. Piatnitskii’s removal was suggested by Dimitrov and Manuil’skii for his opposition to the Popular Front.¹³ This meeting also nominated a new composition for the Presidium of the Comintern and Bolshevik representatives into the ECCI. Stalin, Manuil’skii and Trilissera had their names in both and Zhdanov and Ezhov were included in the ECCI from the Bolshevik Party (*Dimitrov and Stalin* 2000, 23; *Politbiuro i komintern* 2004, 722-723). Stalin and the Politburo were thus never willing to lose control of institutional leverage over the Comintern.

We now have to ask why Stalin and his Party circles themselves did not act main cast at the public stage of the VII Congress. One answer to this may lie in Stalin’s belief that the Comintern must devote itself to demonstrating “democracy” towards the wider leftist parties with the USSR as its “birthplace”. Stalin also seemed to believe that democracy would generate a mighty weapon against the fascist alliance (Khlevniuk 2009, 137). This belief of Stalin’s also had an influence on the way in which the Comintern leadership was represented not in a hierarchical order among the VII Congress delegates. As we have seen above, the delegate number at the Party Congress came to represent the hierarchy of the Party members. The Comintern did not adopt this practice in the 1930s (RGASPI, f.494, op.1, del. 460). At the previous VI Congress in 1928, Stalin had been given delegate No. 94 and no clear indication of such a practice can be found at the VII Congress (RGASPI, f.493, op.1, del. 628, l. 14).¹⁴

The other answer, which is more likely, is that Stalin and his circle were no longer interested in representing Stalinism at the Comintern in an excessive manner. The Comintern itself in fact would become almost distinct after the VII Congress. The representation of Stalinism at the VII Congress show us that the Comintern was the period of “inertia” and nothing new was supposed to be invested, with an exception of the

¹³ Piatnitskii was appointed to the leading post at the Administrative institution of the Party (Chase 2001, 436).

¹⁴ Yet, Stalin’s personal questionnaire is missing in the VI Congress fond (RGASPI, f.493, op.1, del. 631- 633).

introduction of new political tactics.

This is particularly apparent when we compare the extensive investment made into the Bolshevik Party Congress in the 1930s. Archival documents speak of nothing about any particular ceremonial event at the VII Congress either. There are few signs that the Party and the Comintern leadership discussed hospitality and entertainments to welcome the delegates from overseas. Having considered the hierarchical and centralized mechanism of the festival administration in the 1930s, while little room remained for non-central figures to initiate “grass-roots” events, this silence primarily derived from Stalin and his circles (Rolf 2013).

The VII Congress of the Comintern was thus simply manoeuvred to promote tactical shift with Dimitrov and the others as the prime executives. The VII Congress can be described as “the Congress of Inertia” in comparison with “the Congress of Victors” of the Seventeenth Party Congress where many celebratory and ritualistic representations of Stalinism were executed.

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