The Issue of Palestine at the Second Congress of the Communist International

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Résumé

Daily sessions of the Second Congress of the Communist International were held in Petrograd’s Tauride Palace. Delegate Alfred Rosmer described the second congress’ architectural setting: “the debating hall was like that where parliaments meet in every country ... there was a high rostrum, an amphitheater where the delegates were seated, and a gallery for spectators.” Built by Prince Grigory Potemkin during the eighteenth century as a city residence, and renovated several times since his death, representatives convened under the tiered chandeliers of the Tauride’s white-painted convention hall. In the Prince’s debating hall, delegates discussed dictatorship of the proletariat, “hitherto a theoretical question, [it] was now posed as a concrete problem—in fact, as the most urgent problem” before curious spectators. How radical could a discussion be, held in the home built by the favourite of Catherine the Great, who died during negotiations over the Treaty of Jassy which ended a war with the Ottoman Empire? What place would Arab national liberation play in the Tauride, and what of Palestine? The second congress of the Communist International remained in session until 7 August 1920. Historian Alexander Schölch points out that—under such circumstances—Arab communists didn’t respond very well to Bolshevik forms of organization, as when Poale Zion distributed a pamphlet calling on Arab laborers to stay away from their places of employment on international workers’ day and join with Jewish workers under the banner of the red flag. Schölch invited fellow-researchers to “imagine an Arab coffee house in Jaffa [on May Day 1921], where a small shopkeeper, a docker and an orange picker discuss the contents of the [Arabic leaflet] of which they find a copy.”
Second Congress of the Communist International. Painting by Boris Kustodiev representing the festival of the Comintern II Congress on the Uritsky Square (former Palace square) in Petrograd. Ahead of the Second Congress of the Communist International, held in July through August 1920, Lenin sent out a number of documents, including his Twenty-one Conditions to all socialist parties. The Congress adopted the 21 conditions as prerequisites for any group wanting to become affiliated to the International. Many European socialist parties divided because of the adhesion issue.
As part of international communism’s commitment to helping oppressed peoples worldwide, communists began to consider demands for racial equality. Linked with the national and colonial question, support for racial equality was first raised at the First Congress of the Comintern. There, Leon Trotsky and Dutch communist S.J. Rutgers mentioned the colonized peoples of the world, with explicit reference to their races. Lenin further advanced racial equality as one of the many theses in the Comintern’s Theses on the National and Colonial Question.