

FORSCHUNGSBERICHTE

Fridrikh Firsov (Moskau)

Some Critical Notes on Recent Publications on Comintern and Soviet Politics

In 1992 inventories of documents kept in the Comintern Archives were for the first time openly exhibited in the Reading Room of the Russian Center for the Preservation and Study of Documents of Modern History, or RTsKhIDNI, with its director Vladimir Kozlov having granted permission for this event. It was the first time that researchers were able to personally get acquainted with these inventories and select materials they were interested in for further study. Soon afterwards a Guide to the Archives was published with inventories of the Archives of the Comintern¹ listed there among other items. Another important publication of the same period was an informational reference book on the organizational structure of the Comintern.² After that, a lot of articles and monographs were published using many previously unknown documents.³ However, many Comintern documents remained unavailable to the researchers, especially documents of the Cadres Department of the Comintern and personal files among others. The access to archival documents showing that the Comintern was closely connected with the NKVD and Soviet intelligence was prohibited to the public. Even many of the documents which had been open before, were also closed.

In 1992–94, as an employee of the Archives, I was able to study many of the secret documents and came to some findings that I would like to share with you.

¹ Краткий Путеводитель. Фонды и коллекции, собранные Центральным партийным архивом. Главная Редакция Дж. А. Гетти и В. П. Козлов. М. Благовест, 1993.

² Г. М. Адибеков, Э. Н. Шахназарова, К. К. Ширина. Организационная структура Коминтерна 1919–1943. М. РОССПЭН, 1997.

³ In this presentation it is not even possible to name all publications on the history of the Comintern published in different countries in this period. Based on the materials of 2 conferences the following collections were published Centre and Periphery: The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents. Ed. Mikhail Narinsky and Jürgen Rojahn. Amsterdam, 1996; International Communism and the Communist International 1919–1943. Ed. Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe. Manchester, 1998.

Firstly, it is clear that the Comintern was part of the party and government structure of the Soviet Union. It performed specific functions assigned to it both inside and outside the country. It was fully funded by the Soviet government. During different periods the forms of control and guidance by the Soviet ruling establishment may have been different, but the dependence of the Comintern on the Kremlin was permanent throughout the whole history of the organization.

Secondly, while directing the communist parties abroad, the Comintern was very closely connected with the Soviet intelligence services, helped them by all available means, including information and agents. The Soviet intelligence, in its turn, exchanged important information with the Comintern leadership.

Thirdly, within the Soviet Union, the Comintern was directly involved with the repressive structures of the Stalinist regime. The Comintern apparatus exercised supervision over all political émigrés, their private life and professional activities.

There are several facts which illustrate this. In August of 1921, between the CHEKA, the Military Intelligence Department and the Comintern, an agreement was signed to coordinate their activities abroad, containing the following provision: »Cheka and Military Intelligence may request the help of the communist parties only through the respective representative of the Comintern. The Comintern representatives must render all possible assistance to the Cheka and Military Intelligence representatives.«⁴

As an example of such coordination, let me quote the ciphered telegram sent by Georgi Dimitrov on October 2, 1940 to Rudy Baker, head of the underground organization of the Communist Party of the USA: »One of our friends – name Cooper who works in your country and whom we trust is authorized to establish contact with you. You have to help him by all your means – by people and connections – in your country and in Latin America. Cooper will help you in connection with us. We gave him the address of Hannover, meet him there. His slogan by meeting you: »I have something for you from Brother, some greetings«. After you establish direct connection with him continue this connection not directly but through one of your secret comrades.«⁵ Cooper, whose real name was Vassily Zarubin, was the chief agent of the Soviet intelligence in the USA.

Personal files kept in the Archives give a lot of evidence of the collaboration of leading and rank-and-file members of the communist parties with the Soviet intelligence. It does not mean however that every party member was involved in these activities. At the same time, I have not found any mention of a party mem-

⁴ ПГАСИИ 495-19-342-3.

⁵ Ibid., 495-184-3, iskh. 41.

ber rejecting an offer to provide cooperation, made either by his party boss or directly by a representative of the Soviet intelligence.

In the twenties and early thirties, the Comintern leaders were receiving instructions directly from the governing bodies of the CPSU through its representatives in the Comintern. This fact is described by Alexander Vatlin in his monograph published in 1993⁶

Later on such instructions were sent to Dimitrov directly from Stalin and his close окружения. Frequently the staff-members of the Comintern received instructions directly from the officials of the apparatus of the Central Committee of the VKP(b). The ECCI heads Piatnitsky and Wilhelm Knorin wrote on October 20, 1933, to Lazar' Kaganovich, the Central Committee of the VKP(b) Secretary. »We find it necessary to discuss with you the issue of incorrect attitude of certain comrades from some departments of the Central Committee towards our institution. Lately employees from our apparatus have been mobilized for some other work ... or sent to make presentations somewhere in the country without our consent.« They requested »that staff members of the apparatus of the Central Committee be instructed that our personnel was not mobilized without having informed us first as it is common practice with regard to other institutions«⁷. Thus, we see that in their correspondence with high-ranking officials of the party bureaucracy the ECCI leaders themselves called ECII apparatus just another institution.

The actual relations between the CPSU Central Committee and the Comintern leadership can be confirmed by the following Politburo decision of February 28, 1936: »Due to the fact that there is a huge number of political emigrants in the territory of the Soviet Union with a number of them being direct agents of foreign intelligence and police services of the capitalist countries, the Comintern, together with the NKVD, should within three months conduct a complete registration of political emigrants who have arrived in the USSR... *Oblige ECCI to dismantle all subsidiary economic organisations of the Comintern sections within a three months period and to turn them over to the respective economic bodies (Narkomles, Narkomsvchosov, Promkooperatie)*«⁸.

Results of this registration were included in a report by the Comintern Cadres Department containing the following: »The Cadres Department has sent to the NKVD material on three thousand people suspected as spies, provocateurs, wreckers, etc.«⁹ Dimitrov forwarded this report to Stalin.¹⁰ 54 letters written by

⁶ А.Ю. Ватлин. Коминтерн: первые десять лет. Исторические очерки. М. Молодая Россия, 1993.

⁷ РГАСПИ, 495-19-248-186.

⁸ Ibid., 17-162-17-98, -99.

⁹ Ibid., 495-10a-391-46.

¹⁰ Ibid., 495-73-48-55.

Dimitrov and addressed to Stalin from the collection of 211 letters preserved in the Archives were published in the collection of documents of the Annals of Communism series of the Yale Press Publications.¹¹

Based on these given facts I would like to comment on some of the recent publications of documents and research publications on the history of the Comintern. The publication »Comintern and ideas of the world revolution«¹² includes a significant number of documents that are published for the first time. They show the transformation of the idea of the world revolution, for which the Bolsheviks had created the Comintern, into a cover for the involvement of the Stalinist totalitarian dictatorship. Particularly interesting in this respect are documents on the military conspiracy of the Comintern and the communist parties in the early twenties and the activities of the permanent undercover ECCI Commission. Interpretation of the documents is however not devoid of traditional ideological clichés of the Soviet historiography. The introductory chapter contains the conclusion on the so called »independence« of the Comintern in taking important decisions up until the 1920s¹³, on emergence of regimes of »people's democracies« and the world socialist systems after the second world war.¹⁴

The same approach manifests itself in the introductory chapters to a two-volume publication of the documents »Comintern and the second world war«¹⁵, in the introduction to the collection of »Comintern against Fascism«¹⁶, and in the collection of documents on the »Comintern and Latin America«¹⁷. Given the facts above, it is strange enough to see that the recent publications by some Russian historians are repeating the Soviet clichés depicting the Comintern as an international organization, only to some certain extent influenced by Stalin.

¹¹ Dimitrov and Stalin, 1934–1943: Letters from the Soviet Archives. Ed. Alexander Dallin and F. I. Firsov. New Haven and London 2000.

¹² Коминтерн и идея мировой революции. Документы. Отв. редактор Я. С. Драбкин, составители Я. С. Драбкин, А. Г. Бабиченко, К. К. Шириня. М. Наука, 1998.

¹³ Там же, с. 40.

¹⁴ Там же, с. 66.

¹⁵ Коминтерн и вторая мировая война. Ч. I До 22 июня 1941г., Ч. II После 22 июня 1941г. Составители, авторы вступительной статьи и комментариев Н. С. Лебедева, М. М. Наринский. М., Памятники исторической мысли, 1994, 1998.

¹⁶ Коминтерн против фашизма. Документы. Отв. редактор Н. П. Комолова. Составители, авторы вступительной статьи В. В. Дамье, Н. П. Комолова, М. Б. Корчагина, К. К. Шириня. М. Наука, 1999.

¹⁷ Коминтерн и Латинская Америка. Сборник документов. Отв. редакторы Н. П. Калмыков, И. И. Янчук. М. Наука, 1998. We should also mention the book of L. Heifets: Хейфец, Лазарь С.: Латинская Америка в орбите Коминтерна. Опыт Биографического Словаря, Институт Латинской Америки. Институт Всеобщей Истории, Российской Академии Наук, Москва, Институту де Латинаомерика, 2000.

The publication of Dimitrov's personal diary clarifies some important aspects of this problem¹⁸. The diary, without intention of the author, shows that the Comintern was functioning as an auxiliary mechanism for implementing the goals of the Stalin regime. In this connection, I would like to quote the editor of the German edition of this Diary: »*Nolens volens* mutierte der »Steuermann der Komintern nicht nur zum Erfüllungsgehilfen Stalins, sondern auch zum Sendboten, bisweilen auch zum Quartiermeister der sowjetischen Geheimdienste.«¹⁹

Confirmation of the thesis that it was the Politburo that guided the Comintern policies and activities and that the Comintern's activities were stirred by and directly connected to activities of the Soviet intelligence services can be found in the materials of a three-volume publication »VКP(b), the Comintern and China«²⁰. Agents of this intelligence service were members of the military commission of the eastern ECCI secretariat and Far-Eastern ECCI bureau, and were involved in the organisation of the military policy of the Communist Party of China. The problems of relations between the Comintern and China were discussed in the books of N. Mamaeva and Alexander Pantsov.²¹

In one publication pertaining to the situation in Japan we find documents of the Politburo, the VКP(b) Central Committee and the Comintern.²² Another publication of documents »Politburo and the Comintern« is momentarily in press, this is the last work of professor Grant Adibekov.

Two publications devoted to the theme of the Comintern and the civil war in Spain were published almost simultaneously in Russia²³ and in the USA.²⁴ Editors of the Russian publication got relatively few documents for publication in the

¹⁸ Георги Димитров. Дневник (9 март 1933 – 6 февруари 1949). Съставителство, преводи, редакция, предговор, бележки и указатели: Димитър Сирков, Петко Боев, Никола Аврейски, Екатерина Кабакчиева. Университетско издателство Св. Климент Охридски, София, 1997. In German: Georgi Dimitroff. Tagebücher 1933–1943. Herausgegeben von Bernhard H. Bayerlein. Berlin 2000.

¹⁹ Bayerlein, Bernhard H.: Georgi Dimitroffs Tagebücher – Innensichten aus dem Stab der »Weltrevolution«. In: Georgi Dimitroff. Kommentare und Materialien zu den Tagebüchern 1933–1943. Herausgegeben von Bernhard H. Bayerlein und Wladislaw Hedeler unter Mitarbeit von Birgit Schliwenz und Maria Matschuk. Berlin 2000, S. 16.

²⁰ ВКП(б), Коминтерн и национально-революционное движение в Китае. Документы. Т. I. 1920–1925 М. Буклет, 1994; Т. II. 1926–1927. В двух частях. М. Буклет, 1996; Т. III. ВКП(б), Коминтерн и советское движение в Китае. 1937–1931. В двух частях. Ред. Коллегия: М. А. Титаренко, М. Лейтнер и др. М. Буклет, 1999.

²¹ Pantsov, Alexander: The Bolsheviks and the Chinese Revolution 1919–1927. Honolulu 2000.

²² ВКП(б), Коминтерн и Япония. 1917–1941гг. Отв. редакторы Грант Адиеков и Харуки Вада. М. РОССПЭН, 2001.

²³ Коминтерн и гражданская война в Испании. Документы. Отв. редактор С. П. Пожарская. М. Наука, 2001.

²⁴ Spain Betrayed. The Soviet Union in the Spanish Civil War. Ed. Ronald Radosh, Mary R. Habeck, and Grigory Sevostianov. New Haven and London 2001.

Archives of the Comintern, these were mainly reports of ECCI representatives in Spain. They were not even allowed to make references to files and inventories. Many documents contain vague references to »collections of documents«. This could not but influence the duality of the publication. A peculiarity if not an absurdity of this situation is that these very documents are published in the American publication with precise archival indexes. This publication has a lot of important new materials, including documents from the central military archive of Russia, ECCI cipher codes on Mask-material from cipher letters of the Comintern captured by the British and deciphered. There are a lot of documents on Soviet military advisors in Spain. Unfortunately the compilers do not know the history of the Comintern well enough. While analysing the causes of failure of the republic they do not take into account position of England and France.

A few words about the works of the Russian historian Alexander Kolpakidi who actually tries to embellish the role of the Comintern. In 1998, he wrote: »It was mainly due to the presence of the Comintern that the USSR was able to preserve its statehood, its political and economic independence«²⁵. He also attempts to rehabilitate Stalin's character when he blames Nikolai Yezhov for the terror and writes that Stalin »had real grounds to fear conspiracies, upheavals and other anti-government acts«.²⁶ Further he writes that the higher political authorities (leaders of the country) »got an idea to protect the country by taking preventive measures against potential and real enemies. It was done with the very best intentions – in the interests of strengthening the state and moral and political unification of the society in front of a real possible danger of aggression, however it had most severe dramatic consequences for the society...«²⁷

The only step which remained to be made in such argumentation is an admission that there actually was a conspiracy against Stalin. Kolpakidi took this step in his book »Double conspiracy«.²⁸ In this book he discusses preparations and the background of an assassination attempt upon Hitler in 1944, and the history of Tuchachevsky. He discusses allegations of a conspiracy of the Soviet army generals against Stalin. References are made to testimonies taken during the investigations of those arrested and put on trial. It seems that this is not only a sort of political tendency and wish to come up with a new version that is contradictory to the prevalent one. It is also neglect of the necessity to critically assess the

²⁵ Александр Колпакиди. Правда о »сером кардинале« Коминтерна, или Жизнь и смерть революционера. См.: Владимир Пятницкий. Заговор против Сталина. М. Современник, 1998, с. 416.

²⁶ Александр Колпакиди. Вальтер Кривицкий. Вокруг правды и вымысла. См.: Вальтер Кривицкий. Я был агентом Сталина. М. Современник, 1996, с. 353.

²⁷ Там же, с. 373.

²⁸ Александр Колпакиди, Елена Прудникова. Двойной заговор. Сталин и Гитлер. Несостоявшиеся путчи. М. Олма-Пресс, 2000.

documents, especially those pertaining to the Soviet period. This, however is typical not only of Kolpakidi.

A group of Russian researchers prepared a collection of documents to be published by Yale University Press under the title »The Comintern and Stalinist Repression«. William Chase, the American coeditor of this publication adjusted the texts of the preface and comments to correspond to his own ideas and views, so that the Russian coeditor refused to participate in this publication. Chase has only limited knowledge of the history of the Comintern which he demonstrates by calling Nikolai Bukharin the ECCI's Chairman²⁹; when he states that up until 1921 the Comintern was pursuing the policy of an united front from the grassroots. *единого фронта снизу*³⁰, and when he writes that Dimitrov was the only foreigner in the ECCI Secretariat.³¹

To illustrate how William Chase quotes the documents, let me give you only one example. Georgi Dimitrov recorded in his diary the doubts of Leon Feuchtwanger concerning the confessions of the defendants during the trials of Zinoviev and Radek. However William Chase ascribes these doubts to Dimitrov without even mentioning Leon Feuchtwanger.³²

William Chase's lack of knowledge on the subject is reflected in this statement: »The possibility that the party might be threatened from within and that spies, saboteurs, and enemy agents threatened national security demanded vigilant action.«³³ In other words the assassination of Sergei Kirov in 1934 initiated a campaign of vigilance, later on espionage mania turned into xenophobia resulting in mass repressions.³⁴ William Chase writes, quite seriously, that during the trial of Zinoviev and others, the masses were exercising pressure on the court and demanding capital punishment for all them.³⁵ He seems not to know that such actions could be organized only by direct orders from the party. Чейз утверждает также, что в народе было распространено мнение, будто агенты польской шпионской организации проникли в Компартию Польши.³⁶

In Chase's opinion, the mass repressions were associated with the figure of Yezhov and it was the NKVD that established the quotas for arrests.³⁷ However, two fragments from the minutes of the Politbureau contradict this view. On

²⁹ Chase, William J.: *Enemies Within the Gates? The Comintern and the Stalinist Repression, 1934–1939*. New Haven and London 2001, p. 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 162, 199-200, 274–275, 444, 450.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95. See pp. 161, 293, 405.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 440.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

October 20, 1937, the Politburo decided »to approve the proposal of the Altai Committee of the Party to establish the quantity of repressed counter-revolutionary elements in Altai Region at 4000 people of the first category, and 4500 of the second category.«³⁸ The »first category« meant execution. On February 17, 1938, the Politburo decided »to give an additional permission to the NKVD of the Ukraine to carry out arrests of kulaks and other anti-Soviet elements, to try them by the »troikas«, and to increase the limit for the NKVD of the Ukraine by 30000 people.«³⁹ Число пунктов, касающихся репрессий, в списке решений Политбюро в 36 году насчитывало 40, в 37 году – 123, в 38 году – 72.⁴⁰

The work of the terror machine, the functions of its different parts, including the role of the Cadres Department of the Comintern in the massacre of the German political emigrés in Russia is shown in a very detailed study by Reinhard Müller.⁴¹

The Russian author Oleg Khlevniuk has convincingly refuted the version of the allegedly independent role of Yezhov. In his book about the Politburo, he writes that »Yezhov was a diligent executor of Stalin's wishes and acted within the frame of clear directives from above. There is not a single known fact of evidence, even to a small extent, that Yezhov disobeyed Stalin. Yezhov was removed from his post as soon as Stalin found it necessary.«⁴²

It seems that the group of historians, which includes William Chase, Arch Getty and Robert Thurston, have one thing in common. Their perception of Soviet official documents (press publications, speeches at party meetings, etc.) as materials reflecting the actual course of events and the real attitude of the people. This explains Thurston's statement that »extensive fear did not exist in the USSR at any time in the late 1930s.«⁴³ It is hardly necessary to present any evidence that the reality was quite different. However we can recall the well known words of Eugene Varga from his letter to Stalin, sent on March 28, 1938, »The cadres in the Soviet Union who are still free are strongly demoralized and discouraged by this wave of arrests. This demoralization grips the majority of Comintern workers and extends right up to specific members of the Comintern Secretariat... Each evening many foreigners gather their things in anticipation of possible arrest.

³⁸ РГАСПИ, 17-162-22-32.

³⁹ Ibid., 17-62-22-127.

⁴⁰ Подсчитано по материалам протоколов Политбюро ЦК ВКП(б) (Ibid., 17-3-974-1004).

⁴¹ Müller, Reinhard: Menschenfalle Moskau. Exil und stalinistische Verfolgung. Hamburg 2001.

⁴² О. В. Хлевнюк. Политбюро. Механизмы политической власти в 1930-е годы. М. РОССПЭН, 1996, с. 210.

⁴³ Thurston, Robert W.: Life and Terror in Stalin's Russia, 1934–1941. New Haven and London 1996, p. 159.

Many of them are almost insane and unable to work because of this permanent fear.«⁴⁴

This is also the case with William Chase's assessment of Stalin's position as more moderate in comparison with other Central Committee members who demanded the arrest and execution of Bukharin and Rykov.⁴⁵ Arch Getty in his book »The Road to Terror« expresses a similar judgment about Stalin.⁴⁶ He quotes Bukharin's letter from prison to Stalin where Bukharin wrote about his willingness to admit the charges against him.⁴⁷ However, Arch Getty does not mention Bukharin's letter to future party leaders which he wrote shortly before his arrest and asked his wife to learn it by heart. In that letter Bukharin asked them »to untangle the monstrous maze of crimes that is becoming more and more tremendous and flaring ...«⁴⁸

We can see that the discussion on the problems of the Comintern's history, as well as the history of the Soviet Union, has not ceased. Admitting that every historian has the right to present and defend their own standpoint, I would like to express a wish that we should avoid biased approach and discuss every problem in the light of all available facts.

⁴⁴ *Проблемы мира и социализма*, 1989, №7, с. 90.

⁴⁵ Chase. Op. Cit. Pp. 218, 220.

⁴⁶ Getty, J. Arch/Naumov Oleg V.: *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932–1939*. New Haven and London 1999, pp. 325, 417.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 563.

⁴⁸ Анна Ларина (Бухарина). *Незабываемое*. М. Издательство АПН, 1989, с. 363.