Revolution Goes East

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It is there, in the West, that the chains of imperialism which were forged in Europe, and which have been strangling the world, must first be broken. . . . And yet the East must not be forgotten by us even for a moment. It must not be forgotten for the reason that it provides inexhaustible reserves and is the most reliable rear base for world imperialism.

—Joseph Stalin, “Do Not Forget the East,” Zhizn’ natsional’nostei, November 24, 1918

The Japanese Communist Party (JCP) was born in the summer of 1922 as a Comintern branch in the midst of Japan’s Siberian Intervention, Japan’s assistance to the White counterrevolutionary forces, and the Japanese imperialist advance in China. The Comintern expected the new Japanese communist movement to initiate an anti-intervention effort and reinforce opposition to imperialism among the Japanese. This prompted early Japanese communists to confront the issue of the relationship between international and national proletarian movements, and ultimately between nation, empire, and colonies. Furthermore, the Marxist unilineal historical framework, popularized by Russian revolutionaries and Japanese Marxists, was responsible for the new understanding among Japanese leftists that they were part of global, world-historical social changes. As part of the revolutionary strategy, Japanese leftists had to question where Japan stood in the Marxist scale of world-historical development and interpret the history of Japanese political and economic development in accordance with Marxist doctrine. Quite remarkably, despite their admiration for the Russian Revolution, early Japanese communists concluded that the Russian model of socialist revolution was not applicable to Japan’s conditions. Instead, they came up with their own vision for the Japanese revolution, one that was quite divergent from the expectations of the Comintern for the role of the JCP in the Asia-wide anti-imperialist struggle.

This chapter examines the initial contacts between the Comintern and the JCP, and their differing views on revolutionary strategy in Japan, by looking at the writings of the socialist Yamakawa Hitoshi (1880–1958). By 1922, Yamakawa
emerged as the main theoretician of the Japanese Left, authoring the first JCP program that determined the trajectory of the Japanese Left for the next decade. His program for the JCP was faithful (maybe pedantically so) to the principles of Marxist orthodoxy, but his immediate and urgent task was to formulate a political program that would unite the various disparate trends of the Japanese socialist movement: anarchists, syndicalists, social democrats, and communists. However, Yamakawa also actively disagreed with the creation of a party of professional revolutionaries, insisting instead on a mass proletarian party. He also opposed the Comintern’s suggestions for JCP tactics, which he rightly suspected were tailored for China. Through a close reading of Russian Comintern archives and the writings of Yamakawa Hitoshi, including his reports to the Comintern, this chapter reveals that throughout the 1920s, the JCP retained a degree of independence from the Comintern. At the same time, Comintern officials in Moscow often acknowledged that they had little information about Japan, and up until 1928 they delegated the coordination— theoretical and practical— of the JCP to either the Comintern’s eastern branch in Shanghai, headed by Grigory Voitinsky (1893–1956), or more often to the Japanese communists themselves.

In the 1920s, Japanese communists still had the self-confidence to question the decisions of the Comintern. Contrary to the prevalent assumption in Western and Japanese historiography that the JCP was an obedient subsidiary of the Comintern, I demonstrate, first, that the Comintern wielded far less influence and control over Japanese communists and socialists than has hitherto been presumed; and second, that the JCP’s assessment of Japanese social and capitalist development had far-reaching implications for its revolutionary strategy at home and in the Japanese colonies.

The Comintern established two transnational routes to connect with Japanese socialists: a “western route” (Amsterdam—New York—Mexico City) and an “eastern route” (Irkutsk—Vladivostok—Shanghai). The “western route” was managed by the old socialist Katayama Sen (1859–1933), the “eastern route” by Grigory Voitinsky. In the initial period between 1919 and 1922, it was Katayama Sen and fellow Japanese immigrants in the United States, such as Kondō Eizō, Takahashi Kamekichi, Taguchi Unzō, Yoshihara Tarō, Maniwa Suekichi, Ishigaki Eitarō, Suzuki Mosaburō, and Inomata Tsunao, who were the most important links between Russian Bolsheviks and Japanese socialists. They translated socialist and Comintern literature from English into Japanese and obtained crucial collaboration from sailors and other people engaged in trans-Pacific literature-smuggling operations. They also translated Japanese reports on domestic socialist and labor movements into English and dispatched them via Amsterdam to Moscow. Katayama himself radicalized after meeting Leon Trotsky, Nikolai Bukharin, Vladimir Volodarsky, and Alexandra Kollontai in New York in the spring of 1917.
In 1919, he established the Association of Japanese Socialists in New York, and joined the newly formed Communist Party of America. At his urging, Yoshihara Tarō, a Japanese émigré living in the United States, attended the Congress of the Peoples of the East—held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in September 1920—as the only representative of Japan. After helping establish a network of Japanese immigrants on the East and West Coasts, as well as in Hawaii and Mexico, Katayama departed for Moscow in 1921 to serve as chairman of the Far Eastern People’s Congress. He stayed there until his death in 1933, serving as the representative of the Japanese communist movement at the presidium of the Comintern.

The “eastern route” of the Comintern’s advance into the Japanese socialist scene was managed from Shanghai by Grigory Voitinsky, who became a central figure in the history of the JCP and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and had a big influence on Lenin’s East Asian policies and, subsequently, Stalin’s East Asian policies. Voitinsky had lived in the United States (1913–18) and then returned to Russia, where he joined the Bolshevik Party. During the Civil War, he worked for the party in the Russian Far East, was arrested by the White forces in 1919 in Vladivostok and sentenced to a life of hard labor in Sakhalin, where he led a convict revolt and managed to escape. In Vladivostok, he started working in the apparatus of the Comintern, and in April 1920, at the age of twenty-seven, he was sent to China as the leader of a small group of communist comrades tasked with the mission to reorganize the various Marxist groups in Japan, China, and Korea into communist parties amenable to Comintern directions. While there, he assisted in the early development of the Chinese communist movement, both financially and in the training of young cadres. Until 1927, Voitinsky worked as one of the Comintern’s experts on China and Japan, drafting directives for the Comintern’s executive committee as well as for the CCP and JCP, and writing on the revolutionary movement in Japan and China for the Communist International and the International Press Correspondence (Inprecor).

As far back as 1920, the Comintern branches in Irkutsk, Vladivostok, and Shanghai had been sending Korean and Chinese radicals to Japan to establish contacts with Japanese socialists and encourage them to create a communist party as a branch of the Comintern. In 1921–22, the arrival of Asian continental radicals with questionable affiliations, vast sums of money, and persistent invitations to travel to Moscow through the Siberian war zone and carefully watched military police outposts in Shimonoseki and Shanghai, disconcerted the Japanese socialists. Not sure what to make of the Third International, Sakai voiced his doubts about the Comintern in Shinshakai hyōron, in July 1920:

A new international Communist party has arisen with its headquarters in Russia, and it is called the Third International. It is important to know from the start whether we will oppose it or support it. How
these two varieties of international socialism [i.e., the Second and Third Internationals] will oppose one another and how they will unite is truly a major topic of interest.\textsuperscript{10}

Sakai and Yamakawa were familiar with and committed to the Second International and therefore had some hesitation about throwing in their lot with the still unfamiliar Third Communist International. Yamakawa would recollect in his memoirs that the creation of the Comintern transformed the Japanese radical movement: “Everyone interested in socialist thought was influenced by the Russian Revolution. At one brief moment, we all as one supported the revolution. There was such a period. But this was before the Comintern was created. After that, everything settled, and opinions gradually split.”\textsuperscript{11} In the end, it was anarchists and Japanese émigrés from the United States who initially agreed to work with the Comintern.\textsuperscript{12}

Despite his later critique of the Comintern, in 1921 Yamakawa was quickly persuaded that Japanese socialists ought to establish a communist party in Japan and therefore join the global communist movement. Under pressure from one of the “Katayama boys”—Kondō Eizō (1883–1965), who returned from the United States to Japan in 1919—and after meeting another Korean Bolshevik envoy in April 1921, Sakai, Yamakawa, and others set up the Preparatory Committee of the JCP. In the same month, Yamakawa drafted the Manifesto of the Preparatory Committee, which Kondō took to Shanghai in May. The manifesto was then passed on to Moscow, where it was published in September and October of that year as the Charter and Manifesto of the Japanese Communist Party. It seems that Yamakawa, Sakai, and other members of the Preparatory Committee were making plans to visit Soviet Russia, but they were thwarted by the arrest of Kondō Eizō. In Shanghai, Kondō received from Voitinsky an enormous (by contemporary standards) sum of 6,500 yen for organizational expenses but was arrested as soon as he returned to Japan, sparking antisocialist legislation within the home bureaucracy.\textsuperscript{13} Due to tightened security, the planned visit of Japanese socialists to Moscow was foiled. Only Japanese immigrants from the United States, Taguchi Unzō and Yoshihara Tarō, attended the Third Comintern Congress in the summer of 1921, where they claimed to be members of the (nonexistent) Japanese Communist Party and showed Lenin Yamakawa’s manifesto as a proof of their affiliation.

Despite these setbacks, the Japanese socialists were determined to establish a Japanese communist party as a Comintern branch. This time the major push came from two other sojourners to Moscow, Takase Kiyoshi and Tokuda Kyūichi, who were enthralled by the Russian Bolsheviks at the Conference of the Far Eastern Revolutionary Organizations, held in Moscow in the winter of 1922. The
official date of the establishment of the first JCP is considered to be July 15, 1922, and its creation was announced at the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in November 1922. The general secretary was Arahata Kanson, and the secretary of the International Sector was Sakai Toshihiko. At its founding, the JCP had fourteen cells and fifty-eight members.

Communist parties in East Asia were formed in the following order: Korea (May 1921, in Irkutsk and Shanghai), China (July 1921), and Japan (July 1922). The activities of the Comintern in East Asia constituted the only crucial factor in their creation. But because the JCP was forged in the context of the Siberian Intervention and Japan’s imperialist advance in China, the Comintern anticipated that, as “the best organized and strongest force” in Eastern countries, the Japanese proletariat would strike “the first decisive blow against foreign and predatory imperialism and imperialist coercion.” At the Congress of Toilers of the Far East (January 1922), Zinoviev, the head of the Comintern, especially emphasized the importance of bringing the Japanese socialist movement into the communist fold:

The Japanese bourgeoisie rule over and oppress many millions of people in the Far East, holding in its hands the fate of all that sector of the world. Therefore, the defeat of the Japanese bourgeoisie and the final victory of the revolution in Japan can alone solve the Far Eastern question. . . . This makes the responsibility of the young Japanese proletariat particularly great. . . . The fate of the Japanese revolutionary movement is acquiring an enormous international importance.

In the eyes of the Comintern, the ultimate objective of the JCP was to reinforce the peoples’ and workers’ opposition to Japanese imperialism. Japanese socialists bore a heavy responsibility: peace in the East Asian region depended on their actions.

As mentioned before, in April 1921 Yamakawa wrote the Manifesto of the Preparatory Committee of the JCP, based on the program of the British Communist Party. The document was written in English, as was the Program of the Communist Party of Japan, which Yamakawa wrote in September 1922 for the National Convention of the Communist Party of Japan. Yamakawa’s program was sent to Moscow for the Fourth Congress of the Comintern (November–December 1922) as proof of the formal establishment of the JCP. It remained the only program of the JCP throughout the 1920s, even after the party was reorganized in 1926, after which Yamakawa left it. Given the lack of access to Russian archives, it was traditionally presumed that the JCP program was written by the Russian Bolshevik Nikolai Bukharin during the Fourth Comintern Congress, the so-called Bukharin Theses of 1922. As will be discussed later in more detail, what
are known as the Bukharin Theses of 1922 were written in 1924 and became known in Japan only in 1928. Hence, Yamakawa’s program from 1922 was the only communist program of the first JCP known to the Japanese.

The program unequivocally recognized the JCP as a branch of the Comintern. As an illegal proletarian party, the objectives of the JCP were “the overthrow of the Capitalist regime through the establishment of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat based on Soviet Power.” Yamakawa then established that Japan was “the most powerful of the capitalist nations of the Orient,” and therefore “The Communist Party 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.”

In other words, the JCP program considered Japan to be an advanced capitalist country on a par with Western countries and therefore in need of an immediate proletarian, not a bourgeois, revolution, which would “establish the Proletarian Dictatorship based on the Soviet of the workers, peasants and soldiers.”

In the 1921 manifesto of the JCP, Yamakawa had already proclaimed that the Meiji Revolution of 1868 was a bourgeois-democratic revolution, and that it had laid the foundation for capitalist development in Japan. Therefore,

> The progress of capitalism in Japan . . . gave impetus to the proletarian movement. The sharp growth of the workers’ movement in 1918 and, later on, the innumerable strikes and workers’ protests, the rapid awakening and development of class consciousness of the workers, the powerful, unstoppable spread of socialist doctrine throughout the country—all of this is the fruit of the economic development of Japan.

Yamakawa’s claim that the Meiji Revolution was in fact a bourgeois revolution marked the beginning of a decade-long debate about the nature of the Meiji Revolution, which culminated in the late 1920s in a series of seminal debates over Japanese capitalism (Nihon shihonsugui ronsō). Yamakawa supported the idea that Japan’s economy during the Tokugawa period paved the way for its rapid capitalist development in the modern period, rejecting therefore the idea that after the Meiji Revolution foreign capitalism merged with Japanese feudalism to produce a highly contradictory socioeconomic and political system. Yamakawa was confident that Japan was moving steadily toward greater democratization and that after World War I, as Japanese industry and trade grew steadily, the new generation of the bourgeoisie began to demand more political rights and break with existing bureaucratic-military political structures. In the aftermath of the war, Yamakawa argued, a modern capitalist state was finally coming into existence in Japan, bringing with it the completion of the Meiji bourgeois democratic revolution. The rise of the first commoner, Hara Takashi, to the premiership and
the dominance of party politics were proof for Yamakawa that bourgeois democratic political power was firmly established in Japan. This new development, he thought, put Japan on a level with advanced Western countries.

Since the JCP considered the Japanese proletariat to be advanced and therefore an independent political force, the issue arose of whether socialists should support the universal suffrage movement championed by the progressive bourgeoisie. Some JCP members agreed that the party, and socialists of all persuasions, must support the universal suffrage movement and strive for workers’ rights through a legal proletarian party. However, Yamakawa, Sakai Toshihiko, Arahata Kanson, and other leaders of the JCP rejected any cooperation and a united front with liberal democratic forces. Yamakawa specifically refused to create a legal proletarian party, which would, he feared, be drawn into bourgeois politics in the Diet. Yamakawa expected that the JCP would organize “proletarian political action outside the Diet, to help accelerate the ‘progress of Democracy,’” while “exposing the hypocrisy and futility of bourgeois democracy, and demonstrating to the proletariat the necessity of creating their own machinery of Government.” He firmly believed that Japan, as an advanced capitalist country with a long history of a socialist movement had to establish an autonomous labor movement based on the industrial working class in order to achieve a suitable vehicle for the propagation of socialism.

In fact, in 1919–22, Yamakawa made a name for himself as a critic of the Taishō democratic movement, which he insisted was championed by the capitalist and imperialist petite bourgeoisie. He insisted that in the age of imperialist expansion, the bourgeoisie would always and a priori remain antagonistic to the proletariat. He recalled Lenin’s analysis that the imminent and inevitable collapse of capitalism (of which imperialism is the last stage) caused an increased need among the capitalists to secure their assets by manipulating nationalist circles against the revolutionary working class. Only in this way, Lenin argued, could the capitalistic bourgeoisie safeguard its interests and profits achieved through expansion and war. Yamakawa suspected that the Japanese bourgeoisie was using the universal suffrage movement to advance its own interests against the old conservative authority, big capital, and landowners. He argued 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, on which Yoshino placed his hopes, really meant the interests of only one class—the bourgeoisie.

Similarly, Yamakawa justified the Bolsheviks’ terror against their opponents as necessary for dealing with the Russian petite bourgeoisie, which still tended to
side with the old reactionary forces and, Yamakawa believed, was solely responsible for the political violence in the country. He held a view common among non-Russian communists during the Russian Civil War: that the persecution of the opposition in Soviet Russia, the concentration of power in the hands of the party’s political bureau, and the party’s total control of the economy, the state, and the justice system were unavoidable but temporary. Once the whole of society had proletarianized, Yamakawa was confident that the dictatorship and bureaucratism of the soviets would disappear.

Yamakawa therefore declared the true enemy of the people to be the bourgeoisie, rather than the old feudal absolutist forces (the emperor, the military, and the landlord aristocracy). The Japanese proletariat, he believed, must nurture its own class consciousness and reject collaboration with the progressive bourgeoisie. Right until the Kantō earthquake in September 1923, Yamakawa and other socialists following his lead were calling on workers to abstain from voting, as their participation in the electoral process would only further empower bourgeois democracy and its institutions. In this way, the JCP initially rejected the option of a legal proletarian party and insisted instead on illegal activities. One outcome of Yamakawa’s position was that democratic mass movements that had the potential to address or curb authoritarian state power began to be looked down on by socialist intellectuals and other political activists as historically backward. The historian Ito Akira has even argued that Japanese socialists were partly responsible for the fact that popular fascism failed to develop in Japan: fascism in Europe attacked democracy, which in Japan had been crushed by the socialists before it could gain a wider audience.

What was the Comintern’s position on this issue? Despite its hopes that the Japanese proletarian movement would initiate a successful battle against its own country’s capitalism and imperialism, China was what preoccupied the Bolshevik leaders the most. After the communists’ defeats in Europe, they turned their attention and high hopes to Asia, considering now that the revolutionary upheaval in China would ensure the subsequent success of proletarian revolutions in the West. The Bolsheviks’ Asian policy was based on the ideas developed by Lenin during World War I. Lenin recognized the great revolutionary potential of nationalism in Asia and thus recommended to the “toilers of the East” that they fight “not against capital but against medieval remnants,” not against bourgeois but against feudal exploiters. In fact, the nascent proletariat and peasants in colonial and semicolonial Asia were to join hands with the national bourgeoisie to end Western imperialist dominance. Revolutionary Asia thus had to overthrow simultaneously both native feudalism and foreign imperialism. When Lenin came up with his revolutionary program for Asia, however, he had in mind Persia, Central Asia, India, and China in their
struggles against the British Empire. Neither Japan’s proletariat nor its imperialism was ever included in his considerations.

The first time that Bolshevik leaders paid special attention to the Japanese case was at the Fourth Comintern Congress (November 1922). In response to instructions from Lenin, who relied on reports by the Siberian communist Boris Shumyatsky and Grigory Voitinsky from Siberia and China, respectively, a special recommendation for the young JCP was written during the congress. And yet the Comintern’s recommended revolutionary strategy for Japan was similar to its recommendations for India and China. In the Comintern assessment, like China, imperial Japan was a semifudal country, whereas Japanese imperialism was a product of the military, big landowners, and semifudal Asiatic absolutism. The Comintern declared that Japan had not yet achieved the stage of bourgeois democracy, and thus the provisional objective must be the full democratization of the political regime and establishment of bourgeois democratic rule. In the eyes of the Bolshevik leaders, therefore, Japan’s modernity was incomplete. The immediate task of the JCP was therefore to form a united front with the bourgeoisie, which would constitute the first stage of the two-stage revolution. The future bourgeois-democratic revolution, brought about by the united front of proletariat, peasants, and national bourgeoisie, would eliminate the vestiges of feudalism. Only after that revolution was complete would the proletarian revolution follow in Japan.

The Soviet leaders themselves, however, were not convinced. Even so, lacking sufficient knowledge and theoretical analysis of Japan’s modern development, they remained ambivalent about what to make of Japan. As E. H. Carr noted, for the Soviets, “Japan was both the Britain and the Germany of the Far East.” In the proceedings of the Fourth Comintern Congress, Japan was curiously included in both the sections on Western imperialist countries and the colonial and semi-colonial world. Traditionally Asian, with its large agrarian sector and imperial institution, Japan was also industrially developed, never colonized, and the biggest imperialist threat to the Soviet Union. Voitinsky, for example, observed that the Japanese state was strong and progressive in its own way: it included bourgeois parties in the Diet, it was highly modernized, and it had an advanced industry and a developed proletariat. Despite Voitinsky’s assessment and the obvious fact that Japan was an industrialized empire threatening the existence of the Soviet Union, the Comintern concluded in the Fourth Congress that in Japan “remnants of feudal relationships are manifested in the structure of the state, which is controlled by a bloc of commercial and industrial capitalists and big landlords.” At the same time, the emperor was perceived less as the country’s supreme political figure than as the grandest of its “semi-feudal big landlords,” in accordance with Marx’s description of the Asiatic despot.
Thus, in Lenin’s developmental scale of revolutionary progression, Japan was slotted into the semicolonial category and therefore afforded only a secondary place in the coming world revolution. Despite bringing Asia’s revolutionary struggle to the forefront of communist discussions, Lenin retained the old Marxist belief that the West would be the chief battleground of the world revolution, and that Asia’s freedom was a part of the white man’s burden. Revolutions in the colonized and semicolonized world, including Japan, would play only a supplementary role in the grand scheme of things: they would disrupt global capitalism and help trigger revolution in Europe. Only after the European revolutions succeeded, not least by dismantling the system of Western imperialism and colonialism, would the liberation of colonial Asia, including Japan, be possible. Not until then would Japan be ready for the second stage—the proletarian revolution.

This leads us to the issue of the “Asiatic despot”—what was, then, the imperial institution in modern Japan? Remarkably, in the early 1920s, neither the Comintern nor the JCP considered the abolition of the monarchy to be a central issue. In the case of the early JCP, the issue in theory was resolved fairly easily. Because Japan was an industrialized capitalist country, the monarch (kunshu) was simply a remnant of the feudal past. As Japan’s capitalist development was unstoppable and sure, the monarchy was destined to disappear soon, to be succeeded by a democratic “constitutional system” (rikkensei). It was believed unnecessary to make the imperial institution the focal point of the communist struggle because capitalist development would, in the natural course of things, sweep it away as a feudal remnant of the past.

Historians have traditionally assumed not only that the JCP program was written down in the Bukharin Theses of 1922 (or, the 1922 Comintern Theses on Japan), but also that the focal point of the theses was the abolition of the imperial system (kunshusei haishi). Bukharin, it was claimed, declared the preeminent objective of the JCP to be the establishment of “proletarian dictatorship and the replacement of the military-plutocratic monarchy with the authority of the Soviets.” According to official JCP history and historians of Japanese communism, on receiving the Bukharin Theses on Japan, the JCP immediately called a special meeting at Shakujii, a Tokyo district, on March 15, 1923, and adopted them as its official program.

However, based on his extensive research at the Comintern archives in Moscow, Katō Tetsurō has shown that the 1922 Comintern Theses did not call for the abolition of the imperial institution! In fact, Katō persuasively argued that the official JCP story—that it prioritized the struggle against the monarchy from the beginning—has been largely misrepresented by post–World War II Japanese historians with Marxist leanings. The story was originally made up by the communist party member Tokuda Kyūichi during his police interrogations in 1929. According to Katō, there
was no such thing as the Bukharin Theses in 1922. It is more likely that what was discussed by Japanese communists at the special meeting at Shakujii in March 1923 was Bukharin’s proposal for the Comintern’s general program, not the Comintern’s program for Japan.44 The Comintern general program, obviously, did not contain any specific details about Japan.

Indeed, if we examine the day-to-day proceedings of the Fourth Congress, it is evident that Bukharin presented his general proposal at the start of the congress, on November 18.45 Believing that the victory of the world socialist revolution was just a few years away, Bukharin disapproved of the new Comintern policy of a united front with noncommunists—a policy largely influenced by the diplomatic and political needs of the struggling Soviet state—and instead pressed for the more radical program of an offensive on the “capitalist world.” Bukharin was famous among early Bolsheviks for his radical position. He justified, for example, the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1921 and, invoking the French Revolution, declared that Soviet Russia had the right to use military offensives to initiate proletarian revolutions in other countries. Nevertheless, nowhere in his speech does he mention Japan. His proposal was opposed by the majority of the attendees and paralyzed the work of the congress, at which point Lenin (already seriously ill), Trotsky, Karl Radek, and Grigory Zinoviev had to intervene. Their joint resolution rejected Bukharin’s proposition and became the resolution of the congress; it asserted the necessity of the transitional demands of the united front and the adoption of tactics suitable for the peculiar context of each country. Zinoviev offered to lead the way in creating programs for each individual communist party, basing them on the draft of the general Comintern program.46 Therefore, the delegates at the Fourth Congress adopted neither a program put forward by the JCP nor a general program of the Comintern.

In 1922–23, the JCP was preoccupied less with the monarchy than with the revolutionary strategy for Japan. The Shakujii report, written in English (the original is in the Comintern archives in Russia), reveals that JCP members were engrossed in discussing where imperial Japan fit into the Marxist-Leninist historical framework. The debate raged over whether the JCP should agree with the Comintern proposal of the two-stage revolution and the creation of a legal proletarian party and, in general, whether the JCP ought to follow the Comintern’s orders at all, as they seemed not to be based on actual knowledge of Japanese conditions.47 The monarchy issue seemed to be secondary to the more urgent and important one of Japan’s place in world history (at least in the Marxist-Leninist version). Moreover, Katō also points out that in the police interrogations of JCP members after the 1923 arrests, there was no mention of the emperor issue. The only two concerns of the police were confirming that the JCP was in fact established as a Comintern branch and clarifying what the theory of the two-stage revolution entailed.48
If the Comintern considered Japan’s task to be fighting against feudalism, why was the abolition of the monarchy omitted in its recommendations? Here it seems one ought to consider again Soviet foreign affairs. In 1921–22, the Soviet regime still struggled for its own survival. It was of the utmost urgency for the Soviet leaders to negotiate the withdrawal of Japanese troops from Russian territory and to establish diplomatic relations with Japan. It was understood in Moscow that the radical program of the JCP to abolish the imperial system and immediately implement a socialist revolution could endanger diplomatic relations between Soviet Russia and Japan. The needs of the new government took priority over the revolutionary agenda of the Comintern, and the latter conceded. While continuing to recommend the strategy of a united front of the proletariat and national bourgeoisie against Japanese imperialism, the Comintern avoided direct confrontation with the Japanese imperial institution.

Russian Bolsheviks, of course, realized the centrality of the monarchy for Japanese imperialism. The Bukharin Theses, in fact, did exist and did state the need to replace the “military-plutocratic monarchy.” But they were not written in 1922 and did not become the Comintern’s official recommendation for the JCP. What were later to become known as the Bukharin Theses were originally written in German, in late 1923 and 1924, for the publication of *Materialien zur Frage des Programms der Kommunistische Internationale* (Collection of the programs of the Communist International) in Hamburg, Germany, in 1924. The German edition of the theses included a section on “a proletarian dictatorship,” which declared that “the replacement of the military-plutocratic monarchy with the power of the Soviets” was “the goal of the Communist Party.”49

However, the radicalization of the Comintern position in 1924 had less to do with the Japanese monarchy than with the internal struggle within the Russian Communist Party. The “turn to the left” was initiated by Stalin, who was making his way to power as Lenin was dying. After the abortive German revolution in October 1923, Stalin used the opportunity to defeat his internal rivals, Trotsky and Radek, putting the blame for the failed revolution on their shoulders. Stalin denounced Trotsky-supported united front tactics and took a deliberately radical position, which included a seemingly uncompromising fight against Japan’s imperial institution. The *Collection of Programs* for foreign communist parties, including the Bukharin Theses on Japan, served as the guideline for the Comintern’s new radical policy.50 The catch was that no one in Japan—neither the JCP nor the police and government—was aware of the new Comintern demand to abolish the monarchy. The Japanese translation of the theses was published in Japan only in 1928. Yamakawa mentioned that there were rumors of the existence of the Bukharin Theses, but very few people had read the document. Yamakawa therefore was unaware of the monarchy issue because he himself read the
Bukharin Theses in French translation only in 1928. It is probably not coincidental that the revision of the Peace Preservation Law was undertaken in 1928, the year when the issue of the abolition of the monarchy turned up in Japan for the first time.

By refusing to work on the establishment of a legal proletarian party, the early JCP intended to reproduce the tactics of the then illegal Russian Communist Party prior to 1917. In June 1923, at the Third Plenum of the Enlarged Congress of the Comintern Committee (ECCI), Arahata spoke openly against Zinoviev’s proposal to establish a legal proletarian party, arguing that such a party would further alienate militant and anarcho-syndicalist elements of the working class.

Must we form a party and risk losing the support of the active elements in the working class? The syndicalist workers have been against the communist movement for the very reason that the latter became involved in politics. If we form a [legal] party we shall suffer defeat. . . . It is important [first] to educate the workers in politics before we organize them into a political party.

The JCP, and Yamakawa specifically, always insisted that their ultimate goal was the capture of political power, establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and creation of a soviet government. In the meantime, the JCP must create the system of proletarian political education; support the Suiheisha movement; infiltrate and radicalize unions, peasant organizations, and even, remarkably, the army and the navy by organizing clandestine “cells” in order to guide these groups to a socialist revolution.

Yamakawa regarded Japanese labor unions as the closest approximation in Japan to Russian soviets in terms of organization and paradoxically considered labor unions, rather than the vanguard communist party, as the main revolutionary force in the country. In his estimation, it would be organized workers, acting through unions, who would eventually overthrow capitalism, accomplish a socialist revolution, and take control of the country with absolute mass support. In his understanding, the JCP as a party of socialist intellectuals would eventually merge with the bigger labor union movement. Until then, however, the success of the revolution depended on the centralization and unification of labor unions into one national union governed by a central committee. Yamakawa specifically stipulated that the primary task of the JCP was to attract the majority of the working class into the unions. It was within the unions that the emancipation and maturation of the political and individual consciousness of the workers would occur—the necessary precondition for a socialist revolution. Yamakawa thus attempted to merge the socialist and labor movements into one, whereby the labor unions would assume a political character and begin to function as a party.
Yamakawa was inspired by the impact that labor unions were having on domestic and foreign politics. One of the most visible success stories was the anti-interventionist movement initiated by the procommunist labor union Sōdōmei, whose actions were inspired by British labor unions. In 1919, British labor unions and left-wing organizations organized a Hands off Russia Committee, which was fairly successful in turning the British public and workers against the government’s intervention in Russia. In July 1920, a delegation sent by the British Labour Party published its report on the situation there; the report had an enormous impact on the public’s outlook on the Russian question. The British also sent a report titled “Japanese in Siberia” to the Sōdōmei. The report revealed atrocities committed by the Japanese army in Siberia. The British committee warned that it would make sure that workers around the world boycotted Japanese goods unless the Japanese government changed its aggressive policy in the Russian East. In May and November 1921, the Sōdōmei lodged its protest against the intervention with the Japanese government and voiced opposition to a renewal of the Anglo-Japanese alliance. Moreover, in the May First celebrations of 1921, under the Sōdōmei’s influence labor unions in Tokyo began for the first time to demand recognition of the USSR. At the 1922 Sōdōmei national convention, demands were passed for the recognition of the Soviet Union by Japan, the restoration of economic relations with Russia, and the immediate withdrawal of Japanese troops from Siberia. The resolutions of the national convention were written by Akamatsu Katsumaro and Nosaka Sanzō, both members of the JCP, together with Nishio Suehiro, a prominent labor activist. The very public and highly effective political activities of the labor unions were in stark contrast to the socialists’ individual attempts to criticize Japanese state actions at home and abroad. Finally, the Soviets in Russia and, corresponding to them, the labor unions in Japan, came to be regarded as the makers of the revolution, not the vanguard party of socialist intellectuals.

By 1917, Japanese socialists already had been reckoning with Japanese imperialism for some time, and it was nothing new for them when the Comintern declared that the domestic revolutionary struggle of the Japanese socialists would need to go hand in hand with their struggle against Japanese imperialism in Korea and China. In theory, Japanese communists considered Japanese imperialism as a stage in the development of capitalism in Japan, which resulted in Japan’s aggressive expansion and exploitation of backward economic regions in Asia. Capitalism at home was thus the cause of imperialism abroad. The JCP Program of 1922 closed with a section titled “Korean, Chinese, and Siberian Questions.” The full text of this section reads as follows:

The Communist Party of Japan is resolutely opposed to every species of Imperialist policy. It is opposed to the intervention, open and secret,
in China and Siberia, the interference with the governments of these countries, the “Sphere of Influence” and “Vested Interests” in China, Manchuria, and Mongolia, and all other attempts and practices of a similar nature.

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. The Korean Revolution will bring with it a national crisis in Japan and the fate of both the Korean and Japanese proletariat will depend on the success or failure of the fight carried on by the united effort of the Communist Parties of the two countries.

The three principal nations in the Far East, China, Korea, and Japan, are most closely related to one another in their political, social, and economic life, and thus bound to march together toward the goal of Communism. The international solidarity of the proletariat and particularly of these three countries is indispensable to the Victory and Emancipation of the Proletariat, not only of the respective countries but of the whole world.\(^\text{60}\)

The JCP recognized the intertwined revolutionary destiny of Japan, Korea, and China, which were “bound to march together toward the goal of Communism.” Nowhere were the Western countries and Soviet Russia mentioned, so Japanese communists did not consider Soviet Russia and socialist revolutions in the West to be the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change in Asia. Workers of Asia—Japan, Korea, China, Taiwan—were the makers of their own liberation. In this, the JCP’s position diverged from Marx’s and Lenin’s view that proletarian victory of the Western workers would free the “backward” East.

Non-European communists strongly disagreed with the Comintern’s view that the liberation of the non-West “can be victorious only in conjunction with the proletarian revolution in the advanced countries.”\(^\text{61}\) The early JCP agreed with the Indian revolutionary Manabendra Roy, founder of the Communist Party of India, who first mounted a critique of the Eurocentric orientation of the Bolshevik Party at the Second Congress of the Comintern (in the summer of 1920). Roy argued that the victory of socialism in Russia had saved all backward countries from the historical necessity of passing through a capitalist stage. With the aid of local communist parties, workers of India, China, and elsewhere can
take a shortcut to communism. Thus, he rejected Lenin’s prescription to subordinate the communist movement of the urban working class to the national bourgeoisie in the non-European countries. He maintained that at the very start of the revolution the communist vanguard ought to seize leadership and not allow it to remain in the hands of the bourgeoisie. Roy’s conclusion was that the colonized would initiate their own revolution, regardless of the outcomes of the proletarian struggle in Europe. Moreover, Roy and other Asian communists insisted that the proletarian revolution must triumph in Asia in order for the communist movement in Europe to succeed.62 Similarly, Yamakawa and the early JCP members believed that the proletarian struggle in Japan must be independent from, and not subsidiary to, the revolution in either the Western advanced countries or Soviet Russia.

Moreover, the early JCP argued that the Japanese revolution must not depend on the Asian colonies—that is, Korea and China—because they were in a different stage of historical development compared to Japan. In the JCP program, Yamakawa made a critical remark that the Korean and Chinese revolutionary movements were still not free from “nationalist prejudices,” wrongly prioritizing the slogan of independence from Japanese imperialism over the slogan of independence from capitalism, both Japanese and domestic. Yamakawa and most other Japanese communists regarded Korean and Chinese leftist movements as nationalist rather than truly proletarian in nature.63 Yamakawa was highly suspicious of what he perceived as virulent Korean nationalism, which he felt was out of step with internationalist and modern socialist movements. In his view, in Asia it was only the Japanese industrial proletariat that had attained an advanced level of proletarian and internationalist class consciousness, and it alone was capable of leading and representing other colonial workers. Yamakawa maintained that the Korean national independence movement should abandon its national liberation aims and instead rise up against its own capitalist class under the guidance of the more progressive Japanese socialist movement.64 The far-reaching conclusions for the JCP were to brush off the Korean national liberation movement as historically backward; deny the priority of an anti-imperialist struggle, which would require prioritizing the struggle in the colonies and misguided cooperation with the bourgeoisie; and separate the Japanese leftist movement from those of Korea and China.

How and whether to collaborate with Korean colonial workers, and what kind of revolutionary strategy to implement, were the main questions that occupied the Japanese Left in the first half of the 1920s. Only from the mid-1920s forward did Japanese leftists become seriously interested in the Chinese revolutionary movement. Yamakawa’s first writings on China appeared only in 1926. In them, he continued to hold the same position—that without the destruction of the
imperial government at home, in the Japanese metropole, by means of a socialist revolution, there could be no destruction of Japanese imperialism and therefore no Chinese revolution. 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. Ultimately, his “economist” thinking made him somewhat indifferent to the question of imperialism and the role of Japan’s empire in Asia. 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 against domestic capitalism, which they believed would eventually benefit the whole colonial world in Asia.

Early JCP activities were seriously hampered by the police crackdown and internal turmoil. 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 Order and Police Law. Yamakawa was acquitted and released due to lack of evidence; the others received sentences ranging from eight to ten months of imprisonment. Four prominent communists—Sanō Manabu, Kondō Eizō, Takatsu Seidō, and Yamamoto Kenzō—managed to escape to Vladivostok, where they were joined by Arahata, who was attending the Third Plenum of the Comintern, as well as by Wada Kiichirō, Yamazaki Kazuo, and Maniwa Suekichi from Moscow, and Tsujii Taminosuke from Chita. In March 1924, they established the foreign bureau of the Japanese Communist Party in Vladivostok, which acted as an intermediary between Moscow and the remaining Japanese communists in Japan.

The JCP and the bureau in Vladivostok, however, went through hard financial times, exacerbated by a series of embarrassing incidents for the JCP. In early 1923, the communist Yoshihara Tarō disappeared en route from Moscow to Tokyo with a large sum of money and diamonds he had received from the Comintern to finance communist activities in Japan. In 1925, a member of the bureau, Tatsuo Kitahara, traveled to Shanghai, where he received the enormous sum of 10,000 yen from the Comintern, then disappeared with the money somewhere in Japan, paralyzing the activities of the bureau and the remaining Japanese communists at home. There were other incidents of abuse of funds, and in the eyes of outsiders they cast a dubious light on the whole communist group. There is no doubt that rumors about “easy” Comintern money attracted opportunists, rogues, and pretenders, and that some of them were recruited by the police to spy on the leftist radicals.

But it was a natural disaster and its aftermath that completely crushed the early JCP. On September 1, 1923, a massive earthquake hit Tokyo, killing around 120,000 people. In the ensuing chaos, about six thousand Korean residents were killed in a kind of pogrom, and a number of known leftists, including Ōsugi, were
murdered by the military police. Demoralized by the arrests, murders, and general devastation of the city, at the JCP meeting on October 22, 1923, the remaining members decided to disband the party. Post–World War II Japanese Marxist historians explained the collapse of the first JCP by referring to Japan’s initial lack of independent Marxist theorists and experienced domestic agitators. This, they argued, led to the JCP’s dependency on Comintern instructions, which were not based on adequate knowledge of Japanese society and history. Consequently, the communist movement failed to develop indigenous roots, remained alien to Japanese society, and did not succeed in organizing significant resistance to the authoritarian state. 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 first JCP may have been a premature creation. 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. Robert Scalapino has argued that the ideological heterogeneity and immaturity of JCP members in terms of their growth as “true Marxist-Leninists,” combined with ignorance among Soviet and Comintern authorities regarding the situation in Japan, resulted in the collapse of Japan’s communist movement.

Archival evidence suggests, however, that it was not the Marxist theoretical “immaturity” of JCP members that brought about the dissolution of the JCP. Rather, the main cause was lack of conviction among its founders about the necessity of the party’s very existence. The composition of the first JCP was diverse. Many Japanese intellectuals were emotionally and intellectually attracted to Marxism and were potential communist adherents or sympathizers. Numerous activists joined the JCP, united by a shared concern over growing poverty and social displacement, and agitated for the democratization of the political system. Thus, although the party was “communist” in name, most of its members were not communists properly speaking. But most importantly for Yamakawa, the dilemma of how to organize the work of the illegal communist party in different organizations and settings, and how best to set up the relationship between the party and labor unions, was never resolved. The murders of Asian immigrants by working-class mobs shook Yamakawa’s faith in the maturity and revolutionary potential of Japanese workers. The Kantō earthquake and its aftermath thus became the turning point for the early communists, prompting many of them to turn from illegal to legal revolutionary activities.

In late 1923, after the earthquake, Yamakawa announced for the first time the need to create a legal mass proletarian party. He and other members of the socialist circle began to insist on participating in the universal suffrage movement and abandoned the tactic of abstaining from voting. Yamakawa realized
that the unions had limited appeal for the working masses, but that a legal proletarian party could become a conduit for workers’ interests in the Diet and create conditions that would allow the workers’ movement and class consciousness to grow. This, Yamakawa now insisted, was the only revolutionary path available to Japan in its present condition.71 Yamakawa finally agreed with the Comintern’s earlier assessment that Japan’s modernity was incomplete, its working class was not ready for a proletarian revolution, and cooperation with the liberal bourgeoisie in parliamentary institutions was desirable.

At this point, however, the Comintern did not have a unified view on Japan. At the Fifth Comintern Congress in July 1924, no resolution was reached regarding the situation in Japan due to lack of sufficient information and the absence of delegates from Japan.72 The Comintern headquarters relegated the responsibility for dealing with the situation in Japan to its agent in Shanghai, Grigory Voitinsky, who authored the so-called Shanghai Theses of 1925. Voitinsky had always maintained that Japan and China had very little in common. He strongly believed that the Comintern’s commitment to the alliance of the Chinese communists with the bourgeois anti-imperialist Guomindang nationalists should not be replicated in Japan. The time for such an alliance had passed, he argued, opposing the new course of Japanese socialists to unite with progressive liberal forces. In the post-earthquake situation, Voitinsky urged, the imperialist state went on an offensive against the proletariat at home, as well as in Korea and China, and cooperation with the bourgeoisie or even the social democrats was no longer possible. 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 modify their recommendations accordingly. He declared that Japanese capitalism had reached its highest stage and its emerging crisis would soon establish the preconditions for a proletarian revolution.73 The reestablishment of the JCP was in order.

When Sakai and Yamakawa received the Shanghai Theses in Tokyo in February 1925, they categorically disagreed with the proposition to reestablish the JCP. Sakai argued that the communist movement could not develop with the illegal party at its head. Yamakawa refused to participate in the reorganization of the JCP, asserting that the theses ignored the uniqueness of Japan’s position and demonstrated a lack of understanding of the country’s socioeconomic and historical development.74 At this stage, Yamakawa argued, Japanese socialists should work through a legal proletarian party, unions, and intellectual societies. The existence of an illegal party would hamper such activities, isolating the vanguard from the masses and subjecting it to useless and unnecessary persecution.75

The Comintern in Moscow also hesitated and in fact never endorsed the militant Shanghai Theses. Quite to the contrary, the party leadership in Moscow
seemed to agree with Yamakawa’s and Sakai’s resistance to Voitinsky’s plans. In the summer of 1925, after the recognition of the USSR by Japan, the Soviet trade mission was opened in Tokyo. Karlis Yanson (1882–1939), an old revolutionary who helped create the American Communist Party together with John Reed and Katayama Sen in 1919, as well as the Canadian Communist Party and the Workers Party of Canada in 1921–22, became head of the embassy. Yanson became the first Russian revolutionary in Japan who could give a firsthand account of the Japanese communist movement. He was in close contact with Japanese communists, lending them money and helping to organize their activities, even after his transfer to Shanghai in 1927 to replace Voitinsky. In Japan, Yanson was able to assess the situation on the ground, and he agreed with Yamakawa’s position that the creation of a communist party was premature, as there seemed to be no mass support for it. In fact, Adolf Ioffe made similar comments in his reports from Tokyo to Moscow in the spring of 1923 that Japan was not ready for a communist movement. Yanson reported to Moscow that strengthening labor unions and creating a mass labor party on the model of the British Labour Party must be the priority. In his December 1926 report, in which he notified the Comintern of the reorganization of the JCP, Yanson maintained that the creation of a legal mass proletarian movement was of utmost importance, even more so as conservative and radical right-wing groups were becoming a dominant force in big politics and military circles. Both Yanson and Yamakawa maintained that transition to a new social order was possible only by means of a legal proletarian party, which would (at least initially) struggle for a social democratic order within the bourgeois-democratic political system.

In his reports to Zinoviev, Yanson urged that the Comintern assist with publishing Japanese translations of Russian communist thinkers such as Lenin and Stalin—who were in high demand in Japan and whose works could be disseminated legally—as well as attend to the publication of Russian translations of Japanese leftist authors. Yanson pointed out that Russia still lacked adequate knowledge about Japan, especially its modern history, and that it was of the utmost urgency to initiate academic studies of the country. Zinoviev repeated Yanson’s recommendations concerning Japan at the Comintern meeting in September 1925 and ordered an immediate translation of Lenin’s works into Japanese. Zinoviev was the head of the Comintern between 1919 and 1926, and in formulating his position on Japan—which was therefore the official Comintern position—he adopted not Voitinsky’s argument to reestablish an illegal JCP but Yanson’s moderate one. Zinoviev endorsed the creation of a legal party in Japan, maintaining that it was a strategic mistake to create an illegal party on the model of the prerevolutionary Social Democratic Party in Russia. Other matters, the Japanese radicals would have to decide for themselves:
We have not studied Japan enough, and we know very little about its development. We must not make hasty decisions, even about organizational matters. Those who will go from our organization to Japan or who already work there must first of all study the country. We must find someone who will write a study about the situation in Japan, as comrade Roy did about India. We need to have such a book.\textsuperscript{78}

The Comintern did not arrive at any firm conclusions about how to proceed, and Zinoviev finally entrusted the eastern branches of the Comintern, in Vladivostok and Shanghai, with the task of proposing a course of action for the JCP. He specifically asked the Japanese communists and the Comintern's agents in Vladivostok and Shanghai to produce economic and political analyses of the situation in Japan.

Japanese communists were well aware of the Comintern's ambivalence and factionalism. Yamakawa, for example, disagreed not with the Comintern headquarters in Moscow (which, as we have seen, was indecisive and in general supported the creation of a legal proletarian party), but with those who were pushing for the reestablishment of the JCP, namely Voitinsky and local Japanese communists. Yamakawa was aware that the Comintern was not a monolithic organization but rather combined several "nerve centers" at different localities, which defined its local policies. His disagreements were thus not with the Comintern itself but with its agents in China, who were pushing their own local agenda.

As long as the Comintern endorsed Yamakawa's plan to work through a legal organization, the cooperation between Russian and Japanese communists continued. Comintern documents reveal that Yamakawa was in close contact with Yanson and submitted several reports to the Comintern until 1927.\textsuperscript{79} During this period, Yamakawa and other communists worked on infiltrating several leftist organizations, of which he duly notified the Comintern. Japanese communists had a strong influence in the militant Nihon Nōmin Kumiai (Japan Farmers’ Union, established in 1922), which by 1925 had a membership of more than seventy thousand.\textsuperscript{80} Communists also infiltrated the Seiji Kenkyūkai (Political Research Association, established in December 1923), which was devoted to educating the masses and assisting in forming a proletarian party. The association experienced amazing growth, and by 1925 included some four thousand workers, peasants, students, white-collar workers, and professionals in over fifty branches throughout the country. Communists also dominated the Nihon Rōdō Kumiai Hyōgikai (Japan Labor Union Council), which, by the end of 1925 and only a few months after its formation, consisted of fifty-nine unions with a membership of thirty-five thousand workers. The Hyōgikai soon became affiliated with the Pan-Pacific Trade Unions Secretariat, a creation of Profintern. Through
these organizations, the communist group influenced the country’s first legal proletarian party, the Rōdōsha Nōmintō (Worker-Farmer Party, established in March 1926). The enactment of universal manhood suffrage in 1925 raised Yamakawa’s hopes that the workers’ legal struggle was becoming possible, although his expectation was counterbalanced by the enactment of the Peace Preservation Law in the same year.

Yamakawa’s final break with the Comintern and Soviet communism happened because of the Comintern Theses on Japan, authored by Nikolai Bukharin, in 1927. What caused the break was that Yamakawa finally realized that for the Russians, China and the Chinese Revolution would always take precedence over Japan and its socialist movement. Publication of the Comintern Theses on Japan was itself a reaction to events in China. To be fair, the original request came from members of the reorganized JCP (1926), who resided at the time in Moscow. Whether they were asked to write the request by their Russian comrades or it was a genuine concern is unclear and not important. Concerned with the Shandong Expedition of April–May 1927, and Japanese military participation in the suppression of the Chinese Revolution, in June 1927 the JCP requested that the Comintern write up a thesis on Japan, citing as the main reason the growing importance of the China question for the world revolution. The main impact on the theses, however, came from the massacre of Chinese communists by the Guomindang nationalists in April 1927. Since 1922, Stalin and Bukharin had promoted the alliance of the Chinese communists with Guomindang nationalists, a policy about which Trotsky and Zinoviev had reservations. After the 1927 disaster, Stalin and Bukharin shifted their policy 180 degrees and blamed Trotsky and Zinoviev for the Comintern’s failure in China. Stalin and Bukharin now advocated for restructuring and restrengthening militant communist parties around the world; no alliances with “treacherous,” “social fascist” nationalist and social democratic groups were allowed.

The Comintern Theses on Japan, written by Bukharin and adopted on July 15, 1927, reflected the new radical position of the Comintern. Bukharin focused on two issues: Japanese imperialism and the nature of the Japanese state. In regard to Japanese imperialism, Yamakawa agreed with Bukharin’s assessment that it had a peculiar characteristic that made it different from the more familiar Western version. Since the early 1920s, Yamakawa had pointed to mass nationalism as responsible for the unhindered development of the Japanese Empire. Japanese imperialism, Bukharin argued, was getting stronger and more aggressive largely due to wide support by the Japanese masses, who were being “duped” by the government’s promises of opportunities for them in mainland China. Noting especially the entanglement of capitalism, imperialism, and militarism, both Yamakawa and Bukharin pointed out that it was the mixture of nationalism and
patriotism, carefully orchestrated by the military, that enabled Japanese capitalist imperialism to carry on with the silent support of the masses.

But if Yamakawa saw redemption in the gradual maturation of Japanese workers’ class consciousness, for Bukharin Japan could be “saved” only by outside influence. He concluded that only the Chinese Revolution and the crumbling of the Japanese Empire would change Japan’s domestic situation; therefore, the future of the revolution in Japan must be discussed in relation to the Chinese Revolution. 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. The socialist movement in Japan would be aided by the success of the CCP’s struggle on the mainland. In the text of the 1927 Theses, the first four tasks listed concerned Japanese imperialism, while only the fifth task pertained to the dissolution of the Diet, followed by the abolition of the monarchy. Therefore, Bukharin proclaimed, the most important tasks for the JCP were the struggle against Japanese imperialism in China, on the one hand, and against Japan’s preparation for war against the USSR, on the other.

The second issue raised by Bukharin was the stage of Japanese capitalist development, which directly related to his insistence on the need for an independent communist party in Japan. Bukharin perceived that the recent rapid growth of capitalism and imperialism had propelled Japan’s capitalist bourgeoisie to power, and that the country’s feudal absolutism had developed into a bourgeois monarchy. He acknowledged that the previous Comintern strategy of a united front for China and Japan was wrong. Japan had all the conditions in place for a social coup and the dictatorship of the proletariat. Japanese communists should therefore be aware of their vanguard task in leading the coming revolution. Bukharin drew attention to Yamakawa’s misguided belief that the communist party could be replaced by a legal proletarian party or leftist labor unions. The new JCP, Bukharin argued, must be “steel-like, ideologically mature, Leninist, disciplined, centralized, and a mass communist party.” Moreover, the communist party must undertake the task of defeating the social democrats because of “their spreading of parliamentary illusions, and their role as helpmates and camp followers of the pseudo-liberal bourgeoisie.”

The Comintern’s insistence that the illegal JCP work to ensure the survival of the Chinese Revolution at the expense of domestic socialist development finally broke the relationship between Yamakawa and his supporters with the Comintern. Yamakawa, Arahata Kanson, Sakai Toshihiko, Inomata Tsunao, and others, exited the JCP and established their own faction, Rōnō-ha (Labor-Farmer Faction), named after their journal Rōnō (Labor farmer). Witnessing the upsurge of proletarian parties, Yamakawa and the Rōnō-ha became really concerned that the
illegal JCP would endanger the whole proletarian movement and jeopardize the few gains they had made so far. In February 1928, the followers of the Rōnō-ha were formally expelled from the JCP by order of the Comintern.

There was a strong tendency among European and Japanese communists to draw a distinction between an orthodox Marxism, applicable to conditions in the advanced countries of Western Europe and Japan, and a separate Leninism rooted in the realities of backward peasant Russia. Concerns about the predominance of Soviet state interests over the national revolutionary requirements of the communist parties took a critical turn after 1924. Despite the popularity of the Russian Revolution, the dominant view of Japanese leftists in the 1920s was that Japan’s revolutionary path should emulate that of advanced West European countries, where the role of the communist party was minimalized. In general, Yamakawa and the Japanese Left in the 1920s maintained that with the inevitable collapse of world capitalism and the growth of legal labor movements, a true socialist democratic society would be established in Japan. Yamakawa was never at ease with the Bolshevik vision of militant and violent revolutionary progression to socialism, or with the Leninist theory of the vanguard party. Nor did he agree with the Comintern’s assessment of Japan’s social and capitalist development.

This chapter has shown that in the postrevolutionary years, the Comintern did not exercise as much intellectual and practical control over Japanese communists as more orthodox interpretations have argued. Often Comintern agents (Grigory Voitinsky in Shanghai, Karlis Yanson in Tokyo), as well as Japanese communists themselves, acted independently of Moscow’s instructions, and Moscow in turn gave them a lot of leeway. Until the late 1920s, Japanese and other foreign communists, while accepting guidance from Bolshevik experts, still had the confidence and critical capabilities to judge what kinds of revolutionary actions were possible in their own local settings. Thus, although by the end of 1927 the JCP had “bolshevized,” it still disregarded Comintern instructions on some crucial matters. For example, despite the Comintern’s campaign against “fascist social democrats,” Japanese communists actively worked on creating a united front with the centrist Nihon Rōnōtō (Japan Labor-Farmer Party), Rōdō Nōmintō (the Labor-Farmer Party), and the Shakai Minshūtō (Socialist Mass Party). Nor were the Comintern’s demands as radical as had hitherto been assumed. The Comintern did not demand that the JCP topple the imperial institution either in 1922 or in 1927; it agreed that a legal, noncommunist party was a better solution for the time being; and agreed with Yamakawa that Japan was an industrially advanced country rather than a semifeudal one.

The only consistent point of disagreement between Russian and Japanese communists remained the question of the place of the JCP in the regionwide
anti-imperialist struggle, and specifically the JCP’s relation with the Chinese Revolution. At the core of this disagreement were two different visions of revolution. Russian communists believed that because it was so successful their revolution was the only correct one, and that they had the right and responsibility to prescribe the course of actions for foreign communist parties, even if they were ignorant of the local conditions. Yamakawa and his followers, for their part, in the Rōnō-ha faction believed in the unilinear schema of historical development, according to which, they thought, Russia was behind Japan, and therefore the Russian Revolution was not applicable to modern Japan. Consequently, the Japanese communists of the 1920s accepted the Comintern’s recommendations for how to accomplish a revolution with justifiable reservations.

Now, Yamakawa and the Rōnō-ha faction did not represent the whole Japanese interwar Left and, in fact, since the late 1920s their critical view of the Comintern had not been the dominant one. After the Rōnō-ha’s exit, the remaining JCP members accepted the 1927 Theses, and thus the Comintern’s insistence on the priority of the Chinese Revolution for the Japanese leftist agenda. Several factors weighed on 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. The Comintern’s increased centralization and bureaucratization left little space for Japanese and other foreign communists to voice their opposition. The historian Sandra Wilson has argued that since that point the core members of the JCP were “by definition loyal to the Comintern.” It is true that, due to Yamakawa’s departure and the centralization of the Comintern, the critical impulse within Japanese communism diminished.

However, the Comintern alone could not have forced Japanese leftists to suddenly accept its instructions and, by extension, the Russian revolutionary model as the only correct one. The JCP’s acceptance of the Comintern party line was due, I argue, to the escalating imperialist actions of the Japanese government in China. In April 1927, the new prime minister, General Tanaka Gichi, 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. In May 1928, Japanese and Chinese forces clashed at Jinan (the so-called Jinan Incident), and in June 1928 officers of the Kwantung army assassinated Chang Tso-lin, the warlord of Northeast China, paving the way for the future takeover of the whole of Manchuria by Japanese forces. In 1931, the Japanese seized all of Manchuria; in January 1932, Japan virtually annexed parts of Shanghai; in March 1932, the Japanese puppet-state Manchukuo was established. These were the first steps in the Sino-Japanese struggle that,
in 1937, led to a full-scale Japanese invasion of 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.

The Left’s preoccupation with Japanese aggression in China and its repercussions at home, however, ended the debates over the meaning of the Russian Revolution. 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. Since 1928, the majority of the Left found in the Chinese Revolution and the defense of the Soviet state the only way in which the Japanese proletarian revolution could ever be achieved. The JCP itself became committed to the Comintern more than ever, as it came to believe that only the Comintern, and the Russian revolutionary model, could provide a framework for international cooperation and struggle.