The Syrian Revolt
The Cold War in the Middle East
By Raya Dunayevskaya, 1961–1962

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Dear Friends:
The successful army coup to regain the independence of Syria from Egypt put an end to the United Nations (UN) embargo. The coup was an "imperialist plot" against its "socialist." There has been little enough "socialism" in Egypt, let alone Syria. It is true there had been some land reform in Egypt when the British had left but it went very nearly untouched. But it was these same landowners plus the small capitalist class plus the military bureaucracy which, less than four years ago, had asked for union with Egypt, though the latter had neither a common border nor a common history with Syria. About the only reason anyone could adduce then for this sudden merger was that the Communist Party of Syria was getting too powerful and Nasser had shown his expertise in dealing with political opposition. Nasser obliged again by putting the leaders of the CP in jail and driving the party underground.

On the other hand, the reactionary government in Syria was not exactly a novice in such matters either. The Communist Party, which had, four years back, looked so threatening had itself come out of illegality only in 1954. Between 1954 and 1958 it had become the best organized and most active party in the whole Middle East. However, throughout this period, its leaders had functioned, not as revolutionaries, but as Arab nationalists. Although it controlled all three trade unions and party "organizations," it had given up its agrarian demands. For the class struggle it substituted Russian foreign policy, tailored to suit the Arab Middle East.

As its leader, Khaled Bakdash, had put it, "Syria is an Arab nationalist, not a Communist, and will remain so." Its Manifesto appealed to "all four classes." "The National Front," said the 1955 Syrian CP Manifesto, "ought to unite all those who oppose the Pact of Baghdad." To unite the Syrian "Progressive Forces" capable of controlling the ruling clique, it spiced its program with a good deal of anti-Semite. The cornerstone of all Arab Communist policy being that Israel is an "outpost of Western imperialism in the Middle East." Then, the Czech arms deal, the CP persisted with its central aim: to lead Syria, like Egypt unto the Russian foreign policy path.

When the United Arab Republic, under Nasser, drugged the Middle East, not a look of open criticism came from Russia. This doesn't, of course, mean that Russia had no interests other than those of Nasser, but he is too important an ally in the fight against "the West" for Russia to encourage its CPs in the Middle East to carry on any independent policy except when Nasser turns against Russia. Thus, when the Iraqi Revolution occurred, and Nasser and the US supported it, the British navy offered the Iraqis military aid to support the Iraqi king. Nasser then reined massive aid to the High Aswan Dam, although, or precisely because the CP played an independent role and Iraq competed with Egypt for leadership. In a word, that the Nasser began to suspect Russia's loyalty to the Syrian CP was quick to appease him. Let's not forget that it took two full years after the Suez War and Dulles's rout- ing of the promised aid to Egypt before Khrushchev consented to sell.

It is true that in the past few months exposes of Nasser's dictatorial rule, with accusations that he had murdered a leader of the Syrian CP, began to appear in the Russian press. The present military coup, however, seems to be without the benefit of Russian complicity. It is concentrated in the same clique which, four years back, had banned Syria to Egypt most enthusiastically. In the tangled Middle Eastern situation, this doesn't mean that the Syrian CP wouldn't help the same clique break away from the United Arab Republic! It becomes all the more important therefore to review the whole Middle Eastern situation from the vantage point of the cold war.

The entry of Russia in the Middle East in 1955 with the Czech arms deal came on the initiative of Cairo and Damascus as much as from Russian ambitions. Therein lies the key to the differences in Russian policy between 1945 and 1956. At the end of World War II, Russia tried direct military intervention in Iran. Its "Western Allies" soon made it clear to Stalin that they would not tolerate it, and Stalin's army withdrew.

With the victory of Mao in China, the Russian attitude to the Orient changed. It is widely believed that this was due to the fact that Stalin finally realized the value of the peasantry, that he came over to Mao's position of "let the peasants guard." Nothing could be further from the truth. What finally united Stalin and Mao was that both now had the same enemy: the United States. Ever since the Marshall Plan and the Berlin Wall, the US had displaced Russia's rule, and adding to the opposition to Israel, the question of industrialization as "above classes." This is the reason why Spunik No. 1 is a much greater magnet in the Middle East than the brutal crushing of the Hungarian Revolution ever became a symbol against Russia.

The checkered role of so-called "revolutionaries" can be seen also among the Middle Eastern Socialists. Thus the Somekh and Shtayn Party in Lebanon, the BAVITH in Mandatory Palestine, the Communist Party of Iraq in Baghdad, in 1941. One of these groups was originally headed by Michel Affag, a leading member of the Syrian CP. When the axis failed they shifted sides. I don't mean to say there is no kind of "socialism." One must remember that the workingman's total disillusionment with private capitalism was so complete that even Fascism called itself nationalism in a form characterized Peron's, Argentina, and the Middle East. In their national attempts to gain independence, they have stood for agrarian reform. Their socialism was never international. The Marxist-Leninist Party of Iraq, for example, called for "the downfall of imperialism."

Here some flexibility did appear with the death of Stalin and Khruschev's coming to power. But on the whole, the initiative did not come from Russia. Russia refused to participate in any UN aid to the underdeveloped countries. The actual military rulers there began to sound out Russia as to direct help against "the West."

ALONG WITH THE FEELERS FROM ABOVE, THE COMMUNIST PARTIES Began TO EXPERIENCE A COLD WAR IN THE FORM OF THE "HUNGARIAN TATHA THAT WERE SEEING IN POST-WAR COMMUNIST THE ROAD TO BECOMING THE RULING POWER IN THEIR OWN COUNTRIES."

This phrased with their own ambitions and the objective pull of the new stage of capitalism—state capitalism—which meant they neither needed "capital" nor a proletarian mass base, which, in the underdeveloped economies, was tiny in any case. An administration which would suffice "Anti-Westerners" would get aid from Russia. In the case of Middle East, though Russia originally voted for the establishment of Israel, it soon, in and out of Russia, began its own anti- Israel campaign. "Roleless cosmopolitans," was the byword in Stalin's Russia and became popular in the Middle East.

All politics in post-war Middle East revolves around Israel's establishment. Most regimes had been toppled because of their defeat in the Palestinian War (Egypt alone tried to make its revolution not only against Israel but for the Egyptian masses. It embarked on a Land Reform Act. It is impossible, however, to carry through a social revolution "from above." Nor was "the" esoteric method of stepping midway in the revolution, continued with his class-col- laborationist way, both with the capitalists and the feua- dals. He had to "displace" this role, and adding to the opposition to Israel, the question of industrialization as "above classes." This is the reason why Spunik No. 1 is a much greater magnet in the Middle East than the brutal crushing of the Hungarian Revolution ever became a symbol against Russia.

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The anti-Semite of Russian Communism in the post-war period began an open phenomenon in Stalin's last days not only because of the birth of Israel and the recognition of the US, but because of the genuine achievement by being for the more numerous Arab countries. Above all, it became an open phenomenon because, in fighting the true internationalism of Russia's returning soldiers and intellectuals, Stalin had to contend with the irreversible fact of post-war history, that state-capitalism was a world phenomenon. If "the West," as well as Russia could now plan and, according to Varga, would thus be able to avoid the type of depressions that doomed private capitalism, then Stalin, in his aim to dominate the world, faced a might- ier competitor than he was willing to contemplate. He feared both the "socialist" or new type of "state-capitalism" "third period" adventurism. It is this the Stalinist bureaucracy could no longer stand, and welcomed Stalin's demise.

What Khruschev achieved with its "déstalinization" and "war on the not inevitable" doctrine at the 20th Congress of the Russian Communist Party was the recognition that there were "other paths to socialism." That is to say, the neutral zone, the underdeveloped countries, the "Third World." In these, these would unite with a single objective—anti Western imperialism.

In the case of the present coup in Syria, Khruschev may be contended with a divided Middle East. As he once criticized Comrade Walter L. Bagdasarov, the Soviet Middle East is the best of these. The Middle East in Transition edited by Laqueur has a good contribution, "The National Front," by A. Bennigsen. John H. Kassirer and the Communist Party of India, throws valuable light on the relationship of Mao and Stalin. Also Nasser's Philosophy of Revolution should be read.