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Monolithic unity: the Japanese Left and the Communist bloc, 1950–62

The Cold War world was for the most part dissected nearly along ideological lines that ran parallel to its strategic and economic bipolarities. During the 1950s, however, the loyalties of the Japanese people were divided. Those on the Left mostly looked to Moscow and Beijing for their inspiration. The Japanese Left comprised a vast array of interlinked institutions. At the base of this structure, however, were just three organisations: the Nihon Kyōsantō (Japan Communist Party, JCP); the Nihon Shakaitō (Japan Socialist Party, JSP), including its powerful labour federation Sōhyō; and the Gensuibaku Kinshi Nihon Kyōgikai or Gensuikyō (Japan Council Against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs.)

The Japanese Left during the Sino-Soviet honeymoon

The JCP: one revolution or two?

Founded in July 1922 as a branch of the Comintern, the JCP continued to be under the sway of the Kremlin throughout the pre-war ‘underground’ era. In contrast to these filial ties to Moscow, the JCP’s relationship with the CCP resembled that of siblings. The ideological question that dominated this period was whether Japan needed a bourgeois–democratic revolution before proceeding to Socialism or not. Following Japan’s defeat in 1945, the newly legalised JCP answered in the affirmative and chose to cooperate with the Occupation authorities. Under the leadership of the charismatic Nosaka Sanzō the party quickly achieved a leading
role in popular protests and the labour movement. It deliberately played down its
ties to Moscow, with Secretary-General Tokuda Kyūichi claiming at the Fifth
Party Congress in 1946: ‘At present, we have no ties whatsoever with the Soviet
Union...in the future as well, our party will never have relations with the Soviet
Union.’ The JCP sought to reinvent itself as a ‘loveable Communist Party’ that
was pursuing ‘peaceful revolution’. It met with some success: by 1949, the party
claimed 100,000 members, three million voters and 35 seats in the House of
Representatives. In marked contrast to the majority of Japanese, the JCP
‘unreservedly’ welcomed the conclusion of a defensive alliance uniting the main
European and Asian Communist revolutions in February 1950. The party
emphasised the contribution of the Sino-Soviet treaty to the cause of an overall,
‘just and democratic’ peace. The previous month, however, the Cominform
(Communist Information Bureau, successor to the Comintern) launched a bitter
attack on the Japanese party line. With the backing of Beijing, Moscow demanded
that the JCP follow the violent example of the CCP and direct its revolutionary
struggle against ‘American imperialism’ rather than against Japanese ‘monopoly
capitalism’. The party leadership reluctantly concurred, but disagreement over the
pace and depth of reform soon led to internal divisions. A radical ‘internationalist’
faction (led by Shiga Yoshio, editor of the party journal Akahata, and Miyamoto
Kenji, head of the Party Control Commission) temporarily eclipsed a relatively
moderate ‘mainstream’ faction (led by Nosaka and Tokuda). In part, this may
have reflected the emergence of a kind of Sino-Soviet division of labour: whereby
the Soviet Union was determining the ‘over-all Communist policy in Japan’, but
the Japanese Communists themselves were ‘turning more and more for aid and
advice to Communist China’. Subsequent violent demonstrations by Japanese
Communists against the government backfired, provoking SCAP into ordering the
so-called ‘Red Purge’ in late 1949. This removed more than 12,000 JCP members
and ‘sympathisers’ from politics, government, schools, the media and industry.
Half-hearted attempts at guerrilla warfare also failed. Most of the party leadership
either fled into exile in China or went into hiding.

Following the signature of the Japan–US Security Treaty at San Francisco in
September 1951, JCP publications continued to emphasise the defensive nature of
the Sino-Soviet Alliance:

Since February 1950 a false rumour has been propagated in Japan that the
Sino-Soviet treaty views Japan as the enemy...but the real treaty although
firmly against the revival of Japanese imperialism and invasion from Japan is
not hostile towards a peaceful Japan.

It was not until after the October 1954 Sino-Soviet Joint Declaration confirmed
Moscow and Beijing’s desire to normalise diplomatic relations with Tokyo that