

## The organization of the Comintern

A thorough knowledge of the Communist International, or Comintern, is not essential to follow the documents in this collection. Nevertheless, it is useful to have a general overview of its key organizational features (ignoring minor modifications over time). In essence, the organization was a strict hierarchy in which Lenin's 'democratic centralism' held sway: the highest bodies had the greatest control and the least accountability to the membership.

The Comintern was composed of **Sections**, which were the various national Communist Parties. Sections were bound by the '21 Conditions' adopted by the Second Comintern Congress, and by all the other decisions of Congresses. The sections were organized in much the same fashion as the Comintern itself.

The **World Congress** was described in Comintern documents as the 'supreme organ' of the organization. It was, however, only convened twice after 1924, and seven times in total, and it never had the character of a chamber for debate. Its sessions were dominated by set-piece speeches, often by leaders of the Russian Communist Party. Congresses were attended by delegates from the sections, in proportion to their size: the RCP always had the largest number of delegates, followed by (mostly European) parties in the second rank, and then by parties such as the CPUSA. Congresses were always held in Russia.

Congress ratified the election of the Executive Committee, **ECCI**, which was the 'leading organ' of the Comintern between Congresses. Directives to Communist Parties made by the ECCI were binding until overturned by Congress. The leaderships of sections were accountable to the ECCI, and had to forward national reports and copies of minutes to it. The ECCI was originally composed of 25 full members and 20 candidate members, but the numbers had doubled by the time of the last Congress in 1935. The ECCI was based in Moscow, and the largest single number of its members was always Russian. It was not, and was not intended to be, 'representative' of the national composition of the Comintern.

The ECCI elected a **Presidium**, an **Organizational Bureau** (from 1923–28), and a **Secretariat**, which handled in their various ways quotidian matters. The ECCI also convened (irregularly) conferences described as 'Enlarged Executives of the Plenum', or simply **Plenums**. These met between Congresses, and were designed to examine particular issues as the need arose. There was a total of 13 Plenums.

The ECCI organized the Comintern's sections into a number of country Secretariats, as a type of intermediary between individual sections and the ECCI itself. These were gradually modified into geographical or cultural groupings, of which the **Anglo-American Secretariat** was one.

The Comintern had a **Cadres Department** which kept information on all members, information which was useful for the periodic campaigns of verification of members and for purges. It also created an **International Control Commission**, which heard appeals from those who had been expelled by the Comintern's parties, and had the power to investigate and pass judgement on Comintern members accused of inappropriate conduct.