

# The First Four Congresses of the Communist International

A class series given for comrades of  
the International Communist League (FI)

War, Revolution and the Split in the Second International:

**The Birth of the Comintern (1919)**

The Second Congress (1920):

**Forging a Revolutionary International**

The Third Congress (1921):

**Elaboration of Communist Tactics  
and Organization**

The Fourth Congress (1922):

**The "Workers Government" and the Road  
to the German Revolution**

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## Editorial Note

This volume of *Marxist Studies* contains the transcripts of four classes given in 1998-99 throughout the International Communist League (ICL) as mandated in a motion by the International Secretariat on 26 February 1998. The classes deal with each of the first four congresses of the Communist International and were given as part of ongoing party education. They cover only some of the major political disputes at the congresses and are not meant as an exhaustive study of the period, rather as guides for further study.

Readers are encouraged to refer to the list of books and articles that formed the basis of these educationals and which has been appended at the end of this bulletin. For reference purposes, we have also included a general chronology of events of the period between the emergency congress of the Second International in November 1912 and Lenin's death in 1924.

A key document voted at the Third Congress of the Comintern—*Guidelines on the Organizational Structure of Communist Parties, on the Methods and Content of Their Work*—has been published by the ICL in *Prometheus Research Series* No. 1 (August 1988) and represents the crystallization of Bolshevik practices which enabled them to make the October Revolution.

The educational on the Fourth Congress was also part of ongoing internal discussion in the ICL over the Comintern's confused discussion of the "workers government" slogan and over the revolutionary situation in Germany in 1923. Continuing study and debate allowed us to arrive at a fuller evaluation of the German events which is contained in "Rearming Bolshevism: A Trotskyist Critique of Germany 1923 and the Comintern" in quadrilingual *Spartacist* (English edition No. 56, Spring 2001).

Each transcript has been edited for publication purposes.

—12 August 2003



# War, Revolution and the Split in the Second International: The Birth of the Comintern (1919)

by George Foster

New York, 14 June 1998

This class series will attempt to take to heart comrade Lenin's injunction in "*Left-Wing Communism*": rather than simply hailing soviet power and the October Revolution, the real point is to study the experience of the Bolshevik Party in order to assimilate the lessons and international significance of October. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci observed that our capacity to understand the world—and he was referring to class society in particular—is in direct proportion to our ability to intervene in it. And as comrade Robertson recently observed, the lessons of the October Revolution and the Communist International have for us Marxists a very deep validity. They mark the high point of the workers movement, to be contrasted with the current valley in which we today find ourselves situated. This class will consider the First Congress of the Third International which took place in March 1919, in the midst of a civil war in which the October Revolution was fighting for its very life.

The story of the First Congress is mainly the story of the struggle to forge a new revolutionary international following the ignominious collapse of the socialist Second International on 4 August of 1914. It is above all the story of the struggle by Lenin's Bolsheviks to turn the battle against the first imperialist war into a civil war to abolish the capitalist system.

Younger comrades in particular have real difficulty grasping the enormous and traumatic impact of World War I on the bourgeois societies of the time and on the proletariat. From the end of the Franco-Prussian war [1870-1871] until the onset of the first imperialist war, a period of some 43 years elapsed in Europe without a major war. Most of the imperialist combatants who embarked on the First World War assumed it would be very short. The British bourgeoisie in particular was hoping that its rivals on the continent would mutually exhaust each other in a bout of bloodletting and, indeed, looked forward to the war. But it didn't turn out to be a short war.

The war dragged on for over four years. Millions upon millions of proletarians were slaughtered in a war to re-divide the world amongst the various contending imperialists, a war to see who would get how much loot and how much booty. To quote General Sherman: "war is hell." But, if war is

hell, World War I stood out in its grotesque brutality. WWI was fought mainly as a war of attrition, of trench warfare, of bankrupt strategies reflecting the complete bankruptcy of bourgeois society. It was a war in which the proletariat and even the scions of the bourgeoisie were cut down and slaughtered in enormous numbers. For example, the Prussian Junker class was, at the end of the war, a shadow of its former self. Likewise the war decimated the sons of the British ruling class.

To give you an example of the brutality of the situation, in 1916 there was a small salient of the German line projecting into the Entente lines in Belgium at a village called Ypres. The British general in the sector, Sir Douglas Haig, decided to straighten out this little pocket disturbing the geometrical regularity of his front. Over the space of three or four days he lost something like 600,000 men in this endeavor, which did not in any way alter the sanguinary stalemate.

At the beginning of the war there was only one significant republic in continental Europe and that was France. By the end of this war, the face of Europe had changed. Three empires—tsarist Russia, the Hapsburgs of Austria-Hungary and the Hohenzollern empire of Germany—disappeared from the political map to be replaced by various republics. So it was a very big change. I highly recommend to comrades two books. One is Carl Schorske's book, *German Social Democracy, 1905-1917*, and the other is a book by Richard Watt, a British chemist who wrote history in his spare time, called *The Kings Depart*.

The ignominious capitulation of the Second International to the imperialist bourgeoisie during the first imperialist war marks the point at which the struggle for the Third International began and it was a struggle from the onset taken up by the Bolsheviks. To understand the Third International and Bolshevism, which went through its final forging in its revolutionary struggle against the first imperialist war, some remarks are in order about the Third International's predecessor, the Second International, about its origins and history and its collapse.

Going back over that history one is struck by an observation made by Jim Cannon about the early, pre-communist socialist movement in the U.S. In *The First Ten Years of American Communism*, Can-

non observed that it took the Bolsheviks and the Communist International to clarify and settle a whole series of political and organizational questions that had bedeviled the movement—questions ranging from the counterposition between direct trade-union action versus parliamentarism to, in the case of the U.S., the black question. In a very real sense, Cannon's observation concerning the American socialists is more generally applicable to the Second International as a whole. That is, if you go back and you examine the history of the Second International, one gets a sense of participants who, in some sense, were sleepwalking.

It took the experience of the Bolsheviks, who had to deal with a wide spectrum of issues and conditions of work (such as the national question, trade-union struggle, legality versus illegality, work in parliament, soviets, the 1905 mass strikes culminating in the Moscow insurrection), to really forge a new type of party that in its experiences had learned lessons that were valid for the entire workers movement in the imperialist epoch. And Bolshevism, it should be understood, was not born all at once but started as another party in the Second International and, indeed, a party which modeled itself after the preeminent party of the Second International, that is to say the German SPD.

Lenin makes the point that the Second International and the parties which constituted it were very much products of the pre-imperialist epoch, a period of protracted, organic capitalist growth and, as indicated, of peace among the major European powers. If the First International laid the foundation for an international organization of workers, for the preparation of the revolutionary attack on capital, the Second International was an organization, as Lenin remarked, whose growth proceeded in breadth at the cost of a temporary drop in revolutionary consciousness and a strengthening of opportunism in the party.

### The SPD and Parliamentarism

The German Social Democracy itself underwent considerable change over these years. In February of 1881, in the period when the Social Democrats in Germany were outlawed by the Anti-Socialist Laws, Karl Kautsky wrote:

"The Social Democratic workers' party has always emphasized that it is a revolutionary party in a sense that it recognizes that it is impossible to resolve the social questions within the existing society.... Even today, we *would prefer*, if it were possible, to realize the social revolution *through the peaceful road*.... But if we still harbour this hope today, we have nonetheless ceased to emphasize it, for every one of us knows *that it is a utopia*. The most

perceptive of our comrades have never believed in the possibility of a peaceful revolution; they have learned from history that violence is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one.... Today we all know that the popular socialist state can be erected only through a violent overthrow and that it is our duty to uphold consciousness of this among ever broader layers of the people."

—quoted in Massimo Salvadori, *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution 1880-1938*, p. 20 (Verso, 1979)

This was the young Karl Kautsky, at the beginning of his career as a Marxist. And by the way, both Kautsky and Bernstein, who were in a real sense the legates of Marx and Engels, were won to Marxism through Engels' work *Anti-Dühring*. It was *the* work which actually won key cadre of the Social Democracy to Marxism. Kautsky was to go on to become the editor of *Die Neue Zeit*, which was the theoretical paper of Social Democracy (and parenthetically, I would point out, he edited it longer than Norden edited *WV*) and became the preeminent German propagandist for Marxism for the whole period. In fact, he was known as the pope of Marxism and for a long time he was looked up to by Lenin and others as the embodiment of orthodox Marxism. Yet running through the orthodox Marxism of Kautsky was a strong parliamentarist thread which grew organically out of the conditions that the German party experienced.

As a consequence of the German Anti-Socialist Laws the SPD was outlawed from 1874 to 1886. Despite its illegality during this period, the Social Democracy managed to get about 9.1 percent of the votes in parliament. With the lifting of the Anti-Socialist Laws and the legalization of the party, the party began to grow. Notwithstanding some fits and starts the party began to experience a steady accretion of electoral support, both percentage-wise and in absolute numbers. This led the SPDers to think that German Social Democracy would simply grow organically. Some older comrades may remember that many years ago a comrade plotted three or four years of our growth and from that graph projected that by now we would probably have a billion members. Empirical reality rapidly shattered her illusion, but in the case of the SPD in that period, experience tended to confirm a steady pattern of growth.

A few scant years after the end of the Anti-Socialist Laws, Kautsky was putting forward a very different line from that of 1881. Very much influenced by Darwin and German biologists such as Haeckel, he postulated that socialism would be the natural evolutionary outcome of capitalism—that the working class would grow to be a larger and



larger proportion of the populace, that through the votes of these workers, SPD representation would ineluctably grow in parliament and that inevitably Social Democracy would triumph. Kautsky, along with Bernstein, penned the Erfurt Program, a program that all comrades should take the time to read. It is the classic example of the minimum-maximum program of Social Democracy.

The Erfurt Program is also noteworthy for what it does not contain—it consciously avoided the whole issue of the state. Kautsky wrote the theoretical part of Erfurt and Bernstein the practical. By the way, in 1899, Lenin described the Erfurt Program as a Marxist document. But later, reconsidering it in *The State and Revolution*, and based on his experiences in the intervening period, he came to view it very differently.

Kautsky wrote a commentary on the Erfurt Program and in it he developed his central themes. One of them was the indispensability of parliament as an instrument of government in great states—for all classes—and, therefore, for the proletariat as well as the bourgeoisie and, secondly, for the need to win a majority of parliament, treating elections as the fundamental, strategic avenue to power for the labor movement.

Kautsky posed an indissoluble link between the conquest of state power and the conquest of a majority in parliament, between the defense of the technical importance of parliament and the impossibility of a Paris Commune-type state. He thought that the Social Democracy, its political and social struggles and use of parliamentary legislation for socialist purposes, constituted the very content of the dictatorship of the proletariat. As early as 1892 Kautsky writes:

“In a great modern state, [the proletariat, like the bourgeoisie, can] acquire influence in the administration of the state only through the vehicle of an elected parliament. Direct legislation, at least in a great modern state, cannot render parliament superfluous, [but can only represent a ramification of the administration. Hence the general thesis:] it is absolutely impossible to entrust the entire legislation of the state to it [direct legislation], and it is equally impossible to control or direct the state administration through it. So long as the great modern state exists...”

And notice there is no class character to this state:

“...the central point of political activity will always remain in its parliament. [Now:] the most consistent expression of parliament is the parliamentary republic.”

—quoted in Massimo Salvadori, *ibid.*, pp. 35-36

And, therefore, the conquest of parliament was indispensable for Social Democracy. This was to be a

signpost of German Social Democracy thenceforth, through the whole period up to the first imperialist war.

Now Wilhelm Liebknecht aptly termed the Kaiserine parliament a “fig leaf for absolutism.” Germany at this time presented a strange combination of parliamentarism, with rather nominal powers, fronting for absolutist despotism ruling on behalf of German capital. This was reflected in the laws regarding suffrage. On a national level there was direct male suffrage. On the provincial level suffrage rights varied a lot, ranging from places like Prussia, which had a notorious three-class franchise system based on how much direct tax you paid, to some of the southern German states, which eventually had more or less direct suffrage, but were very short on proletarians and had large peasant populations.

It was clear that the German Social Democracy would have to contend on a parliamentary level if it were to be a political party in Germany, and it did so. During the years of the Anti-Socialist Laws, because the parliamentary fraction was granted immunity, it was relatively untouchable, and played a key role in leading the party. This early experience later played its part in reinforcing a tendency to fetishize parliament despite the fact that the Reichstag was impotent and could not compel the imperial government to answer to it. And on the provincial level it was downright bizarre to have parliamentary illusions, for example, if you look at the restricted suffrage in Prussia.

In the Prussian elections in 1913, the SPD got over 775,000 votes, some 28.3 percent of the total. But it only won ten seats in the Prussian parliament. In contrast the Deutsche Volkspartei, which received 6.7 percent of the votes, won 38 seats. The Free Conservative Party, with 2 percent, won 54 seats. The National Liberal Party, with 13 percent, won 73 seats. The Catholic Center Party, with 16 percent, won 103 seats and the German Conservative Party, with 14 percent, won 147 seats. How is this possible? The people who paid the top third in income tax got a third of the seats, etc. That was about 2 or 3 percent of the population. So, there is a certain level at which one’s credulity is strained at the evident latching on very early to parliamentary cretinism.

### The SPD and the State

Secondly, the SPD was clearly awed by the power of the German state and army. One gets the impression that the experience of the Anti-Socialist Laws resulted in an attitude of “Never again!” The party lived in real fear that it could be outlawed by a stroke of the Kaiser’s pen. As the party accrued influence and organizational mass there was a cor-

responding reluctance to risk this organic growth by displeasing the powers that be. This sentiment went hand-in-hand with the conception of the SPD as the party of the whole class.

When, in 1875, the Marxian wing fused with the Lassalleans, the fusion was codified in the Gotha Program (basically a Lassallean program). When Marx penned his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, that critique was suppressed in Germany. It was suppressed by Bebel, Kautsky and Bernstein, because they were afraid it would provoke a split with the Lassalleans.

Likewise, when the Erfurt Program was penned, Engels wrote a very sharp criticism of it; you can read about it in *The State and Revolution*. Engels thought it was a very fine program, but the failure of the program to address the key issue of state power fundamentally compromised it. Engels opined that while it might be difficult to raise the demand for a democratic republic, that failure opened the door to politically disarming the party when it had to confront big revolutionary events. Engels' criticisms were suppressed to maintain unity with the opportunists and out of fear that their publication might expose the party to reprisals from the Kaiser's government.

During the life of the Second International, which was founded in Paris on the 100th anniversary of the French Revolution, 14 July 1889, the German Social Democrats were very hesitant to call any sort of May Day actions because they feared a strike in Germany on May Day would bring the government down on them. So, there was a very peculiar development of a sense of German exceptionalism, a feeling that things were going along swimmingly, the SPD was gaining in parliament, the organization was burgeoning. The mindset was that the party must at all costs avoid a premature confrontation with the bourgeoisie that could spell disaster. Tactical prudence was beginning to evolve into reformist adaptation.

Kautsky and others of the German Social Democrats were always concerned about a general strike because they thought it would be a one-shot proposition in the Kaiser's Germany. It would immediately lead to total confrontation with the bourgeoisie and either the proletariat would triumph or it would be smashed. And, since inevitably the SPD was gaining influence in parliament and expanding its press, trade-union organizations, and sporting groups and hundreds of other associations were growing, why wreck the inevitable march of progress toward socialism?

I have spent some time on the SPD's reformist adaptations because I would like to contrast it with

the experience of the Bolsheviks. The Bolshevik experience was needless to say very different.

It's an old saw that "you learn something new every day." But sometimes what you learn is important. Gary Steenson in his book *"Not One Man! Not One Penny!" German Social Democracy, 1863-1914* [University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981] reveals a little-known fact:

"One very unusual aspect of the socialist congresses in Germany was the presence at most of them of police officials. These men had the right to interrupt speakers who ventured into forbidden territory, and they could even cancel a session altogether if the discussion got too extreme. But the congressional participants themselves usually knew the allowable limits, and after the end of the antisocialist law, the police officials did not often intervene. Their presence was, nonetheless, a source of embarrassment for the SPD and should have been for the authorities also."

—p. 125

This submission to cop censorship is absolutely breathtaking, and accommodation to it reveals the deep reformist rot that infected the SPD. It should be contrasted with the comportment of the Bolsheviks who took their responsibility to revolutionary Marxism seriously. Commenting on what can be said and what must be said, in 1917 Lenin wrote:

"At times some try to defend Kautsky and Turati by arguing that, legally, they could no more than 'hint' at their opposition to the government, and that the pacifists of this stripe do make such 'hints'. The answer to that is, first, that the impossibility of legally speaking the truth is an argument not in favour of concealing the truth, but in favour of setting up an illegal organisation and press that would be free of police surveillance and censorship. Second, that moments occur in history when a socialist *is called upon* to break with all legality. Third, that even in the days of serfdom in Russia, Dobrolyubov and Chernyshevsky managed to speak the truth, for example, by their silence on the Manifesto of February 19, 1861, and their ridicule and castigation of the liberals, who made exactly the same kind of speeches as Turati and Kautsky."

—Lenin, *Collected Works* [hereafter CW],

Vol. 23, p. 186

Clearly the SPD's many-years-long accommodation to police censorship played a significant role in its slide into social chauvinism when confronted by the revolutionary tasks imposed by the imperialist war.

The SPD's accommodation to bourgeois legality is all the more surprising given the very real repression the party experienced, particularly in its formative years. Liebknecht and Bebel, for example,

opposed the Franco-Prussian war. For their efforts, they were thrown into prison for a couple of years. The party did face a situation of near illegality, even following the lifting of the Anti-Socialist Laws. Many, many people were arrested for crimes of *lèse majesté*. SPDers were elected to parliament and when they got to Berlin found out their landlady had been told by the government not to rent them a place. Socialists were exiled, under old laws going back to 1850, to tiny provincial towns.

Kautsky summed up in 1888 what we have come to know as the social-democratic worldview when he wrote in *A Social Democratic Catechism*: "The Social Democracy is a revolutionary party, but it is not a party that makes revolutions...." The SPD's policy was one of revolutionary passivity, of waiting. Kautsky maintained that Social Democrats are not pacifists. The SPD would eventually prevail in parliament and if the bourgeoisie offers resistance the Social Democratic workers would suppress them. But the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat was for Kautsky really a question for future generations

The rise of imperialism and the rise of opportunism go hand in hand. Early on, in the heavily peasant areas of south Germany, where the Social Democracy was weaker and where there were fewer proletarians, SPD representatives began to openly adapt to alien class pressures. These pressures reflected themselves nationally when, in 1895, Bebel and Liebknecht, over the vociferous objections of Kautsky, revised the Erfurt Program to "include a demand for democratization of all public institutions, to improve the situation in industry, agriculture and transport within the framework of the present social and state order."

Bernstein, who had lived for 20 years in exile in Britain, while there began to develop fundamental doubts on the possibility or necessity of proletarian revolution, doubts which he later systematized into a general revisionist assault on Marxism. Kautsky, since Bernstein was his good friend, temporized on launching a struggle against this revisionism. However, eventually the battle was joined, with Kautsky, Luxemburg and Plekhanov weighing in very heavily against Bernstein (who was not handled in the party with kid gloves). Nonetheless, Bernstein and Kautsky both feared a split in the party. Kautsky hoped to ideologically defeat revisionism without a split, arguing that revisionism could be isolated and would cease to be dangerous. This generally was the approach of the Second International in the whole period leading up to the war.

I should mention, by the way, that Kautsky's deep but latent reformist streak found expression in

the Second Congress of the Second International in Paris in 1890 when the issue of Millerandism came up. The French socialist politician Millerand had recently accepted a cabinet post in a bourgeois government. Kautsky led the charge against Millerand stating that it was absolutely impermissible to be a minister in a bourgeois government...except under "special circumstances." And the special circumstances were, for example, in the event of a war, where, say, the tsar invaded Germany. Only then, according to Kautsky, would a Social Democrat be compelled to join a government of the enemy class; only unity in defense of the nation made permissible that which in times of peace was impermissible!

### Impact of the 1905 Russian Revolution

The 1905 Russian Revolution had an enormous impact on Germany, the class struggle in Germany, on the Social Democracy and on the trade unions. On the left of the party, Rosa Luxemburg saw 1905 through the lens of her experiences in Warsaw, where she went to participate in the revolution. For Luxemburg, the main lesson of the revolution was the efficacy of the mass strike as the road to revolution. She saw the mass strike as the chief instrument for realizing the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat. Through intervention in these struggles the socialists would win authority and lead the workers to victory. The assault on the capitalist power would not be through parliament, but through a series of convulsive strikes that would clean the party of revisionism and lead to the fall of capital. But while Luxemburg invested the mass strike and spontaneous action by the proletariat with great revolutionary import, she failed to grasp the significance of the soviets and as well of the real rehearsal for October, the culmination of 1905, which was the Moscow insurrection.

Germany in 1905 experienced massive turmoil. There were thousands and thousands of strikes. There were numerous lockouts by employers. There were militant workers' demonstrations and street fighting between the workers and the police.

Under the impact of both Luxemburg and the events in 1905 in Germany and Russia, Kautsky was driven to the left. He certainly was among the most perceptive of the commentators on what was going on in 1905 in Russia from the outside. Both Lenin and Trotsky claimed Kautsky's analysis supported their views. Kautsky did, indeed, refer to what was going on in Russia as permanent revolution and stated that the unfolding of the revolutionary struggles in Russia turned out to be very different from what he had previously thought. Thus he wrote:

"The [Russian] liberals, can scream all they want about the need for a strong government

and regard the growing chaos in Russia with anguished concern; but the revolutionary proletariat has every reason to greet it with the most fervent hopes. This 'chaos' is nothing other than *permanent revolution*. In the present circumstances it is under revolutionary conditions that the proletariat completes its own maturation most rapidly, develops its intellectual, moral, and economic strength most completely, imprints its own stamp on state and society most profoundly, and obtains the greatest concessions from them. Even though this dominance of the proletariat can only be transitory in a country as economically backward as Russia, it leaves effects that cannot be reversed, and the greater the dominance, the longer they will last.... Permanent revolution is thus exactly what the proletariat in Russia needs."

—quoted in Massimo Salvadori, *op. cit.*, p. 102

Here he is speaking of permanent revolution in the sense of Marx's "Address to the Central Committee of the Communist League."

In January of 1906, Kautsky, basing himself on the experience of the Moscow insurrection, declared that it was now necessary to re-examine Engels' famous preface to Marx's *Class Struggle in France*, the text of which the German Social Democracy had so often used to justify its own legalism. The reformists had fixated on an observation by Engels that the epoch of barricades and street fighting was definitely over. But Kautsky said that the battle of Moscow, where a small group of insurgents managed to hold out for two weeks against superior forces, indicated that victorious armed struggle by the insurgents was possible because of the mass strike wave, of which he said too little was known in Engels' time. It was precisely the strike wave and struggles around it that had undermined the discipline of the army and those lessons were applicable, not only in Russia, but possibly throughout Europe.

Thus Kautsky swung quite far to the left. But he was still very nervous about a mass strike in Germany, which he thought could only be a one-shot affair—all or nothing. For its part, the German ruling class was also drawing its own class lessons from the events in Russia. The Kaiser thought that it might well be necessary to send an expeditionary force into Russia to rescue his fellow monarch, the tsar, and, as a corollary to that, the Kaiser certainly was planning to suppress the German Social Democracy.

The turmoil surrounding 1905 frightened many of Germany's SPD trade-union leaders. In the main they had a very clear position: "No mass strikes! Nothing out of the ordinary!" These bureaucrats

feared that the street demonstrations and turmoil were pulling in unorganized workers who had low consciousness and would threaten the organized and above all orderly German trade-union movement. In May of 1905 in Cologne, the trade unions came out on record against the mass strike.

The stage was thus set for an open division between the party and its affiliated trade unions. At the Jena Congress, the party, under the impact of what was going on in Russia, adopted the mass strike as a political weapon in defense of suffrage rights and the right of association in particular. The mass strike was presented as a means of extending suffrage in places like Prussia and of defending the right of a Social Democratic party to exist and organize in the trade unions. This mass strike resolution carried overwhelmingly, by 287 to 14 votes.

One of those voting against the resolution was a man named Carl Legien who just happened to be the leader of the SPD's trade-union federation. He importuned the party leadership and on 16 February 1906, at a secret meeting of the party and trade unions, the party capitulated to the trade unions. Basically, the trade unions said to the party: if there are to be mass strikes and the party can't prevent them, it is the party and not the trade unions who should lead them. The trade unions promised to support the party to the extent they could, but the party was to bear the brunt not only of the responsibility for leading mass strikes, but also of paying for them. The very next year in September of 1906, Bebel at the Mannheim Congress declared that without the support of the unions, mass strikes are unthinkable and Legien said "Ja! They are unthinkable!"

At Mannheim the party endorsed the deal cooked up at the earlier secret conference. Bebel, who wielded immense authority in the German movement, pushed the proposal through by a vote of 386 to 5. Among those voting for it were Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

Following the events of 1905 there was a rise in German imperial ambitions. The German bourgeoisie reacted to 1905 with a great wave of chauvinist propaganda and in the 1907 elections the German Social Democracy got a really cold, wet rag smacked in its face. These were the so-called Hot-tent elections and they were the first elections in which imperialist patriotism played a big role. In 1907, many of the petty bourgeois who had previously voted for the Social Democrats, didn't.

The percentage of the SPD votes didn't drop very much in absolute numbers. It went from 31.7 to 29, but the number of SPD representatives in the Reichstag dropped from 81 to 43. At the time there were numerous political parties in Germany and

thus provisions for runoffs if no party obtained a majority of the vote. The Social Democracy willy-nilly had been counting on a large number of petty-bourgeois votes.

In contesting for election in Germany, routinely the SPD had made blocs with the liberals. Where a Social Democrat didn't get in the runoff, SPDers were told to vote for the bourgeois progressive, and an appeal was made to the progressive voters to vote SPD if a socialist was in a runoff. Of course, Social Democrats, being disciplined, got many progressives elected. But following 1905, the progressives' bourgeois base would have nothing to do with these anti-patriotic reds and this bloc didn't work out so well from that standpoint.

### The Social Democracy and Imperialist War

Turmoil growing out of events in Russia and the swell in imperialist and patriotic propaganda really drove the party leadership into frenzy. Thus the stage was set for erosion of the historic position of the SPD encapsulated in the slogan of Wilhelm Liebknecht of "not one man, not one penny."

Bebel started talking about being for national defense if Russia invaded Germany and, believe me, the Russian question was as big a bugaboo in Germany in this period as it was in America in the Cold War period. Bebel made a speech in the Reichstag explaining when he would be a defensist, at the same time sugar-coating it with a denunciation of Prussian discipline, mistreatment of soldiers and financial burdens. He was followed by a SPDer by the name of Noske, who contested the accusation that Social Democracy was anti-national or anti-patriotic. Noske said that there is no accusation more unjustified than the claim that the SPD wanted to undermine the discipline of the army. Where in Germany except in the army is there greater discipline than in the Social Democratic Party and the modern trade unions?

"As a Social Democrat I agree with the honourable Minister of War when he declares that German soldiers must have the best arms.' Finally, he [Kautsky] proclaimed that the Social Democrats would repel any aggression against their country 'with greater determination' than any bourgeois party, that the SPD wanted Germany to be 'armed as well as possible,' and that 'the entire German people' had an 'interest in the military institutions necessary for the defence' of the 'fatherland'."

The quote is from Massimo Salvadori's *Karl Kautsky and the Socialist Revolution, 1880-1938*, p. 119 (1938). Salvadori comments: "There could have been no more public funeral for the anti-militarist propaganda preached by [Karl] Liebknecht."

The party had begun to polarize into an incipient center, a left wing and a very insidious right wing. Karl Liebknecht had become the *bête noire* not only of the right wing but also of some of the center of the party with the publication of his book *Militarism and Anti-Militarism*, and for his efforts to organize an anti-militarist youth organization. In fact, Liebknecht's book earned him almost two years in prison—apropos the point about the reality of life in the Kaiser's Germany.

By the way, one must say that aside from *Die Neue Zeit*, which received a lot of criticism because it contained articles having nothing to do with Germany, German Social Democracy was very provincial in its views. It tended to concern itself mainly with domestic issues.

By 1910, the German Social Democracy panicked before the bourgeoisie's patriotic propaganda offensive. Some SPDers began to entertain the proposition that since they had always been for an income tax, the SPD should therefore support the direct tax, even though the purpose of the direct tax was to raise money for the war budget. The party pulled back from that position, but by 1912, when the party was really in a panic about regaining what it had lost in the elections, operationally it had moved very, very far to the right.

When the issue of the direct tax came up again in 1913 the Kautsky center gave critical support to the social-chauvinists on this issue. Rosa Luxemburg said that if Kautsky urged his followers to vote the direct tax, in a year they would be voting war credits. She was absolutely prophetic in that. When war came on 4 August 1914, the German party, which was the biggest party of the international, capitulated and voted war credits, betraying socialism. Nearly all parties of the Second International from the various belligerent countries followed suit with the honorable exceptions of the Russians, the Italians, the Serbs and, ultimately, a few Germans.

The Second International, to which the SPD was affiliated, was not an international in the Leninist sense. The war revealed it to be an international in little but name, more akin to a bunch of socialist pen pals.

That political rot which precipitated out on 4 August 1914 did not fall from the sky but grew, organically if you will, within the SPD. And there were premonitions of the problems which manifested themselves at earlier Second International congresses.

Thus, the Stuttgart Congress of 1907 actually debated whether there could be a socialist colonial policy. There was a commission in which the majority called for exactly that. That proposal by that

commission was only narrowly defeated, by a vote of 128 against 108, with 10 abstentions. It was a near thing. Commenting on it, Lenin said that vote had tremendous significance. First, socialist opportunism, which capitulated before bourgeois charm, had unmasked itself plainly, and, secondly, there became manifest a negative feature of the European labor movement, which is capable of causing great harm to the proletariat.

Half of the SPD delegation at Stuttgart was made up of trade unionists and maintained the position of trade-union independence. And, then, of course, the war question also came up. If you read the Stuttgart resolution on the war, and the subsequent ones culminating in the Basel Manifesto, they all speak about how, to combat war amongst the capitalist powers, the proletariat should use whatever means are at its disposal when necessary.

Lenin objected to the slogan of a mass strike against war. How the proletariat is to conduct the struggle against war depends upon the particular conditions it confronts. Answering a war, he says, depends on the character of the crisis which a war provokes—the choice of means of struggle is made on the basis of these conditions. But the Germans really wanted any reference to any strike action against war deleted, because they opposed anything that would commit them, even on paper, to such a course.

Lenin in contrast stressed that the key thing about the resolution on war and peace was that the struggle must consist in substituting not merely peace for war, but socialism for capitalism. "It is not a matter of preventing the outbreak of war, but a matter of utilizing the crisis resulting from the war to hasten the overthrow of the bourgeoisie." And he, Rosa Luxemburg and, I believe, Martov blocked to amend a resolution by Bebel (which was a very orthodox resolution) because it was possible to read the orthodox postulates of Bebel through opportunist glasses. So Lenin and Luxemburg amended the resolution to say that militarism was the chief weapon of class suppression, to say that agitation among the youth was necessary and indicated, and, third, that the task of the Social Democrats was not only struggle against the outbreak of war, or for an early termination of war which had already broken out, but also to utilize the crisis caused by the war to hasten the downfall of the bourgeoisie.

When war broke out in Europe in August 1914, it found Lenin in Galicia. He couldn't believe the SPD had voted for war credits, thinking it must be police propaganda. After he managed to make his way back to Switzerland, Lenin's course was set. He and his comrades embarked on an implacable

struggle for a new revolutionary international to replace the Second International, now fatally compromised by social chauvinism. The central issue was that the world war was an imperialist war, and that the answer to this war was not "peace," or "no annexations," or "the right of self determination of all nations," but, in fact, to turn this imperialist war into a revolutionary civil war against the bourgeoisie, for socialism.

The war disrupted the Second International for a while, but shortly various national parties, each aligned with its own bourgeoisie, held "antiwar" congresses. First the Entente "socialists," then the central powers "socialists" met. This was followed by the Copenhagen Congress of neutral "socialists." The Bolsheviks at first were not inclined to participate in the Copenhagen Congress because of its demands: peace, no annexations, courts of arbitration and disarmament. But on reconsideration, the Bolsheviks attended Copenhagen to raise five points: socialists out of bourgeois cabinets, no vote for war credits, fraternization of troops, for civil war against the imperialist war, and for illegal organizations that organize for revolutionary propaganda and actions among the proletariat in the struggle for the Third International.

### Forging the Third International

It was in the struggle against the social chauvinists and centrists that the Bolsheviks finally hammered out the key points of their international and political and organizational program. To do so it was necessary to swim against a raging stream of social chauvinism. Zinoviev says:

"It was in a manifesto on the arrested Bolshevik Duma fraction that we first advanced the slogan of turning the imperialist war into civil war. At that time, in the camp of the Second International, we were regarded literally as lepers. When we stated that this war had to be turned into a civil war, a war against the bourgeoisie, they seriously began to suggest that we were not quite right in the head."

The first international conference that pulled together socialists from various belligerent countries was, in fact, an international women's conference organized in Switzerland by Clara Zetkin. The Bolsheviks intervened and were voted down. That conference was followed by an international youth conference which also voted down the Bolshevik proposals.

It was only at the Zimmerwald Conference that the Bolsheviks were able to come forward as a weak minority—but a minority which was to become the nucleus of a new Communist Third International. At that conference Ledebour (who was one of the

German center) confronted Lenin: "Civil war to end the imperialist war? Well, Lenin, go to Russia and try it there. It's pretty easy to say this in Switzerland." In the Second International all these centrists and chauvinist wiseacres proclaimed that all the Russian workers supported the war and that no one supported the Bolsheviks. During the period of 1915-1916 the Bolsheviks remained an insignificant minority. It was only in 1916 that they began to re-establish real and significant links in Russia.

Lenin was absolutely implacable in hammering on the issue of the imperialist nature of the war and the revolutionary task it demanded. His key point was that the greatest danger to the proletariat and to the chance of revolution were the centrists, with their flowery conceits and illusions.

Take Kautsky, for example. Kautsky had not been a member of the German parliamentary fraction, but he was such a doyen of the party that he was invited to the meeting where they voted war credits. Kautsky had planned to suggest abstention, but when it became clear there was going to be no abstention, he said, fine, let's vote for the war credits and state that our condition is no annexations, blah, blah, blah. Well, the German chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg said, that's a good resolution. Let's just take this part out about no annexations. And that was what happened.

Liebkecht originally went along, as a disciplined member of the party, with the vote, but broke immediately thereafter. Once the war began in earnest Kautsky argued it was a war of defense for Germany. In an incredible exercise in muddle-headed obfuscation he argued it was, as well, a war of defense for the French, the Belgians and the British. After all, Social Democrats are not anti-national and can't present themselves to the nation as anti-national. His conclusion—the International is really a peacetime organization! After the war, everyone would get back together! So, to justify his support to voting for war credits, he supported the votes of all Social Democrats for "self-defense."

As the war progressed it became more hideous. And the fighting lasted far longer than anyone had imagined. Social tensions began to rise and the bourgeoisie and the centrists began to get nervous. By 1917 a turn occurred. The war had run its course. Germany had grabbed a fair chunk of territory. None of the combatants had the capacity to squeeze much more blood or sweat out of the proletariat. The Germans were beginning to think they had a chance to split Russia off from Britain and France and do a separate deal.

Kautsky began to worry about the news from the front—that everybody in the trenches supports

Liebkecht. Liebkecht had made a famous speech against the war. For his troubles he had been drafted into the army out of parliament and then imprisoned. Luxemburg was arrested soon after Liebkecht. The centrists began to calculate that they were losing their influence. Thus, Kautsky and company began to redouble their offensive for "peace" and broke off from the official Social Democracy to form an independent party.

Lenin's struggle against the war meant not simply struggle against the centrists outside the party, but inside as well. Some Bolsheviks, exemplified by Bukharin's Bogy group, were seduced by the siren peace songs of the centrists. Bukharin and his co-thinkers also had a position against the right of self-determination for nations during the war, because, according to them, the imperialist war had rendered all such questions irrelevant. Lenin characterized this position as a caricature of imperialist economism.

It is very interesting to consider Trotsky's role in the struggle against the social chauvinists. He of course had a solidly internationalist position of opposition to the war. But until quite late in the war Trotsky rather quixotically conciliated various centrists. At times he sought out political blocs with the Mensheviks and for a brief period even hoped to obtain Kautsky's collaboration in the struggle against the war. For these reasons Lenin subjected him to some very harsh criticisms.

### Forging the Bolshevik Party

The programmatic intransigence of Lenin laid the foundation for the struggle for October. In this regard let's examine the period of the Bolshevik Party from 1912 to 1914, and contrast it to the evolution of the German Social Democracy. There are three key periods of struggle in the development of Bolshevism: 1895 to 1903 against economism, from 1903 to 1908 against the Mensheviks, and from 1908 to 1914 against the liquidators. The liquidators were the Mensheviks of various stripes and origins who wanted a legal labor party in Russia. Given the conditions in Russia, Lenin made the point that such a party could not be a Marxist revolutionary party.

Certainly Lenin's experience with the German Social Democracy in the Second International in this period was not exactly positive. The SPD-dominated International tried a number of times to foist unity on the Russian Marxists and it was fairly clear from the get-go that Kautsky in particular, like most of the SPD leadership, viewed Lenin as an incurable sectarian enragé.

The Germans were really pro-Martov; they wanted to enforce unity. The last effort at unity was

in 1913-14, when the International demanded that all the Russian Marxists get into one room in front of a commission of the International and take steps to unite into one big party. And, by the way, the German Social Democracy also had its fingers on the purse strings of a lot of the money that the Russian Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had.

I really enjoyed reading about this conference. Lenin chose Inessa Armand as the Bolshevik representative. Armand was a very elegant and cosmopolitan woman, who spoke several languages, was intelligent, politically hard, and diplomatic. Following Lenin's instructions she told the conference that the Bolsheviks were in favor of unity, however, that unity had conditions attached to it.

"1. All-party resolutions of December 1908 and January 1910 on liquidationism are confirmed in a very resolute and unreserved manner precisely in their application to liquidationism. It is recognized that anyone who writes (especially in the legal press) against 'commending the illegal press' deserves condemnation and cannot be tolerated in the ranks of the illegal party. Only one who sincerely and with all his strength helps the development of the illegal press, of illegal proclamations and so forth, can become a member of the illegal party."

It goes on:

"3. It is recognized that the entry of any group of the Russian Social Democratic Labor party into a bloc or union with *another* party is absolutely not permissible and incompatible with party membership."

—Ganken and Fisher, *The Bolsheviks and the World War*, pp. 120-121 (Stanford University Press, 1940)

Bundism is to be condemned; it is incompatible with membership; national and cultural autonomy, this again, contradicts the party program; and the failure to recognize the resolutions of the party on that is incompatible with party membership. When Inessa Armand presented these conditions, her presentation was considered the worst of manners from the standpoint of all these Second International Social Democrats. How could the Bolsheviks act like this?

In fact, the reality on the ground in Russia was that there was one Russian Social Democratic Workers Party that mattered, and it was the illegal party of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. By the time that the international was trying to engineer unity among the Russian factions the Bolsheviks had about 80 percent of the active proletariat, in terms of their support, and correspondingly in press circulation.

The influence of the Bolsheviks amongst the Russian proletariat was initially undercut by the

outbreak of the war, and indeed the war sharply undercut a rising tide of worker militancy in a number of countries, including Germany and Britain. One of the subsidiary reasons why the various bourgeoisies were not averse to embarking on imperialist war was that they thought it would quench class struggle at home.

The road of development of Bolshevism spans nearly a decade and a half. The fundamental point of this talk is that the October Revolution would not have been possible without the program and the tactics elaborated by the Bolsheviks in the struggle for the Third International and against imperialist war. For it was on the rock of the war that Menshevism, tying itself to the bourgeoisie, broke its neck. Because of the war, once the revolution broke out in Russia there was no room for a formulation akin to the "democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry." In fact, the task that had been set in motion by the outbreak of World War I was that of civil war of the proletariat for socialist revolution.

Lenin's key three works of this period, *Imperialism, The State and Revolution*, and *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, were polemics against the center, internationally, in Social Democracy. In the heat of battle, in Russia and across Europe, when the founding of the Third International took place, it was not easy to get delegates to Moscow, and most of those who turned up were people who either were lucky and made it through or happened to already be there. The delegates to the First Congress were thus necessarily a somewhat eclectic collection of parties and individuals. But it was an historic affirmation of the years of previous struggle and above all of the actual creation of the dictatorship of the proletariat embodied in soviets. The key resolution at that Congress was, indeed, an upholding of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Kautsky spent the last 20 years of his life as an embittered, anti-Soviet Social Democrat, an apostle of bourgeois democracy, blaming all ills, including German fascism, on Bolshevism. Lenin, for his part, recognized the real issue which the Third International had to turn its attention to and that was the spreading of the October Revolution to other places. I wanted to quote something that he wrote in October of 1918, which I think kind of gives a measure of him as a revolutionist. If you look in the volume that has *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, there is, earlier on, a very short piece by the same name and in it Lenin notes:

"Europe's greatest misfortune and danger is that it has *no* revolutionary party. It has parties of



traitors like the Scheidemanns, Renaudels, Hendersons, Webbs and Co., and of servile souls like Kautsky. But it has no revolutionary party.

"Of course, a mighty, popular revolutionary movement may rectify this deficiency, but it is nevertheless a serious misfortune and a grave danger.

"That is why we must do our utmost to expose renegades like Kautsky, thereby supporting the revolutionary *groups* of genuine internationalist workers, who are to be found in *all* countries."

—CW, Vol. 28, p. 113

It was that task that the founding of the Third International took up.

The German delegation of the newly fledged Communist Party arrived in Moscow with a mandate (adopted before the Spartacus uprising) to oppose the launching of a Third International, because the German Communists could not yet break themselves from the conception of the party of the whole class. They still were mesmerized by the possibility of some sort of unity with various centrists and thought the formation of a new international premature. The German delegation was actually talked out of this position while in Moscow.

That was crucial. It had been a long and difficult struggle, but the banner of international proletarian revolution, besmirched by Social Democracy in 1914, was planted at this founding conference. Its key programmatic element, the dictatorship of the proletariat based on soviet power, was asserted. The struggle to forge new revolutionary parties was launched.

The new parties which adhered to the banner of October reflected a generational split. It was the young workers who had gone through the war who were to become the base of the new International. It was the older workers who tended to stay behind with the Social Democracy. Certainly our tasks today have obvious parallels. The *sine qua non* is to build parties of a Bolshevik type, to forge an international, and to contest for proletarian power and that really is the only road to new October Revolutions, which is what this class is all about.

### Summary following discussion

I believe it was some of the German centrists in 1917 who were denouncing Russian designs to annex Constantinople while, meanwhile, calling for a free Turkey. Now, of course, they weren't denouncing German imperialism's designs on Turkey. That's the whole point. Basically, they were a front for the social chauvinists. Now, in general, a key aspect of Social Democracy, and the attendant parliamentary cretinism, is the assumption that the proletariat will

get more and more of a vote. Labour Party cretins in Britain fantasize that if Labour were to get 51 per cent and triumph in parliament then, when 51 per cent of the means of production is nationalized, one will have socialism.

The problem, of course, was that, in Germany, at a certain point, the German Social Democracy had managed to mobilize behind it most of the proletariat. I actually thought Victor and Len made the points rather well about the question of the party of the whole class. But what I tried to indicate by reading some of the points which Inessa Armand had raised was that the break with the liquidators meant the institution in practice, and an attitude toward the other formations in Russia, basically of a programmatic, disciplined, unified party.

The *Junius Pamphlet* is quite important, because Lenin really goes after the Achilles' heel of German Social Democracy. It was precisely the concept of a national war in defense of the fatherland that was the justification for the position of the center and the right. Tsarism had historically been the main counterrevolutionary force in Europe, so naturally—I suppose it is playing lesser evilism with emperors—the Hohenzollern emperor is a lesser evil, so that when counterrevolutionary tsarism invades, it becomes a just war. Of course, the French were arguing meanwhile that their just war was a war in defense of democracy against the German empire, while, of course, being in alliance with the tsar.

Lenin's particular point about the whole nature of the war was that it was an interimperialist war. The Brian Pearce article ["Lenin and Trotsky on Pacifism and Defeatism," *What is Revolutionary Leadership*, Spartacist pamphlet, 1970] is interesting because, indeed, if you do read it, what you will read is a denigration of Lenin's policy of revolutionary defeatism, which was at the core of his policy of turning the imperialist war into a civil war for socialism. I gather Emily and Jim had talked about this and Jim actually thought that this article served a certain purpose for Healy, that we weren't cognizant of at the time, which is that Healy came out of that wing of the British Trotskyists who supported the Proletarian Military Policy. But, if you cut out the defeatism, you cut out the whole struggle, the whole orientation of the Bolsheviks. Defeatism, I want to argue again, was absolutely crucial for the bringing off of the October Revolution. It was one of the two elements, the other being the dress rehearsal of the Moscow 1905 insurrection. Lenin absolutely viewed the adherence of a German party to the Communist International as the precondition for having a real international party.

I was thinking it would be fun, since Norden falsely accuses us of having a pessimistic perspective, rejecting “the crisis of leadership,” to confront him with Lenin’s speech of January 1917 to young Swiss workers: “We of the older generation may not live to see the decisive battles of this coming revolution. But I can, I believe, express the confident hope that the youth...of the whole world will be fortunate enough not only to fight, but also to win, in the coming proletarian revolution.” That speech itself is, to some extent, contradicted by some of the other things Lenin wrote in 1917. For example, he wrote that a turn is going on in world politics; that the imperialists have milked this war for what they can and are thinking of cutting their losses and trying to cut a deal. So we have the danger now that imperialist peace moves, imperialist plans to settle the war, will lay the basis for a new war. But this raises the issue of revolution. Millions of proletarians now possess excellent weapons. This is not a subjective evaluation on our part. This is the objective condition. The situation is being posed of either an imperialist peace or a fight for revolution. It is quite interesting that Lenin, being a Marxist, nonetheless didn’t pretend to have the crystal ball of our centrist Norden.

What strikes one about both Luxemburg and Kautsky is they both adopted a posture of being above the fray in the party. Not politically, but there is a disconnect between their programmatic struggles and any practical conclusions. With Kautsky, this was connected to his deeply evolutionary parliamentarist conception; with Luxemburg, I think it was a bow to what Jon talked about, which was her absolute faith in the spontaneity of the proletariat. This led her to not draw practical conclusions from her theoretical work. Thus, she wrote a very long article on imperialism that was wrong, but, nonetheless, it just sort of sits there floating. There is no connection to any particular struggle in the German party. I thought Jon’s remarks were quite to the point there. It is certainly true that the colonization issue did have reflections in a lot of other places—Holland is one, Britain and France are certainly other places.

I appreciated Alan’s point, about Engels’ letter to Bebel and Kautsky and their suppression of it, because the German Social Democrats were always “placating the old ones in London.” Marx and Engels had big misgivings about the various unifications with elements of the Lassalleans. It was

really Bebel, in particular, but also Kautsky and Bernstein, who argued very strongly: well, yes, the programmatic concessions are here, but organizationally we are going to triumph. Organizationally they did, but a pattern was set of concessions. Engels was particularly concerned that the Erfurt Program, by dodging the question of the state, would disarm the party when a revolutionary situation arose. Engels had a very different conception of revolution, having gone through the experience of 1848 and the Commune, than that of Kautsky and Bernstein, and Bebel.

I have to conclude by saying that this first talk is an indirect polemic against our comrades in the SpAD, who have not sufficiently studied the history of their own workers movement and assimilated, or begun to assimilate, the very rich lessons that can be drawn from that history. I am not simply talking about Trotsky’s writings and the struggle against fascism in Germany, but of going back through the whole period and looking at it with a critical eye. As Jane mentioned, one has to think, for example, about the connection between Trotsky’s PMP and his advocacy of a referendum against imperialist participation in the war in the United States in the 1930s. There is a certain link between those things.

The question of revolutionary defeatism is key. It would be useful if some comrade would actually pursue a bit of work on this topic, especially in regard to the Pearce article. Hal Draper also voiced the position that Lenin was only a revolutionary defeatist in Russia and that the policy was never really applied. But what opposition to revolutionary defeatism means is opposition to the perspective of a civil war against imperialism and for socialism. Lenin’s fight for a revolutionary defeatist policy in WWI is absolutely key and leads in a straight path to the October Revolution, the first break in the chain of imperialism at its weakest link. The whole perspective, in fact, was to forge the International to carry out its duty as Marxists—to bring the proletariat to state power around the planet.

That is really what the Third International and the October Revolution were all about. The comrades who say it has nothing to do with socialism in one country are so obviously right. This is simply a reflection of the past, of the dead dogs of Stalinism. But revolutionary defeatism is a key issue. It is the reaffirmation of the original revolutionary aims of the *Communist Manifesto*.

# The Second Congress (1920): Forging a Revolutionary International

by Steve Henderson  
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I should say right away what I am not going to cover, which is the national and colonial question. Although it was a major topic of discussion and debate at the Second Congress, the underlying assumption of the theses and resolutions on the colonial question was the *absence* of a proletarian political movement in the colonial world, something which was rapidly changing following World War I. But the implications of this were not yet obvious in 1920. Jim spoke succinctly to the question of permanent revolution at the Bay Area discussion, so I would refer comrades to his remarks [see transcript, pp. 36-37]. In any case, all eyes at this time were still centrally focused on the revolutionary possibilities in Europe and the tasks of the Communist parties there.

The Second Congress of the Comintern was held in July and August of 1920. Soviet Russia had been fighting a civil war for over two years, and was still facing counterrevolutionary armies on three separate fronts. By this time the initial post-war revolutionary wave of 1918-19 was over in Central Europe. Revolutionary upheaval had shaken the defeated imperialist powers, principally the German and Austro-Hungarian empires. But while the kings departed, the bourgeoisie and its armed fist remained. The defeat of proletarian revolution in this period was at bottom due to the political treachery of the Social Democracy and the organizational and political weakness of the small Communist forces.

However, in 1920, at the time of the Congress, there were continuing political crises and outbreaks of tremendous class struggle in Europe. In Germany, the right-wing Kapp Putsch against the SPD government in March of 1920 was defeated through a nationwide general strike, combined with an armed mobilization of the workers. In Italy, 1920 was the year of massive strikes, culminating in the month-long factory occupations in August and September. And as the Second Congress was taking place, the Red Army had just repulsed Pilsudski's forces in the Ukraine and was advancing toward Warsaw—posing the possibility of revolution in Poland and linking up directly with the German proletariat. So, despite the delay of successful revolution, the Comintern anticipated continued revolutionary opportunities. But what were needed were effective Communist parties to take advantage of them.

The First Congress, held in March of 1919, had declared war on the Second International, mobilizing support for the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., soviet power. The manifesto for the First Congress focused on the soviets as the organs of revolutionary struggle, and much less so on the party as the indispensable instrument for victory. The Second Congress began the fight on this question: giving organizational and political form to the member parties of the International. However, the precondition for building such parties was finishing the split with the reformists and the centrists.

Several mass social-democratic parties, including the Socialist Party in Italy (PSI), the Independent Social-Democratic Party in Germany (USPD), the French Socialist Party, along with a number of others, had withdrawn from the Second International. Under pressure from their leftward-moving members, these parties had been forced to go to Moscow. The PSI had already affiliated; others were looking to do so. But the Comintern had to keep out the reformists and centrists who were simply following their base. The Second Congress affirmed that, unlike the Second International, the Comintern was a democratic-centralist international. Its decisions were binding on national parties, which could not keep reformists within their ranks and continue to function in the same old way. This is where the "21 Conditions" come in, and their purpose was to build this kind of international.

In addition, forging real Communist parties meant starting to codify the program and tactics of the International. Simply agreeing with the dictatorship of the proletariat and soviet power was not sufficient in the long run. The Comintern sought to win over as many of the pro-Soviet "Lefts," the syndicalists and anarchists, as possible to an understanding and agreement with the full communist program. The political arguments for this are hammered out in "*Left-Wing Communism*," which was written by Lenin a couple of months prior to the Congress, translated into all the major European languages and handed out to every delegate at the Congress. Successfully implementing this perspective would fuse the best of the left wing of Social Democracy with the subjectively revolutionary anarcho-syndicalists on a Leninist basis.

Most comrades have read "*Left-Wing Communism*", so I don't want to go through everything, but many of the theses and presentations at the Congress took up and refuted the arguments of the Left Communists and the syndicalists. In his opening speech, Lenin said that compared with the task of rooting out the opportunists, rectification of the errors of the Left Communists would be comparatively easy, because their position of boycotting the trade unions and anti-parliamentarism was a product of the betrayals of the Second International. His antidote was to familiarize communists with the internationally applicable experiences of the Bolshevik Party. Cannon writes about that in *The First Ten Years of American Communism* and the impact that it had on the American section, for example, the rooting out of a lot of these errors.

But Lenin did not mean this figuratively. If you read the opening paragraph of "*Left-Wing Communism*", he talks about the experiences of the Bolshevik Party which are directly applicable to the other countries and the parties of the West. I don't want to repeat every argument, but one thing that really jumps out when you read "*Left-Wing Communism*" on the arguments of the left is that all of Lenin's opponents, pretty much without exception, invariably resorted to national exceptionalism. From the right, Kautsky portrayed the Bolshevik Revolution as a dictatorial Russian deviation from the civilized norms of European, i.e., German, Marxism. The left communists, who denounced the Social Democracy, nonetheless made a symmetrical argument: that the Bolshevik experience did not apply to Europe because the parliamentarist and reformist trade-union tradition was too strong. Therefore, the Communist parties had to make a complete break from these institutions. This is really an inverted social-democratic worldview. If the working class is that wedded to bourgeois democracy, it writes off *a priori* the revolutionary capacity of the European proletariat.

As a revolutionary theory, Left Communism is pretty barren. But Lenin did not simply dismiss the Lefts. They were a significant current within the early Communist movement which had a working-class component. There may have been some petty-bourgeois intellectuals, but they did have a big working-class base at the time. A lot of their impetus really was based on hatred of the class collaboration of the reformist trade-union bureaucrats. If you read about any of the strikes that took place during WWI, you will find they were led from outside the framework of the official unions. That is where you get organizations like the Shop Stewards in Germany, who led the Berlin metal workers strikes, or the Clydeside Workers Committees in the

British Isles. There was a basis for looking to go around the unions and around the official institutions. But by the end of the war, workers were pouring back into the unions, they were becoming the mass organizations of the proletariat and they were forced to carry out some class struggle. So to dismiss them would have left the whole mass base of the workers movement back in the hands of the reformists.

In the appendix to "*Left-Wing Communism*", Lenin writes:

"There is reason to fear that the split with the 'Lefts'...will become an international phenomenon...Let that be so. At all events, a split is better than confusion..."

But then he goes on:

"Only, every effort should be made to prevent the split with the 'Lefts' from impeding—or to see that it impedes as little as possible—the necessary amalgamation into a single party, inevitable in the near future, of all participants in the working-class movement who sincerely and conscientiously stand for soviet government and the dictatorship of the proletariat."

—V. I. Lenin, "*Left-Wing Communism—An Infantile Disorder*, *Collected Works*, Vol. 31, pp. 107-108 (Progress Publishers, 1966)

The Comintern at this time was anticipating renewed outbreaks of revolutionary struggle in Europe, and therefore the immediate programmatic questions were still the fight for Soviet power and against bourgeois parliamentarism. Lenin did not want a premature split with the Left Communists and hoped to win over as many as possible.

However, it was much different against the social-patriots and reformists. There wasn't going to be any friendly persuasion: they needed a hard split and a purge, which was the aim of the 21 Conditions. This was not exactly the view of the main leaders of the German and Italian parties, Paul Levi and Giacinto Serrati. They had more or less the opposite perspective: to purge or isolate the Lefts and for unity with the reformists and centrists, which is why they opposed the 21 Conditions at the Congress. Although they ended up voting for them, they sabotaged them in practice. Within the Comintern, they were the major centrist obstacle to the implementation of the perspective of breaking with the reformists.

In the appendices to "*Left-Wing Communism*", Lenin deals specifically with Germany and Italy, which both had sizable parties and revolutionary opportunities. Therefore, the role of Levi and Serrati is of no small consequence. Serrati was conciliating an openly reformist wing within the PSI that

was hostile to proletarian revolution. While Levi did not have a reformist wing within the KPD, the German Communist Party, he was looking to regroup with the left-social democratic formation, the USPD, on the widest possible basis, without Comintern interference. He later blocked with Serati in Italy to sabotage the birth of the PCI. Levi was on a trajectory out of the Communist movement at this time and back to Social Democracy, which will figure quite large in the next class. I wanted to go a little into the history of these parties, the German KPD and the Italian PSI, so you know where they were coming from and where they were going, both before and after the Second Congress, and so you can understand why they did what they did at the Congress.

### **Spartakus and the German Revolution of 1918-19**

I want to start with the question of Germany and the German party. As comrades know, the KPD had its origins primarily, but not solely, in the Spartakusbund of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. They operated as a faction within the USPD, also known as the Independent Socialists, which was formed in April 1917 as a left-pacifist split from the pro-war SPD governmental socialists. It was also explicitly formed to head off the influence of Luxemburg and Liebknecht and the Spartakusbund. The USPD consisted of a right wing led by Karl Kautsky & Co. There was a center composed of left social democrats and centrists, and then there were the Spartakus revolutionaries. As the war dragged on, the Independents attracted thousands of discontented workers and began to rival the SPD's influence over the working class. They were becoming a mass party. The important point about the Independents is that at every critical juncture, the Independents provided the left cover for the SPD to head off socialist revolution.

When the German revolution broke out in early November of 1918, the newly formed Spartakusbund was still inside the USPD. After the Kaiser abdicated, the SPD took over governmental power with the express aim of heading off social revolution. To do that, it proposed that a joint SPD-Independent coalition government rule until a National Assembly could be convened. In other words, the Independents should provide the left cover for an interim so-called "socialist" government that guaranteed continued capitalist rule. The USPD leadership agreed to this.

Workers and soldiers councils were springing up in Berlin and around the country and they had to be convinced of this plan. With the authority of the Independents behind them, the SPD could appeal

to working-class unity and got the needed Berlin council approval for this. Meanwhile, Friedrich Ebert, the SPD head of government, had been in secret communication with the German Military Command, working out how to get reliable troops to Berlin to put down the revolution. So, you had the left face, which is the coalition government with the USPD acting as its left wing, and then you have the real deal, which is collaboration with the military high command to put down revolution.

The Spartakusbund and its paper, *Die Rote Fahne*, fought for most of the right things: arm the workers, disarm the counterrevolution, no support to this coalition government, expose the National Assembly fraud, all power to the councils, appropriate the bourgeoisie. But they remained within the USPD until the eve of the ill-fated Spartakus uprising. Luxemburg had disagreed with Lenin on the need to split from the Social Democrats and form a tightly disciplined revolutionary party. Her perspective was essentially to capture the leadership of the USPD, and she put too much faith in the spontaneous self-organization of the working class. Consequently, in the midst of this revolution, instead of having a Leninist party, you had a not-very-disciplined party still immersed in the left wing of the Social Democracy. The split came way, way too late.

The KPD was formed on 31 December 1918 from a fusion of the Spartakusbund and the International Communists of Germany (IKD), a loose federation of independent Communist groupings based in cities like Bremen, Dresden, Berlin and others. The IKD's principal difference with the Spartakusbund had been opposition to entry into the USPD. And they were absolutely right on that question. But they also had other differences that were not right. The IKD had strong syndicalist leanings, thus they tended to be the center of parliamentary boycottism and for boycotting the trade unions.

The most fiercely debated question at the founding conference of the KPD was whether or not to participate in the National Assembly elections. By this time, the Spartakusbund leadership was arguing for participation, because the whole of the working class was pretty much going along with it, due to the work of the SPD, but they got overwhelmingly outvoted at the founding congress by the membership and its delegates. The arguments of the boycottists varied in motivation—some opposed parliamentarism in principle, others for tactical reasons. But what is clear is that a sizable portion of the KPD membership, especially in Berlin, was anticipating imminent proletarian insurrection, even though they had no actual plans to organize it and they

weren't organizing it themselves.

To give an idea of the difficulties: they were essentially a tiny group that was swamped by a huge, volatile membership and periphery. In November in Berlin they had approximately 50 people; on the eve of the uprising and the conference they had approximately 300 in Berlin. Maybe they gained a few more from the fusion, but we are talking of a tiny party that at the same time was leading, in their own name, armed demos of 150,000 and with the shop stewards holding demonstrations of 250,000 workers. This was a tiny party that had a huge periphery. Karl Liebknecht had enormous authority. The perception that insurrection was imminent and possible in Berlin was not totally out of line. One of the main questions was whether it would be isolated.

In response to the KPD conference, the SPD escalated its campaign to criminalize the revolutionaries in the Spartakusbund in preparation for bloody repression. On 29 December, the opening day of the KPD conference, the SPD's bloodhound Noske had deployed outside Berlin a new armed force to be used for counterrevolution. This was the Freikorps: volunteer battalions, initially composed of junior officers and noncoms, who were organized by right-wing officers. They were used for counterrevolution in Germany and also in Poland in the East. Many future Nazis got their start in the Freikorps.

The SPD government provoked the Berlin workers by firing the popular USPD Berlin police chief on 4 January. I won't go into the details, but this led to a semi-spontaneous uprising led by the USPD left wing. The USPD had finally pulled out of the coalition government just beforehand, under pressure from their left wing. The KPD obviously did not have the forces to lead an insurrection on their own. They were tiny and so the Berlin USPD was effectively in charge: that was who was running the show. Luxemburg had sought all along to avoid a premature uprising, as did a number of leaders of the Spartakusbund (she wasn't happy with Liebknecht, who got sucked into it), but once it happened, she urged it forward. She called on the leaders—i.e., the USPD, not the KPD—to quit vacillating and act. But it was futile.

The USPD Lefts' brief commitment to revolution was immediately followed by panic and capitulation. By this time Radek, who had sneaked into Berlin and had been there for the week before, when the uprising had been going on for a couple of days, was urging them to pull back because it obviously wasn't going anywhere. He told them to call an organized retreat, as they did in the July Days

in Russia, except the USPD right-wing national leadership had meanwhile intervened and was beginning negotiations with the SPD government. And the USPD Left was going along with this. So Luxemburg said, if they are negotiating the retreat, why should we take responsibility for it? But that was a big mistake, because what was actually going on was that the SPD was delaying. They were not interested in negotiations and were just waiting for Noske to get the Freikorps ready to march into Berlin. When they did march in, on January 13, there were a lot of Spartakusbund and others still occupying buildings, still carrying guns, which meant that you would be shot. It was a set-up for a massacre and the Freikorps came in and did just that. They crushed the working-class vanguard and killed its revolutionary leaders.

The Spartakusbund leadership had all along been worried, rightly so, about an isolated insurrection in Berlin. But in fact, the Berlin uprising was quickly followed by uprisings in the northern port cities starting in Bremen, followed by Hamburg, Cuxhaven and Wilhelmshaven. In Bremen, the KPD and USPD united to form a municipal soviet and seize power. But following the bloody suppression of Berlin, 3,500 Freikorps troops were then sent to Bremen. It was a repeat of Berlin. A small force of well-armed, ruthless shock troops overwhelmed a vastly larger, but poorly armed, workers militia.

The Freikorps then followed the insurrection and put it down one city at a time—from the northern ports, to the Ruhr, to Halle, to Munich. After the murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, Leo Jogiches led the party. He had been the longtime central organizer of the Spartakusbund. With the workers uprisings being suppressed by small military forces repeatedly, Jogiches decided to change tactics and organize a general strike in Berlin. That took place in early March and was fairly effective. Berlin was shut down. Jogiches gave orders not to go over to an armed action, because he didn't want that to bring a response. But the KPD had little control over the situation. Workers took up arms at a certain point anyway. Then the SPD responded by sending over 30,000 Freikorps into Berlin to crush it: 1,500-2,000 revolutionaries were killed in Berlin and about 10,000 wounded. Jogiches himself was captured and murdered in a police station.

By now all of the central leaders of the KPD had been murdered. The party was being hammered by repression, driven underground, and in disarray. The central committee, or *Zentrale*, had no control over party members outside of Berlin. And there was still the basic political problem of its tangled relations with the USPD which had been a

problem from the beginning and continued to be a problem throughout this period.

A lot of comrades may have read the book, *The Kings Depart*, by Richard Watt. The author has a pretty good description of what was going on:

“It was even difficult for the German Communists to put forward a clear-cut program of their own. Against Radek’s advice, they had become so entangled with the leftwing of the Independent Socialists and with the various splinters of other revolutionary parties...that nobody knew who was directing whom.”

—R. Watt, *The Kings Depart*, p. 303 (Simon & Schuster, 1970)

I thought that was a fairly succinct political description of the situation and of the problem.

This mixing of banners with left social democrats was not unique to Germany. It was one of the lessons that was brought up repeatedly in the discussion and theses of the Second Congress. In Hungary, Béla Kun’s Communists formally fused with a much larger social-democratic party to form the soviet government in March of 1919. The fusion was, I believe, the de facto precondition for Béla Kun assuming power, because the Communist Party was quite small. He was in jail at the time and they literally went to the jail and said: here, do you want to head the government? They fused and he took it over.

They made a lot of mistakes in Hungary. For example, the Hungarian soviet unnecessarily provoked opposition from the peasantry, among its many errors. The newly formed CP wasn’t much of a communist party in the sense of experience and programmatic agreement. But the first and the biggest mistake was the fusion with left social democrats. When the Hungarian soviet soon came under siege, their social-democratic “comrades” in their own party secretly opened negotiations with the Entente for the ouster of the Communists and to end the soviet “experiment.” In the end, they were overthrown by Romanian troops, backed by the French. Béla Kun was forced to resign on 1 August and white terror soon followed. In the neighborhood of 10,000 people were killed. The counterrevolution wiped out the left in Hungary.

A similar thing happened in Finland, right after the October Revolution, that of merging the Bolsheviks, or the revolutionaries, in Finland with the social democrats and then getting sold out.

### Levi and the KAPD

In Germany, with the older and experienced leaders now either dead or in prison, leadership of the KPD fell to a 36-year-old lawyer and *Zentrale* member, Paul Levi. He had been in the second tier of

leadership of the old Spartakusbund for a long time. According to Franz Borkenau in his book *The Communist International*, Levi viewed the problem of this period as:

“The party was thoroughly defeated, and that by its own mistakes. It had gone to decisive battles with incredibly small forces. Levi decided to put an end to this, and during all his subsequent career as a communist one of his chief cares was never again to allow a section of the party to involve itself in a fight which was disproportionate to its forces.”

—F. Borkenau, *World Communist—A History of The Communist International*, p. 152 (Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1962)

Borkenau was an ex-communist renegade. He had been in the KPD from 1921 to 1929, so he had his own ax to grind. But his description, from everything I have read by and about Levi, rings quite true. His policy of caution was no doubt a response to the volatile, undisciplined elements inside the KPD, but it also expressed fundamentally his pessimistic view about the possibilities for revolution in this period.

The real problem was that the KPD had gone into battles effectively relying on the USPD, which was not up to the task and often then panicked and left the KPD holding the bag, which is what they did in Berlin. Another famous case is Munich, where some local USPD leaders light-mindedly declared a soviet and then when it came under attack they cut and ran, leaving the KPD to face the consequences. That was how Leviné was murdered after a show trial, executed for defending the soviet against the Freikorps troops. He was the one who said, “We communists are dead men on leave.” This was a repeated problem. But that is not exactly the way Levi viewed it. He generalized it into a policy of caution, at all times and in all places, as his later career makes clear.

The KPD, despite its disarray, grew from several thousands of members at its founding conference to over 100,000 almost a year later, which is when you know you are in a revolution. But in the aftermath of the defeated German revolution of 1918-19, Levi orchestrated a split in the KPD at its second conference in October 1919. For those who read Marlow’s chronology, you’ll know that Levi’s motivation was that until the KPD got rid of its ultralefts, it would be impossible to effect regroupment with the much larger USPD with its base of trade unionists. But meanwhile, it had been recruiting a lot of workers and a lot of left-wing workers.

Those who opposed participation in the trade unions and parliamentary elections were purged from the party, reducing it in size from 107,000 to

50,000. Radek, who was still there, although he was in prison, had urged Levi to uphold the Comintern policy on the questions of parliamentarism and trade unions but use persuasion with the opposition. Instead, Levi tacked on a rider to his political resolutions expelling everyone who disagreed. A lot of people left who didn't even disagree with the Comintern's positions, but they were just so pissed off at the bureaucratic maneuver. Levi had a seemingly pathological hatred of the anarcho-lefts and he really wanted to get rid of these guys. Consequently, the KPD lost most of its working-class members, and in Berlin it was reduced to several dozen members. It was cut down to nothing.

After the purge, the boycottists formed the KAPD (Communist Workers Party of Germany). The Comintern initially sought to bring the KAPD back into the KPD, but backed off at Levi's insistence. The KAPD was nonetheless invited to the Second Congress and given sympathizer status. In the end, the KAPD leaders chose not to participate in the Second Congress after they had read the draft theses.

It is useful to look at the difference between Levi's attitude and Lenin's attitude to these Lefts. At the time of the split/purge, Lenin immediately wrote the KPD central committee, saying he found it "incredible" that they had expelled the boycottists and proposing that the ECCI, the Executive Committee of the Comintern, mediate the dispute (see V. I. Lenin, "Letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Germany Regarding the Split," *Collected Works*, Vol. 30, p. 87). As I said earlier, Lenin still anticipated immediate possibilities for proletarian revolution, which would necessarily be based on winning over not only the left wings of the Social Democracy, but also the fairly large anarcho-syndicalists in Europe. Under those circumstances, you would want to keep the Lefts within your ranks as long as possible and fight with them. While you couldn't keep unreconstructed anarcho-communists in the party indefinitely, if they maintained their positions, they nonetheless held the same positions on soviet power and opposition to bourgeois parliamentarism.

Jim, in the Bay Area discussion, as an analogy and by way of example, said that while we in the Trotskyist movement had no differences with the Oehlerites over the Spanish Civil War (i.e., over the question of proletarian revolution), the differences were over how to build the party in times that are not immediately revolutionary, which is most of the time. So you couldn't tolerate somebody who disagreed on fundamental tactics over a long period of time, but this was a period when you were still looking for fairly immediate proletarian revolution, or possibilities of it.

By August 1921, which was after the Third Congress, after the post-war revolutionary wave had definitively subsided, the CI was making changes in what the tactics and orientation of the parties should be under those conditions. Lenin drew the balance sheet and told the KPD to stop paying so much attention to the now much-smaller KAPD. The KAPD hadn't learned anything in those intervening two years, they were not moving closer to the KPD, and by this time, the KPD was a small mass party of 350,000 and was directly competing with the SPD. It had much bigger fish to fry.

### 1920 Kapp Putsch

In 1920 the possibility of revolution in Europe was still on the immediate agenda. However, it's apparent that Levi had already written off prospects for revolution—and never saw any prospects again. Levi had expelled most of the ultralefts, cut his party in half, essentially cut Berlin down to nothing. He carried out a massive retrenchment with the view that revolution was off the agenda, and all this occurred four months before the Kapp Putsch.

The Kapp Putsch was referred to by the Bolsheviks as the German equivalent of the Kornilov affair. Everybody knows that coming out of the failed Kornilov coup attempt in August 1917 was the resurrection of the soviets and the swing back to the Bolsheviks, leading toward the seizure of power. It didn't turn out that way in Germany. Levi (and most of the left today who bother to comment on these questions) thought the Bolsheviks' assessment was wishful thinking. But the events run counter to this pessimistic view of what was possible at the time. Unfortunately, the KPD proved incapable of taking advantage of the political possibilities.

The KPD, especially after the murders of its central founding cadre, was never able to forge an effective leadership, even in its revolutionary period. It ended up with a leadership that was divided between Lefts (despite Levi's massive purge), who operated on what was later dubbed the theory of the "revolutionary offensive," and cautious Rights (beginning with Levi), who didn't take advantage of revolutionary opportunity. The now much smaller KPD was soon to be tested during the Kapp Putsch, which occurred only a few months before the Second Congress.

On 13 March 1920, a right-wing general named Lüttwitz marched into Berlin with Reichswehr troops and installed a certain Dr. Kapp in power. While the SPD and bourgeois coalition government fled Berlin, the 70-something-year-old SPD head of the trade-union congress, Karl Legien, proclaimed a general strike. The KPD *Zentrale* in Berlin initially



ignored the strike (these are the remaining Lefts) and warned the proletariat to “not lift a finger for the democratic republic” (U. Winkel, “Paul Levi and his Significance for the Communist Movement in Germany,” *Revolutionary History*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Spring 1994, p. 48). That was the “Left” response. By the next day they discovered that the working class and the KPD ranks across the country had wisely ignored their advice and were striking, so they then changed their position.

Levi was in jail at the time and wrote a furious letter to the *Zentrale*, denouncing them for initially abstaining from the struggle and then for raising slogans advocating a congress of councils (soviets) and world revolution. He argued:

“The council republic comes *at the end* and not at the beginning.... Demands belong to a strike.... The demands are...the arming of the proletariat for the security of the republic, that is, issuing weapons to the politically organized workers.... A council republic and a council congress are not demands, and one cannot work to attain them.”

—*ibid.*, pp. 48-49

The full quote also had a lot of ellipses, so maybe Levi advocated further demands that aren't mentioned. But the arming of the proletariat, while a necessary first step, doesn't determine the political aims of the struggle. One of the things that Levi also talked about in this letter was to warn that the strike leadership would betray. Well, the question was: betray what? On their own terms, they didn't betray. They actually waged the strike in defense of the bourgeois republic, which is what Levi demanded of them. Levi makes a lot of valid and scathing criticisms of the Lefts. But the point was that the KPD had to find the political lever for not just the defense of the republic, but to go beyond that to achieve dual power (i.e., soviets). This was not simply a strike, but a political mobilization of the proletariat, which posed once again the question of power.

Workers councils in several cities revived during the Kapp Putsch and in the struggle against the military coup. The strike paralyzed Germany, and armed workers, including SPD workers, mobilized to defeat the putschists. Localized soviets existed in the city of Chemnitz, under Heinrich Brandler, and in the Ruhr, where a Ruhr red army was formed. But Legien, with the aid of the USPD right wing (Kautsky and the rest), successfully kept the struggle within the framework of defending, as Levi put it, “the security of the republic.” That was the betrayal that needed to be exposed; that was what had to be challenged from the beginning.

When the coup attempt collapsed after four

days, victory was proclaimed, and negotiations began over the formation of a new “socialist” government. It didn't go anywhere. Legien, a committed SPD reformist and social-patriot, wanted to put pressure on the SPD government rightists. He didn't like Noske and wanted to hold the militarists in check a little bit, so he proposed an SPD/USPD coalition government (shades of 1918). The KPD, although small, was nonetheless brought into the negotiations, not because they were going to join the government, but to determine their attitude to such a government, i.e., would they immediately try to overthrow it. Jakob Walcher, a Levi supporter, said the KPD would be a “loyal opposition” to the “socialist” government as long as the bourgeoisie was excluded. He went on:

“...A state of affairs in which political freedom can be enjoyed without restriction, and bourgeois democracy cannot operate as the dictatorship of capital is, from the viewpoint of the development of the proletarian dictatorship, of the utmost importance in further winning the proletarian masses over to the side of communism....”

—quoted in V. I. Lenin, “*Left-Wing*” *Communism—An Infantile Disorder*, pp. 109-110

That statement expresses some pretty deep illusions in the Social Democrats and bourgeois democracy. The KPD wasn't in a position to organize the immediate overthrow of this government, but to give credibility to the Social Democrats in that way represented a big right-wing bulge by the Levi wing of the party.

However, Legien's negotiations collapsed not, as anticipated, from KPD threats of a putsch, but from opposition within the USPD itself. A sizable USPD left wing opposed coalition with the SPD, because they remembered the experience of 1918. The SPD then formed a government again with bourgeois parties and proceeded to put down the local soviets with the same troops that had just tried to overthrow them.

Surrounded by Reichswehr troops, the Chemnitz soviet, under KPD leader Heinrich Brandler, surrendered without bloodshed. But miners and workers in the Ruhr didn't want to put down their arms. They stayed fighting. The USPD left tried to continue the strike in Berlin in the Ruhr's defense, but the strikers resumed work on the advice of the SPD and USPD right wing. They left them hanging. The Reichswehr troops, which two weeks earlier had been routed by these workers (miners mainly in the Ruhr red army), wanted revenge and made conditions of surrender so difficult that many workers balked. Then the Ruhr was bloodily suppressed and the Communist movement there was shattered for a time.

In the aftermath, the Kapp Putsch became the subject of mutual recriminations between the left Communists, who had initially abstained, and the right Communists, principally Levi, who had tended to go to the right toward the Social Democrats. There was plenty of criticism to be made on both sides. The Comintern expressed its dissatisfaction with the KPD leadership as a whole. Lenin, while not objecting to the operational aspect of the KPD policy regarding the proposed SPD/USPD government, heavily criticized in "*Left-Wing Communism*" Walcher's statement for sowing illusions in the USPD. Citing the USPD leadership's role during the Kapp Putsch, Lenin described them as:

"...sniveling philistine democrats, who become a thousand times more dangerous to the proletariat when they claim to be supporters of Soviet government and of the dictatorship of the proletariat because, in fact, whenever a difficult and dangerous situation arises they are sure to commit treachery...while 'sincerely' believing that they are helping the proletariat!"

—*ibid.*, p. 111

So, once again, it was the same problem of relying on the left social-democratic leadership.

### The USPD and the Twenty-One Conditions

The leftward-moving section of the USPD membership, however, was another matter. During the course of the German revolution, and afterward, the USPD attracted hundreds of thousands of revolutionary-minded workers, who ought to have been in the KPD. Under pressure from them, the USPD had withdrawn from the Second International in December of 1919. The leadership was trying to avoid affiliation with the Third International, and trying to have some halfway meeting, instead calling for a conference of the Comintern and other revolutionary socialist groups. The USPD leadership wanted to dilute the influence of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. The ECCI said no, and instead invited USPD representatives to the Second Congress for negotiations.

Various Lefts at the Second Congress were upset that the USPD was present at all, because they didn't want to negotiate with another party containing avowed reformists. They didn't get it that the reformists didn't want to be there either and the terms of negotiation were dictated by the CI. The 21 Conditions combined with the *Theses and Resolutions of the Second Congress* were to provide the political basis to split the USPD, as well as the PSI, French SP, etc., and that is basically what later happened.

Levi, unlike the Lefts and other critics, understood very well what was going on, which is why he

opposed the 21 Conditions. He really had a difference over the USPD. Whereas the Comintern looked to split the USPD on a communist basis, he wanted to regroup with pretty much the whole of the USPD (minus the worst reformists). His intervention in the Congress makes it pretty clear. He tells the USPD leadership delegation (two right-wingers and two left-wingers):

"Give us a real political program, so that what is really meant can be seen. Then you will have what the Independents need at this moment. And I am by no means talking about a split, which you love to frighten people with; I am referring to obliging you to tell the masses what you want and what the others want. Developing basic principles in this way, which in my opinion is decisive and significant, is the point where the Communist International must begin. I myself am too much the lawyer not to know how inadequate lawyers' efforts are. And thus I must confess, I am very skeptical about formulating eighteen points.... We do not achieve what the masses are trying to obtain and what the Independents have to this day failed to provide: a clear political program....

"We will continue to make our criticisms along these lines, not for our own sake but for the sake of the masses in the USPD, to whom, no matter how we are criticized, we must say:

"Cupid, who loves and torments you,  
Wants you blissful and purified."

—*The Communist International in Lenin's Time: Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920*, Vol. 1, pp. 393-394, (Pathfinder Press, 1991)

Bad poetry aside, Levi was basically telling the USPD leadership: come up with a program and let just us Germans talk. The Comintern was saying: we have a communist program, binding on all national parties, which excludes the reformists; we want to take it to your membership for a vote. That's a big difference—and it's the beginning of Levi's opposition to the CI, especially the Russians, which falls under the purview of the next class.

In the end they did have the split conference in Halle in October 1920. Zinoviev went in with Lozovsky, the head of the Profintern. The USPD reportedly had 800,000 members. Jim and I have a bet over what are the correct figures. He says Shachtman said that they got two-thirds of it. What I have read in Borkenau's book is that they would have gotten about 60 percent of it by the delegate vote, but in the end they got 300,000 out of the 800,000. Three hundred thousand went back into the SPD and 200,000 dropped out. But what is clear is that Levi didn't think he got as much as he could and he didn't really want the Russian Communists there. He thought he could have gotten more with-

out them. So that is Levi and what was going on in Germany going up to the Congress.

### **Serrati and the PSI**

I want to talk now about Italy, because Serrati was the other major player, although Levi also factors into this. The Italian Socialist Party (PSI), which, uniquely among the Social Democracy did not vote war credits in WWI, had affiliated to the Comintern *without a split taking place*. The PSI had three components. First, there was a Communist left wing led by Amadeo Bordiga, an ultraleft who was for immediately splitting with the reformists and centrists and for an independent communist party. One of his main tactical/programmatic points was parliamentary boycottism. Then there was the larger center wing, which was led by Giacinto Serrati and ran the party apparatus and the press. Finally, there was a small, but very decisive reformist wing based on the trade unions and the parliamentary fraction, with Filippo Turati as the parliamentary leader and D'Aragona as head of the CGL, the trade-union federation.

All three of these factions were represented at the Second Congress. But you won't read any of the Italian reformists' speeches, because they decided that their best course was to lay low, get out of there as soon as they could, and then go home. They weren't going to gain by saying anything.

The catastrophic consequences of unity with the reformists are tragically clear in Italy. It is very blatant. The Italian working class was extremely combative, and heavily influenced by syndicalists and anarchists. Since 1917, there had been political strikes, mass revolts, localized uprisings in cities and villages, mutinies, etc. The country was seething with rebellion. But there was no communist party there to lead this. Instead, you have the PSI and the anarchists and the syndicalists.

### **The PSI in World War I**

I want to go a little bit into the history of the PSI and how they got to that point and what happened just before and after the Congress. When WWI broke out, Italy was neutral, so it wasn't hard for the PSI to oppose the war. But it wasn't Lenin's revolutionary opposition of turning the imperialist war into a civil war. Instead it was pacifist so-called "absolute neutrality." In June of 1914, the anarchists, led by Errico Malatesta, actually rose up in Ancona in anticipation of the war, which was taken as the signal for the PSI to carry out its long-promised threat of a general strike against the war. The PSI directorate, their main leadership body, actually issued a call, but was thereafter paralyzed. One had localized uprisings, mainly led by the anarchists and anarcho-

syndicalists. The localized uprisings were suppressed and the CGL, the reformist trade-union federation, soon intervened to call off the strike.

It was clear that Italy would soon enter the war on one side or the other. Benito Mussolini broke from the PSI on the question of war, advocating intervention on the side of the Entente. Mussolini, the future fascist leader, was not a minor figure in the PSI. He was editor of *Avanti!* the main paper; he had the backing of the PSI youth; and he was the PSI's most well-known spokesman and leader. He led the party. His expulsion, after he came out for intervention in October 1914, was a big shock because he had been known as being in the far-left, anti-militarist wing of the party. But not many people went out with him. The overwhelming majority of the socialist youth and workers remained committed, hard anti-militarists. They were against the war. The young Gramsci, who figures prominently later on, initially echoed Mussolini's arguments and was labeled an interventionist. He dropped out of politics for a year and came back a hard antiwar activist, but his initial response always politically hurt him.

This was when Serrati took over the leadership of the party and became editor of *Avanti!* When Italy finally did enter the war in May 1915, the PSI altered its position to "neither support nor sabotage." In practice, this removed any obligations from the PSI trade-union leaders in the CGL to actively mobilize working-class opposition to the war in any fashion. The PSI was active in the Zimmerwald movement, but its antiwar stance was largely on paper. They ended up with talk against the war, but in practice it was the same old, same old.

The reformist PSI parliamentarian Turati routinely refused to vote war credits in chambers, but would then visit his top government friends to offer "dignified collaboration" in holding the masses steady to the national cause. Everybody recognized that the PSI had to talk left, because otherwise they would lose everything to the anarcho-syndicalists. It was an accepted reformist practice, to put something radical on paper, but then implement your real program.

### **The Russian Revolution and the PSI**

Life in the factories was practically feudal. During the war, workers were tied to the factories and if you messed up, you went to the front. It was fairly brutal exploitation. The hatred of the workers for the class collaboration of the CGL was growing.

Working-class opposition to the war was accelerated greatly by the Russian Revolution. When a Menshevik-SR delegation toured Italy in August of 1917, they were met to their horror by cries of

"Viva Lenin!" Serrati organized the Russian tour and he became increasingly associated with Lenin (to his credit, this is prior to the Bolshevik seizure of power). The war question and the class collaboration that was going on in the factories finally began to polarize the PSI, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution.

The reformists in the party were looking in anticipation of the post-war period to Wilsonian imperialist democracy, while hard Lefts like Bordiga were calling for class struggle against the war to achieve the revolutionary ends of socialism. Serrati was in the center, but increasingly pushed to the left by the fact of the Russian Revolution.

This Russian visit was actually a spark for a blowup in opposition to the war. A week after the Russians visited Turin, a food riot broke out which led to an explosion of factory demonstrations against the war. Turin was the Petrograd of Italy. It had grown enormously during the war. It was where the main Fiat plants were, with an industrial proletariat concentrated in large factories, particularly in auto. The proletariat there came fairly recently from the countryside. It had many of the aspects of the Russian proletariat. They were concentrated in large factories, where there was vicious exploitation, and the profits of these companies were enormous and people knew this.

Pitched battles broke out and the socialist, syndicalist and anarchist workers almost succeeded in taking over the city, in getting to the center of the city. But they were beaten back by machine guns and tanks. The PSI and CGL national leaders rushed into Turin, but gave no effective leadership to the struggle, except to praise the workers' courage and tell them to give up any further "useless violence." Within a week it was over. There were a lot of arrests. A bunch of the people who were arrested were then sent into the army.

Within a few months, the Turin uprising was followed by a huge military defeat at Caporetto. It was massive. I've read 300,000 casualties. There is an area in Italy where, in the mountains, you can still find skulls. The Austrian army just creamed the Italian army and this was also taking place at the time of the October Revolution. It was also when all of these "troublemakers" from Turin were sent into the army. Consequently, there was a huge nationalist backlash over the defeat itself, but also blaming it on the "communist conspiracy," supposedly caused by all of these reds in the army and the antiwar Bolsheviks who had allowed the Austrians to redirect their forces and concentrate their attack on Italy.

Most of the reformists were swept along; Turati

essentially committed the PSI to support to the war. But the Italian radicals moved in the opposite direction under the impact of the Russian Revolution. In November of 1917, a clandestine conference took place in Florence which included Amadeo Bordiga, Serrati and his grouping which called itself the "intransigent revolutionaries." From Turin, Antonio Gramsci attended his first national convention. He supported Bordiga there, who called for an immediate uprising. Serrati argued against Bordiga and carried the day. In the end, they simply reaffirmed the "neither support nor sabotage," but added stronger antiwar language. I don't think they could have had a successful uprising at the time, but it does indicate the nature of the split where Serrati is for it on paper, but always has a reason to not be for it in fact.

There was heavy repression at this time. The leftists were being thrown either into jail, after Caporetto, or sent to the front. But eventually the right-wing backlash died down and all the renewed anger among the proletariat and elsewhere came out with even greater force after that blew over. The revolutionary left started to revive.

In September of 1918, toward the end of the war, the PSI held its national conference. This is an example of the routine in the PSI. After all of this, the right wing is supporting the war, the left wing is calling for revolution, there was the uprising in Turin, but at the end there is unity at the conference. All the old wounds between the "maximalists" (the Serrati wing of revolution on paper) and reformists were patched up and unity once again achieved. Only the conduct in support of the war of the social-patriot Turati was condemned outright, and nothing further happened. The more radical left motions were curbed, and the party committed itself once more to its maximum paper program: the socialization of the means of production and distribution.

### The Biennio Rosso

The discontent and the seething of the masses were not going away. Now, we are heading into the period called the *Biennio Rosso*, the red two years, 1919 and 1920. In the beginning of 1919, the war was over and the first great strike wave broke out. The syndicalist unions (whose federation is called the USI) were rapidly gaining strength. That is actually one of the reasons that the PSI affiliated to the Comintern in March of 1919. The PSI leaders very much wanted the reflected prestige of the October Revolution. It gave them a left cover for what they weren't doing at home. The popular working-class mood was to "do what the Russians did." There was also some genuine left movement within the PSI,

including Serrati. The point is that it didn't go very far. So the PSI directorate voted in March to affiliate to the Comintern, with all the reformists, like Turati and the other guys, opposed, but it carried.

About this time, in the beginning of the red two years, and after the last conference, when the left motions are getting voted down, Bordiga draws some lessons and he is pushing for a split. His new journal, *Il Soviet*, comes out calling for expelling the reformists. In February of 1919, he began developing the themes for boycotting parliament, which initially he conceived of as a tactical, not a principled, question. He began calling for a new party and began to organize nationally a Communist faction within the PSI that would ultimately lead the split in early 1921.

The only other nominally Communist grouping at this time in Italy was developing the factory council movement in Turin. That was around the journal *L'Ordine Nuovo*. But this politically heterogeneous grouping was only just getting started and the main thing is that it lacked a *party* political perspective at the time. They were just concentrating on the factory councils. One of its leaders was Antonio Gramsci. The others were Togliatti, who later became a leader of the Communist Party, Tosca and a number of names that are familiar in Italian Communist Party history.

A strike wave was also going on in this same period. The strikers actually won a number of gains from the employers. But the strike wave also led to the increase of fascist activity in response to it. In April of 1919, fascists burned down the offices of *Avanti!* The PSI's response was to rely on the cops, to simply do nothing. The membership, however, was outraged. And two days later, the anarchist secretary of the syndicalist USI trade unions proposed a "united revolutionary front" of the PSI, CGL, USI, anarchist trade-union federations and the railway unions. But the PSI leaders and the CGL basically turned it down. Some of them were in favor of it, and it was popular among the workers, but the overture was rejected by the leadership, because the CGL had always opposed the syndicalists and the syndicalist unions as simply troublemakers, and Serrati had a very passive view of revolution, which led him to reject any kind of direct or street actions.

The strikes had made short-term economic gains, but workers still could not keep pace with inflation. Food shortages during the summer of 1919 led to widespread protests and localized uprisings, sometimes verging on mini-soviets, either spontaneous or led by anarcho-syndicalists. In some places, the "House of Labor" took over food distribution and the merchants simply gave them the

keys. They were taking over somewhat the life of the city. When these actions were often met with brutal repression by the government, the CGL leaders blamed the disturbances on syndicalist "secessionists." These events continued the pattern of reformist hostility to social struggle, which only strengthened the hands of the spontaneist anarcho-syndicalists within the workers movement in Italy. Throughout all this, the PSI was passive, because there was a pact which they had reintroduced—it was the old social-democratic pact—that if it was an economic strike, the CGL ran it, and if it was a political strike, the PSI could take it over. And so all of these strikes were nominally economic, so the CGL reformists were running them and the supposed revolutionaries in the PSI were taking a hands-off attitude. So the PSI didn't play a role in any real way in all of this social protest.

In effect, unity between the "revolutionary intransigents" in the PSI directorate and the reformists in the CGL had been achieved, especially in anticipation of the upcoming election campaign where they expected the PSI to get big returns. They didn't want to get involved in active social struggle and they were preparing for an election campaign.

The next conference is in the fall of 1919. Bordiga's Communist "abstentionist" faction was handily defeated at the October PSI conference. Affiliation to the Comintern was approved by acclamation. *Avanti!* later received a letter from Lenin, which hailed the adherence of the PSI to the Comintern, supported the decision to take part in the elections, and developed his arguments against the ultralefts. This was taken by Serrati as a justification for the rejection of both Bordiga's policies, not just on the abstentionism regarding parliament, but also for an independent Communist Party, which was another key component of his program. Serrati also thought it justified his opposition to the factory council movement in Turin, which had been starting to grow in this period. The opposition in reality was based on the fact that it was a threat to trade-union control, which was run by the CGL.

The Turin Communists, through their journal, *L'Ordine Nuovo*, popularized the idea of factory councils, which were based in Turin on existing union structures within the industry. Much of the initial political motivation by Gramsci is not exactly in line with what you read in the *Theses on the Trade Union Movement, Factory Committees and Communist International*, from the Second Congress. It is vague. Gramsci originally motivated the idea of councils as proletarian training schools essentially for production under communism, which is obviously an inherently utopian and/or reformist scheme. As they got off the ground in

reality, they were quickly viewed as a vehicle to get around the reformist CGL leadership, and a means to draw a broader industrial workforce into political life and social struggle. A lot of the workers in these plants were not in the unions. The metal workers unions and these other unions tended toward the skilled workers. So there was a large component that was cut out of any representation in the unions' political life. The arguments changed over time as Gramsci and others moved toward Leninism and toward a party perspective.

The main union in Turin was the metal workers union, FIOM, which represented, as I said, only a portion of the workforce in the factories. But for these factory councils to grow, the Turin Communists and those active in the council movement had to come to some kind of agreement with the local CGL and FIOM, because they were not going to go very far in opposition to them. So they agreed that councils would not replace the unions and that, while all workers could vote for factory commissars, only union members could run for election, so this kept union leadership intact while giving representation to and drawing in other workers. By October of 1919, a commissar assembly held in Turin represented 32 factories and 50,000 workers.

*L'Ordine Nuovo* presented itself as a Communist journal adhering to the Third International, but it didn't have a party political perspective initially. It was advocating factory councils in opposition to the party which was supposed to politically guide them. The PSI was siding with the reformist leaders of the CGL, who adamantly opposed the council movement as a threat to their political hegemony. There were a lot of problems with the councils as initially conceived and in practice. Enforcing workers control over production under capitalism is necessarily short-term: either you overthrow capitalism or the capitalists and their state mobilize to reassert control over their factories. Factory councils can be organs of revolutionary struggle only if led by a communist party that deals with the broader political problem of power: especially the question of the state. But that party didn't exist. And the PSI/CGL reformists' hostility served to strengthen the syndicalists within the council movement who glorified the economic struggle on the shop floor, whose grand conception was the "expropriating general strike."

Serrati launched a blistering attack on the Turin council movement as "the realm of aberration," making some valid Marxist criticisms but in the service of reformism, because that is what he was politically blocking with. Bordiga dismissed the councils as a reformist scheme which avoided the central question of political power and the need for a communist party. Most importantly, the Com-

intern rep in Italy weighed in, raising similar arguments against them. This actually had a big impact on Gramsci, who had conceived of the Russian Revolution as a soviet revolution and he didn't understand the role of the Bolshevik Party in it and the importance of the party, but it started to register after a while.

In the meantime, the council movement itself, beginning in 1920, had about 150,000 workers in Turin organized into it. But the PSI and CGL hostility to it essentially isolated the PSI influence in the councils to Turin. The council movement did not go beyond Turin with the PSI leading it.

Gramsci fought back, writing an article entitled "First: Renew the Party," in January 1920, blasting the PSI leadership for its passivity and for tolerating the stranglehold of the parliamentary reformists and the trade-union officials. In early 1920, there were huge strikes by postal and railway workers which totally passed the PSI by since these were economic, not political, strikes. But the strike wave paralyzed the country. Gramsci argued that as the state neared collapse, the party was abandoning workers to their own devices. That only the anarchists would be the gainers. And, in fact, the syndicalist USI kept growing rapidly: in 1919 it had 300,000. Its growth through 1920 was so rapid that there was talk of 800,000. Outside of Turin, the factory councils were exclusively in the hands of the anarcho-syndicalists.

The crisis in all of this came to a head in April of 1920 in Turin, a couple of months before the Second Congress. The industrialists were preparing to dismantle the council movement. Troops were pouring into Turin in preparation for a lockout, as essentially an army of occupation. A minor incident in one Fiat plant led to a sitdown strike in defense of the council commissars and the council movement. This eventually escalated into a general strike throughout the Piedmont region of northern Italy, the main industrial area where Turin is located, encompassing 500,000 workers and involving four million people.

To succeed in the face of the military occupation, the strike obviously had to extend geographically and in its political scope. But the PSI leadership simply opposed the strike. The Milan edition of *Avanti!* (edited by Serrati) refused to publish even the strike manifesto of the Turin section. The PSI directorate met at the height of the strike (the meeting was abruptly shifted from Turin to Milan) and refused to authorize the strike's extension beyond Piedmont, effectively isolating it and guaranteeing demoralization and defeat. No one on the PSI directorate supported the strike: the reformists wanted to negotiate with the government to end it

and the radicals, the “intransigent revolutionaries” or “maximalists” around Serrati, claimed they needed time to prepare. Bordiga attacked the leadership for its irresolute behavior, but abstained on the PSI directorate motion disavowing Turin and offered the *ordinovisti* nothing more than programmatic criticism of the council movement. The general strike went down to defeat after eleven days, but that is a long general strike. But it did have a demoralizing effect. It served its purpose for the reformists.

From this experience, Gramsci concluded that it was necessary to purge the reformists from the PSI. In its aftermath, he wrote an article “For a Renewal of the Socialist Party” in May and sent a report to the ECCI in June 1920, denouncing the role of the reformists and *Serrati*. The article is specifically cited at the Second Congress, where Lenin said: We agree with it. There were no delegates from Turin. All the factions at the Second Congress, including Bordiga, were hostile to the Turin group. They could use a lot of its syndicalist leanings or some of its more reformist arguments against it. It should be noted that by this time Gramsci’s views had changed. He was retroactively emphasizing the need for a revolutionary party and downplaying the role of the syndicalists in the factory councils. But all of his conclusions regarding the need to break with the reformists were absolutely valid and that is what Lenin agreed with. He did not know the Turin grouping exactly, but he agreed with the article.

As should be clear, Serrati didn’t want to break with the reformists because he essentially shared their non-revolutionary outlook. At the Second Congress he argued that only individual reformists should be expelled when they break discipline. He didn’t want to purge the reformist wing of the party, which was politically identifiable (the “socialist concentration” faction). And he repeatedly cited Condition 16, pleading for consideration of special Italian conditions to justify his position. Although he voted for the theses, his interpretation effectively nullified their intent.

As delegates returned from the Second Congress, red and black flags flew all across Italy. Serrati was still in Moscow and didn’t get back until much later. When the rest returned, there were 500,000 workers occupying the factories.

Now we come to the PSI betrayal on an even grander scale in response to the factory occupations in August and September. On August 21, the reformist leadership of the FIOM, the metal workers union, in Milan called a work slowdown over economic demands. They were trying to keep pace with inflation. These were bad economic times, so

they were thinking that if they just walked out, they would be locked out. The workers were told that, in the event of an employer lockout, they should occupy the factories and *run them*. This was not a sitdown strike. They ran the factories. It quickly spread to Turin and other cities, and went beyond just the metal workers. Outside of Turin the vast majority of the factory occupation movement was led by the syndicalists, who were for spreading the strike as much as possible, but whose central aim was the “expropriating general strike.”

The reformist leadership of the FIOM was banking on the intervention of the liberal government of Giolitti to pressure the employers for a settlement. When this didn’t happen immediately, they handed control of the strike over to the CGL. About this time, peasants in southern Sicily and Lucania also began occupying the unworked lands of the large estates. Returned soldiers, veterans committees of peasants, were taking over areas of land. So there was a potential for widespread explosions throughout central Italy.

There were obviously a number of problems with the factory occupations. You can’t take state power by staying in the factories. There was also a lot of factory parochialism, so that you did not have a generalized militia in a city but instead had individual factory militias. Production was similarly organized around each factory, although they eventually tried to coordinate production on a broader basis. But the unresolved problem remained one of overthrowing centralized capitalist power: banking, communication, transportation and, most fundamentally, the army and the state. This required a communist party at the head of soviets.

Government troops were mobilized throughout this period. They were occupying the centers of the cities and the key installations, but they were not throwing workers out of the factories. They were held in check to be used as a last resort. But they were an ever-present threat. From what little I’ve read, Turin probably came the closest to forming a city-wide soviet. But any further political development toward that was cut off by the CGL/PSI in mid-September.

So what were the Italian Communists in the PSI doing during all this? Some key leaders were still in Moscow as the strike began, but that wasn’t the real problem. In the Communist stronghold of Turin, the “council communists” around *L’Ordine Nuovo* over the summer had broken apart into different political factions in disarray and isolation following the demoralizing defeat of the April general strike. The syndicalist-influenced Communist “abstentionists” adhered to Bordiga’s faction. The Communist

“electionists,” which included figures like Togliatti (the future Stalinist leader of the PCI) and Terracini, opposed parliamentary boycottism and an immediate split. Gramsci formed a tiny group (less than 20) called the “communist education group.” During the critical period in August-September, the various Communist factions in the PSI were all—for different reasons—ineffective in combatting the reformist obstacles in the CGL and PSI. Despite the Comintern’s warning in late August, they either ignored the reformist national leadership of the party and unions or at the critical juncture acquiesced to it.

By early September Italy was obviously heading toward a crisis, so the CGL leadership called an emergency union conference convened jointly with the PSI national leadership in Milan. They called in the representatives from Turin on September 9 for a preliminary discussion, because Turin was the vanguard. These were the guys that they had left hanging a couple of months earlier. The CGL leadership interrogated them: Are you prepared to start the insurrection? Togliatti, representing the left-wing Turin PSI section, replied:

“We want to know what your objectives are. You cannot count on an action launched by Turin alone. We will not attack on our own. It demands a simultaneous action in the countryside. Above all, it demands action on a national scale. We want assurance on this point. Otherwise we will not commit our proletariat.”

—J. Cammett, *Antonio Gramsci and the Origins of Italian Communism*, p. 119 (Stanford University Press, 1967)

These were all valid concerns, and they had been badly burned in April. But to even discuss insurrectionary strategy with committed reformists and demand assurances of support was to play into their charade. It meant conceding defeat in advance. The CGL and PSI reformists got the answer they expected and wanted.

The official meeting occurred on September 10 and 11, operating strictly within the terms of the Pact of Alliance. The reformist head of the CGL union federation, D’Aragona, who was a delegate at the Second Congress, put forward a motion to broaden the scope of the occupations to other industries—which was simply an acknowledgement of what was already happening—and called for *union* control of industry. This was a reformist demand to set up some kind of commission after the occupation ended, a joint union/employer/government corporatist scheme.

Members of the PSI national directorate put forward a motion for the PSI to take over the strug-

gle and called for the traditional “socialization of the means of production and exchange.” Several days earlier the PSI directorate, in response to the peasant mobilizations and the spreading factory occupations, had similarly verbally threatened revolution in a public manifesto. But their bluff was quickly called by the reformists. D’Aragona offered to turn the whole movement over to the PSI national leadership, if they wanted to assume command. (It was like British prime minister Lloyd George in 1919 asking the reformist trade-union leaders, who were threatening a national strike, if they wanted to accept governmental power, knowing they would refuse.) Faced with this, the PSI national secretary Gennari, who was one of Serrati’s main lieutenants, then insisted that the CGL first poll its representatives about the question of revolution! A vote of mainly reformist trade-union leaders on the question of revolution is itself a renunciation of it, but the results are still illuminating. Spreading the occupations (CGL position) only outpolled “revolution” (immediate socialization) by 591,000 to 409,000—relying on the more conservative agricultural workers unions and the abstention of FIOM with its 93,000 votes. Gennari then declared:

“The pact of alliance [between the CGL and PSI] states that for all questions of a political character the Party directorate may assume the responsibility for the direction of the movement.... At this moment, the Party directorate does not intend to avail itself of this privilege.”

—G. William, *Proletarian Order*, p. 258 (Pluto Press, 1975)

Terracini, a Turin Communist “electionist” also present at this meeting, later told the Comintern, “When the comrades who led the CGL submitted their resignations, the party leadership could neither replace them nor hope to replace them. It was Dugoni, D’Aragona, Buoizzi who led the CGL; they were at all times the representatives of the masses” (G. William, *ibid.*, p. 258). While centrists like Gennari openly refused leadership with a visible sigh of relief, leading Communists by their silence again conceded the reformists’ hold over the working class without a fight. If nothing else, they could have loudly warned the proletariat of the inevitable betrayal being prepared by the reformists *and centrists*. Instead, that was left to the syndicalists. It would have also made the Communists’ later fight against the Serrati faction at the Livorno split conference clearer to the proletarian masses in the PSI.

Of the other Communist groupings, Bordiga’s faction regularly denounced the reformists, but during September their journal *Il Soviet* never once



mentioned the factory occupations in its editorials! Gramsci remained in Turin. Although he posed the need for an “urban soviet,” he also initially claimed that the CGL call for *union* control of industry vindicated the factory council movement. He did not denounce the CGL/PSI political demobilization in Milan until later in September when the results were obvious. As for the syndicalists, the USI immediately denounced the decision in Milan, but they could only advocate more militancy in extending the “expropriating general strike.”

It was not as if, had they won the vote, the PSI leadership would have been capable of leading a proletarian revolution. But this was their formal statement of opposition to proletarian revolution. This broke the back of the occupations. That was when the head of government, Giolitti, came back into the scene. He had figured that he could ride out the occupations and rely on the CGL. This was the clear signal that the PSI and all of the main people would go for a deal. So he strongarmed the industrialists a little bit for some concessions. They gave the CGL leaders an economic package, like they did in May of 1968 in France: seal the deal and you can always change it later, and inflation will take care of wage increases anyway. And, consequently, workers did accept the deal, which was put in terms of a victory. It was enough on an economic level that they didn't feel totally sold out.

On August 27 (even prior to the generalized occupations), the ECCI had sent a letter to the PSI asserting “in Italy there are at hand all the most important conditions for a *genuinely popular, great proletarian revolution*.” It predicted that the Entente would not be able to “send its troops against the Italian working class”—a threat always invoked by the reformists. Warning against putsches, the ECCI went on to state that the Comintern was “equally opposed to the proletarian party turning itself into a fire brigade that puts out the flame of revolution when that flame is breaking through every crevice in capitalist society” (J. Cammett, *ibid.*, p. 119). The ECCI didn't get detailed news until September 21, by which time the contract with FIOM was already being ratified and people were starting to end the occupations by September 25.

On September 22, the ECCI sent another message declaring to Italian workers that, to avoid defeat, the occupation must “cover the whole of Italy with councils of workers', peasants', soldiers', and sailors' deputies” and drive out the reformists, culminating in the taking of state power (J. Cammett, *ibid.*, p. 119). But it was too late and there was no communist party to do it.

Quickly growing opposition among Turin Communists to the results of the Milan meeting and subsequent sellout (including bitter criticism of their own leaders' role in Milan) led to increasing demands for a final break with the reformists. The somewhat belated recognition of the magnitude of the lost revolutionary opportunity led Gramsci and many “electionist” Communists from Turin to join Bordiga's faction, despite their differences, to wage the fight to establish a Communist Party at the Livorno Congress a few months later. Their main obstacle was Serrati who, even after this betrayal, alibied the reformists.

I wanted to make a point about Levi again, because he had a hand in Italy later on. He was interviewed in *Avanti!* around mid-September. Levi argued that even if the time was not ripe for establishing a soviet republic, it was for the creation of soviets as a dual power. He continued: “It is my firm belief that the party runs the risk of succumbing to general inertia if, at this moment, it does not seize the reins of the movement, master events and become a motor force” (G. William, *ibid.*, p. 269). Now, that is all true, but there is nothing on the reformist obstacles, and then he later made a bloc with Serrati who continued to sanction this betrayal. That tells you where Levi was coming from. He could make the correct formal criticisms, but he was blocking with the centrists, who protected the reformists.

The defeat of the factory occupations led immediately to the explosive growth of fascism. The bourgeoisie didn't quite trust their state and so there was a massive explosion of fascist growth. The Livorno party congress that was originally planned for Florence in December of 1920 had to be postponed to January 15 and moved to Livorno because of the growing fascist menace in Florence. The small Communist Party that emerged from the Livorno Congress—the majority stayed with Serrati in the PSI—immediately faced growing fascist terror. The betrayal of the PSI/CGL in 1920 led fairly directly to the rise of Mussolini.

The newly formed PCI opposed the united-front policy from 1921 to 1923. They were in opposition to it, and the basic reason was that they hated the PSI and the CGL so much that they just couldn't stomach the idea. They were actually the first proponents of “social fascism” in some way. The hatred for the reformists was intense, understandably so.

The defeat in Italy also roughly coincided with the Red Army defeat in Poland. Remember the Red Army was marching toward Poland and it was defeated in a battle which the bourgeoisie had named the “Miracle on the Vistula.” Poland was

important for a whole number of reasons. It set the tenor for the Second Congress, because it looked as though they would win in Warsaw and it appeared that it might pose the possibility of hooking up with Germany. In spite of the problems with the sections in Europe, they might get a beachhead there.

The defeat in Poland also had an impact in Europe. For example, regarding the USPD, one thing that I read was that the KPD got less out of the USPD split in the wake of the defeat of Warsaw. It was demoralizing for left-wing German workers, because it looked like the prospects for German revolution might be put off further. But even more, it also had a demoralizing impact in Russia.

The question of Poland was crucial. The bourgeoisie greatly feared the Bolsheviks gaining a common border with Germany. It was their worst nightmare, the Bolsheviks getting into Poland, spreading communism into Europe. This is a quotation Marlow found from Lord D'Abernon, the British ambassador in Berlin:

"If Charles Martel had not checked the Saracen conquest at the Battle of Tours, the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught at the schools of Oxford, and her pupils might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mahomet. Had Pilsudski and Weygand failed to arrest the triumphant advance of the Soviet Army at the Battle of Warsaw, not only would Christianity have experienced a dangerous reverse, but the very existence of western civilisation would have been imperiled. The Battle of Tours saved our ancestors from the Yoke of the Koran; it is probable that the Battle of Warsaw saved Central, and parts of Western Europe from a more subversive danger—the fanatical tyranny of the Soviet."

—quoted in N. Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, Vol. 2, pp. 399-401 (Columbia University Press, 1984)

The defeat in Poland was not a small thing. When you read Lenin's subsequent address to the Central Committee, the felt isolation of Soviet Russia is really striking. The Bolshevik Party was trying to create its own revolutionary opportunities, probing Europe with bayonets. And I have to assume that the evident incapacity of the European parties was no doubt equally demoralizing. So that in the reading there is a mention of the pacifism of *Die Rote Fahne*. There are a lot of criticisms of the German leadership. At the Second Congress, Levi, who thought it was inconceivable that there would be an uprising in response to the Red Army in Poland, said:

"And if the Red Army, in its battle against the White army of Poland, approaches Germany's borders, it will hear from the other side, over

the bayonets, a cry of the German proletariat, the cry 'Long live Soviet Russia!'"

— *The Communist International in Lenin's Time: Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920*, Vol. 2, p. 783 (Pathfinder Press, 1991)

One commentator observed that a shout, then, was all that Levi would concede to the Russians by way of a promise. These are the sorts of problems the Bolsheviks were dealing with in trying to build parties in the West. Emily made the point in a class—and it has been in *Spartacist*—that we normally think of 1923 as one of the key turning points in the degeneration of the Soviet Union. But actually Poland in 1920 had an impact on those within the Bolshevik Party who were inclined to think that revolution in the West was becoming unrealistic and, therefore, they would have to go it alone.

But Lenin continued to fight to transform those parties, in spite of all this, into genuine Communist Parties, as the Third Congress will demonstrate. That is really the high point of the Congresses, giving the fully fleshed out organizational and political forms. So we should try to learn from those. The Second Congress tried to give the lessons to the Lefts and, generally, give some tactics and program to the parties of the world. But the main thing is that they had to split with the reformists. That was the overriding task. Then, having split with them, you could have united fronts with them a year later.

### Summary following discussion

When I was in the youth, some old CPer came up to tell me what was wrong with the Trotskyists and he recommended that I read "*Left-Wing*" *Communism*. Alison gave me a note about the abuses of "*Left-Wing*" *Communism* and she mentioned that the Cliffites recommend it in England as an antidote to Spartacism. But the real point is that Lenin is arguing to work in these different arenas, in all sorts of different milieus, with the communist program. Everybody else wants to work in these milieus and drop the communist program. For example, some of the Lefts simply dismissed the Labour Party in Britain—the shop stewards and others. They wanted to throw rocks at it. But in fact, it was real in Britain and there was a contradiction to exploit. The Labour Party had all of these "hands off Russia" committees. The reformists and centrists were really up against the wall.

George did a review of Challinor's book and gave a speech on it. It is in *Spartacist* [No. 36-37, Winter 1985-86]. From what I remember there were meetings where the head of the Labour Party had to get up and debate the question of soviets. Lenin was saying, get Communists in there and

exploit that contradiction. The British delegates were split between the syndicalist types who wanted to throw rocks at it and say it was not important and those who wanted to go in and betray.

The British Socialist Party tended to have more of the rightists. They were for going in, but they were mush. The British Communist Party was still-born, because some of the best elements of these leftists didn't go into the CP. That was the problem there. That they wanted to ignore the problem from both directions. That is what Lenin was trying to overcome.

About the sources on Germany: After the First CI Congress, they started printing the *Communist International*, on a monthly basis in multiple languages. That was the theoretical journal where a lot of issues were debated out. When you read Helmut Gruber, a lot of the articles and excerpts are taken from there: over Hungary, Germany, Munich—all of these things that were being hammered out in a lot more detail than what ends up in the theses and resolutions.

Another source is the series the SWP published on the Congresses—the purple book (*The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power*) and the two yellow books (*Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite! Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress*). Just take out the worker-peasant alliance and a couple of other quirky things (like their support for the national revolutionary movement of M.N. Roy) as the justification for their current positions. Not just the documents, but the historical introductions, from what I have read, are actually good. Unlike most histories of the German Revolution by bourgeois historians, which focus on the Social Democrats, the purple book gives you all the debates that were going on among Communists.

On Italy, I appreciated Ali's remarks. It was true not just in Italy, but in France and other places, that there were very large peasant armies in WWI. The bourgeoisie would always mobilize the peasantry against the proletariat, who they often considered shirkers in the factories who didn't have to suffer the same way as the peasantry did. When there were mutinies in France—soldiers were going to march on Paris—the ruling class had big problems. But nobody had worked among the peasantry, and this was true of the syndicalists who concentrated on the workers and the socialists who viewed the peasantry as a reactionary mass. The left tended not to consider the peasantry, so the possibility of splitting the army never took place. This is why Lenin's writing on the agrarian question was not simply for the Third World. He was talking about Italy, France, Spain, a lot of places, and Germany also.

On parliamentarism: a good parliamentarist is someone who, when the party goes underground, goes to jail. That is the deal. The Bulgarians went to jail; the Russians went to jail; the good parliamentarians went to jail. If you're asked to run in the next campaign—that's the deal.

On the Profintern: it's the period in history. If you look at who signed initially, there is Gargania from Italy, who then went on to betray. But then there is Castaña from Spain, a lot of the anarcho-syndicalists. Mainly, the Profintern was an attempt to attract the IWW and a number of revolutionary syndicalist groupings who were not going to join the Comintern directly. This was a way to try to draw them into the Communist movement. In the absence of large syndicalist formations to regroup, it gets kind of squirrely later on.

The thing about the USPD Halle fusion conference in Germany with the trade unionists bolting was interesting. Lozovsky, the head of the Profintern, was there. When he got up and started denouncing the Amsterdam International, supposedly that's when the trade unionists in the USPD got upset and didn't go with the vote. You could argue, well, maybe he shouldn't have been there demanding union affiliation to the Profintern, but it sounds like these guys wanted to be trade unionists rather than communists. Supposedly anybody in the unions could affiliate with anything, but when you asked them to ally with the Profintern that meant to them that they had to be communists on the shop floor, which is where they lived. Because, as somebody said, the German proletariat had more loyalty to its unions than to its parties, including the SPD. At least you didn't have a false unity: it meant you really had to be communists in the unions.

I think it did get sort of funny later on when you didn't have these mass syndicalist groupings that were ostensibly revolutionary. In this post-WWI period of party building, the Bolsheviks were unique. They made a revolution, took power and then there are these mass social-democratic and other parties coming to them. That is different from what we mostly do: splits and fusions among the far left. It was fairly unique, so that colored a lot of what they had to do at the time. To go from nothing to Communist parties from splits from the Social Democracy and the anarcho-syndicalists.

A final comment on Poland: after the Russian Revolution there were soviets and major revolutionary struggle in Poland that got crushed by, I believe, the Germans and some of the Freikorps. Lenin and the Bolsheviks were banking on this history of struggle when they marched on Warsaw in

1920. It was worth the risk and, although they didn't have specific information, there was some reasonable expectation that there would be a supportive rising, because there had been major strug-

gles. Poland was part of that Central Europe when you talk about workers councils rising up and then getting smashed. That really was a crucial period and I wish they had won.

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## Remarks on the National and Colonial Questions

by Jim Robertson  
Bay Area, 11 July 1998

At the Second Congress, the comrades did not view the colonial question as having a working-class component, and the Communist International was based upon a proletarian centrality, so it seemed like a big contradiction. The position that they adopted, pretty much—and again, rather vaguely, because of the lack of correlation—was to cheer on colonial insurrections on the grounds that they would weaken the major imperialist powers and therefore, to that extent, help the proletarian revolution by the confusion of imperialist troops busy being bogged down in the colonial world. For example, the Spanish and the French armies really were tied up for a big chunk of the 1920s fighting Abd el-Krim in North Africa. But there was no extension of the experience of the Tsarist Empire into the colonial world for pretty good reasons: Until the First World War, you will find hardly anywhere, outside that weak link [both imperialist and semi-colonial] of the Tsarist Empire, industry in the colonial countries. They really were overwhelmingly areas in which raw materials or agricultural products were extracted and dumped on the world market under the terms of trade or of direct colonial preferment so that the imperialist countries benefited.

Take Mexico, for example. They had a big mining industry but it was all out in the boon-docks. They had a big revolution at the same time but it was a peasant revolution and the workers played no significant role whatsoever. To the extent that there were little-bitty unions of cobblers and the rest, they were likely to be on the counterrevolutionary side.

It was with this kind of sense of background that the delegates assembled at the Second Congress. It really took a long period of time for the Communists to assimilate the new significance of the colonial world where, particularly in China and India, as a result of the disruption of world trade in the First World War, a new industrial growth had taken place and there were very real, concrete

possibilities of proletarian revolution in those two countries. The sequel was that revolution was barely defeated in China and the British imperial police were quite handy in suppressing the revolutionary threat in India. The Communists in Japan and India had a really rough time because they had organized imperial police forces to contend with and the police were quite successful. But in China, which was fractured, the Communists got a long way down the road, despite their own ineptness, in a proletarian revolution. It was really only the directives of the Comintern to make common cause with and subordinate to and merge into the radical bourgeois party, the Guomindang, that managed to salvage the situation for capitalist imperialism.

There is a statement at the very end of Trotsky's rather obscure polemic with Karl Radek, which has been published as *The Permanent Revolution*, which might, with more powerful capacity, have been the conclusion on the colonial question of the Second Congress. But I would like to point out that this was only written in 1928.

"Under the conditions of the imperialist epoch the national democratic revolution can be carried through to a victorious end only when the social and political relationships of the country are mature for putting the proletariat in power as the leader of the masses of the people. And if this is not yet the case? Then the struggle for national liberation will produce only very partial results, results directed entirely against the working masses."

In "Basic Postulates," a post-script to the publication of *The Permanent Revolution* in book form in 1930, the point is reiterated:

"A backward colonial or semi-colonial country, the proletariat of which is insufficiently prepared to unite the peasantry and take power, is thereby incapable of bringing the democratic revolution to its conclusion."

I believe in fact that it was not possible in 1920 to arrive at the position that Trotsky was able to put

forward only after the defeat of the Chinese Revolution and writing around 1930.

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The Mensheviks, that is to say the reformists of the Second International, were seen rightly as the central enemy of the building of the Communist movement. But the principal opponents throughout East and Central Europe were the nationalists. With the crash of the imperial structures—remember all those eagles that went down, the Hohenzollern eagles, the Hapsburg eagles and the Romanov eagles; that's about six of them because they all had two heads—there needed to be a new unifying axis to resist working-class revolution supported by poor peasants. And that was generally supplied by the nationalists. There were different kinds of national formations: The Polish Party of Socialism, which Pilsudski came out of, had one wing which was plebeian and a component that was proletarian, so that the PPS managed to supply at the same time both the great bulk of the Communist Party of Poland from its left wing, and the sources of Pilsudskiite nationalism from its right wing. Then you had the Freikorps, which didn't just undertake action against the working-class struggles in Germany proper but had a long prior history in Silesia fighting the Poles and in the Baltic states fighting for the maintenance of German power there. That was a nationalist formation which, of course, became closely associated with the police spy and renegade Catholic, Adolf Hitler. Then of course

Mussolini, who was not entirely an accidental figure, something like Pilsudski.

One other point I wanted to make in connection with the talk that Steve gave was that conditioning the whole of the Italian experience is one of the greatest military disasters of World War I, which is hardly known outside Italy because it was a separate theater. But the Italians lost hundreds of thousands of men at Caporetto; it completely gutted [the morale of] that country, and its consequences are there today. So you should understand that the whole background of this excellent description that Steve gave was based on an overwhelming military disaster by the Italian Army at the hands of the Austrians. Last I read, it was still hard to climb those mountains because of all the skulls and bones that were left up there.

So I think that there's a tendency, because of the central preoccupation of the Bolsheviks and of the Comintern leaders, to underplay the issue of the nationalist formations as the guys who had to be beaten, rifle in hand. It certainly proved true in the survival of the Soviet Union during the Civil War, because there were different nationalist formations—like the Russian nationalists, officers like Kolchak, Kornilov and the rest—that were extremely hard to get to cooperate with Poles and Ukrainians: "We are struggling in order to re-suppress you swine and we expect you to fight under our command." This was probably decisive in permitting the Bolsheviks to survive.

# The Third Congress (1921): Elaboration of Communist Tactics and Organization

by Reuben Samuels

New York, 5 September 1998

The Second Congress of the Communist International [17 July-7 August 1920] that Steve dealt with took place at what in hindsight turned out to be the peak of a revolutionary wave that followed World War I and was inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution. As you will recall, a great map was hung at the Congress charting the progress of the Red Army and its march on Warsaw. But the Red Army was unable to take Warsaw.

The massive scope of the postwar class war reached the point of revolutionary crisis in countries like Hungary, Germany and Italy. It contributed decisively to the Red Army victory over the White Guard forces and their imperialist allies. The imperialists were unable to crush the Soviet workers state, but despite heroic battles, without a tempered and authoritative revolutionary party, the combative working classes of Hungary, Germany and Italy were unable to overthrow their own bourgeoisies.

As Lenin stated at the Third Congress in the summer of 1921:

“The result is a state of equilibrium which, although highly unstable and precarious enables the Socialist republic to exist—not for long—of course, within the capitalist encirclement.”

—“Theses for a Report on Tactics of the R.C.P.”, *Collected Works (CW)*, Vol. 32, p. 454, First English Edition (Progress Publishers, 1965)

The defeats of this period demonstrated both the immaturity of the newly formed communist parties and the ability of the Social Democracy—despite its role in WWI mobilizing the proletariat for the imperialist slaughter, and despite its vanguard role in the imperialist expeditions against the Soviet Union—to maintain its base among the organized working class in the advanced industrial countries.

So we had in the period leading up to the Third Congress a mighty coal miners strike in Britain that was betrayed by the Labour Party and the trade-union bureaucracy. A very similar development took place in the fall of 1920 in Italy, which was the mightiest upsurge of the working people in all of Europe in that period, which was also betrayed by Social Democracy. Then there was the defeat of the German proletariat in Saxony, March 1921, crushed by social-democratic governments. In each case, the defeat was a confirmation of what Trotsky wrote in the *Lessons of October* (1924): “Without a party, apart

from a party, over the head of a party, with a substitute for the party, the proletarian revolution cannot conquer” (*The Challenge of the Left Opposition 1923-25*, p. 252).

At the Third Congress, Trotsky, in concluding the opening report that he gave on the economic situation and the prospects for proletarian revolution, stated:

“Now for the first time we see and feel that we are not so immediately near to the goal, to the conquest of power, to the world revolution. At that time, in 1919, we said to ourselves: ‘It is a question of months.’ Now we say: ‘It is perhaps a question of years.’”

—quoted in E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*, Vol. 3, p. 385 (Macmillan, 1953)

The Third Congress was devoted to using this period of precarious equilibrium to prepare the communist parties that were often communist parties only in name and stated goals, but not in their activity and organization.

In summing up the work of the Third Congress, Trotsky made what I think is an important point about historical materialism, about the crises of the bourgeoisies such as developed directly out of WWI. This point was important to counteract crisis-mongers like the Healyites in the '60s—or for that matter the Stalinists in the Third Period—who claimed that there were crises so severe that their own dynamic alone would bring down the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie would create a form of social suicide. And Trotsky responded to this in light of his report to the Third Congress where he had emphasized the temporary stability of capitalism:

“History has provided the basic premise for the success of this [proletarian] revolution—in the sense that society cannot any longer develop its productive forces on bourgeois foundations. But history does not at all assume upon itself—in place of the working class, in place of the politicians of the working class, in place of the Communists—the solutions of this entire task. No, History seems to say to the proletarian vanguard...History says to the working class, ‘You must know that unless you cast down the bourgeoisie, you will perish beneath the ruins of civilization. Try, solve this task!’”

—“School of Revolutionary Strategy,” *The First Five Years of the Communist International*, Vol. 2, p. 6 (Monad Press, 1972)

So it was clear to the Bolsheviks—at least it was clear to Lenin and Trotsky going into the Third Congress—that it was no longer sufficient to lay out the broad outlines in principles of the Bolshevik Revolution. Equally important was transmitting the strategy of revolutionary struggle for the conquest of power. The two decades of experience of building the Bolshevik Party, the instrument for the proletarian revolution, had to be made available to these fledgling communist parties that had gathered around the Comintern. This experience had to be made accessible to them and had to be applied by them to the specific circumstances in their own countries.

The debates that took place at this Congress, the debates over tactics, party building, the relationship to the trade unions, communist work among women and youth, could not have taken place without the programmatic ground-breaking work of the First and Second Congresses: the “Manifesto of the Communist International to the Workers of the World,” the “Theses on Bourgeois Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat,” the “21 Conditions for Admission to the CI.” These documents sought to draw the hard programmatic line against the centrists and opportunists who sought to destroy the new revolutionary international from within with their own brand of anti-revolutionary entrism. This was the framework in which this discussion could take place. It was not going to be a discussion with the centrists who would not split with the reformists.

Now this doesn't mean there was a cleavage between these Congresses. Lenin and Trotsky realized from the very beginning the necessity to impart their organizational and tactical experience to these revolutionaries who had been won to the October Revolution, but not yet won to Bolshevism. Lenin wrote the manual on tactics, *“Left-Wing” Communism—An Infantile Disorder*, so that it was in the hands of all the delegates to the Second Congress of the CI. But it was still necessary at this Congress to devote significant time to the struggle against the centrists and opportunists who were seeking to “get on the bandwagon” of the then extremely authoritative and popular October Revolution and its new International, offering a clean banner on which they could wipe their blood-besmirched hands.

To give you an example of the problems that the Comintern and the Bolsheviks faced, take the Czechoslovak Communist Party. Like the German party, in Czechoslovakia, the Comintern won a substantial section of the old Social Democracy and a party with hundreds of thousands of members. Now, the tradition of this party, very much like the French and German, was very reformist, very much in the

tradition of Noske and the French Social Democracy. As late as 1919, a social-democratic coalition government sent Czech troops in to crush the Hungarian Soviet. However, this actually had a radicalizing influence on the base of the Social Democracy.

A substantial left wing took over the party headquarters and newspapers. The social-democratic leadership responded by calling in the troops. This resulted in a political general strike of one million workers in December 1920, just before the Third Congress of the Comintern. The most militant sections of this working class, however, were organized into separate national parties. Czechoslovakia was put together from the remnants of the Habsburg Empire, and the Slovaks and Sudeten Germans each had their own parties with substantial minorities of Jews, Gypsies, Hungarians—you name it, they had it. The parties were divided along national lines. And the strongest, the Bohemian-Moravian party, was also the most reformist and the last to declare its agreement with the Comintern and the 21 Conditions.

This was an anomalous situation: a country with two parties that said: ‘We're ready, take us in!’ And hanging back was a third party that says: ‘We're almost ready! We agree with the 21 Conditions. We agree with getting together and having a united party.’ Finally they held what many thought would be their unification congress in the middle of May, just one month before the Third Comintern Congress. But instead of unifying, the congress set up a “Committee of Action” for this purpose. It was really a delaying tactic to prevent the consolidation of a united communist party in Czechoslovakia. Going into the Comintern Congress, maybe there was a party, maybe there were three parties, but, then again, maybe no party. So, when you read reports and exchanges at the Congress, very angry about the leadership of the Czech Communist Party, you can understand why.

And this was not atypical. So much of the discredited Social Democracy was drawn in the wake of the authority and enthusiasm for the Bolshevik Revolution that the sorting-out process was not easy.

### **NEP: A Necessary Retreat**

Now, within the Soviet Union itself, the Soviet workers had successfully defended themselves from domestic counterrevolution backed by the intervention of 17 imperialist armies. The dictatorship of the proletariat was triumphant, but the proletariat was shattered as a class. It was at the expense of the physical existence of the working class that this victory was won.

In 1921, famine swept Russia. Even cannibalism reappeared. The proletariat, already a small

minority of three million at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, was reduced by half. And very often this proletariat was subsidized, supported by the state simply to maintain intact remnants of the class, the basis for the dictatorship. This is graphically described in Deutscher's, *The Prophet Unarmed*:

"...[B]y the end of the civil war, Russia's national income amounted to only one-third of her income in 1913...industry produced less than one-fifth of the goods produced before the war...the coal-mines turned out less than one-tenth and the iron foundries only one-fortieth of their normal output...the railways were destroyed."

—p. 4

All the stocks, reserves and the exchange of goods and services on which the economy depended for its work were utterly destroyed. Russian cities and towns became so depopulated after 1921 that Moscow had only one-half and Petrograd one-third of their former inhabitants. And the people of the two capitals had for many months lived on a food ration of two ounces of bread and a few frozen potatoes.

What was the situation in the military? There were five million soldiers in 1920. There was a policy of demobilization, but how? What to do with five million armed men and women? There were no trains to transport the demobilized troops home. There was no fuel for them in the barracks. Many of these troops demobilized themselves and became bandit partisans. They would simply roam the countryside and the cities and try to forage food and a little bit of clothing to stay alive. This became such a significant problem that the Cheka, which is often mis-translated as secret police but was actually the Commission for the Suppression of Counterrevolution, Sabotage and Speculation, formed a special section to combat banditism.

Lenin's wife, Krupskaya, worked in what was called the Department of Enlightenment and a lot of her "enlightenment" had to do with teenage bands that had no other way to survive than to act like gangs. They went out and foraged and stole what they could, by any means they could, to stay alive! At the time of the 1921 June-July Third Congress of the Comintern, bandit partisan warfare is still going on throughout the Soviet Union. I just mention one district, Temblöv. In Temblöv the old Socialist Revolutionaries had gotten together an armed band of 21,000, and this was just in one district. This was happening while the Third Congress was going on. If you read *The Trotsky Papers (1917-1922)*, volume 2, put out by the Institute of Social History in Amsterdam you'll see more paper is devoted to Temblöv than is devoted to the Third Congress.

This problem was increasingly taking the form of a civil war of the countryside against the cities. How to deal with it? As Lenin said: 'the *easy part* was expropriating the bourgeoisie. Difficult was defeating the imperialist-backed counterrevolution. But we did that too. Now we've hit the real bedrock of capitalism: the petty proprietors, the peasants. Without their food the cities cannot be rebuilt. There cannot be any kind of reconstruction under this devastation of civil war.'

It was necessary to make what was openly called a retreat: introducing a tax in kind for the peasantry. This is what became known as the New Economic Policy (NEP). The tax in kind meant instead of having all their grain and foodstuffs taken by the state, they had to pay a certain amount in the form of taxes. Then they could market the rest. That is the restoration—within the context of state ownership of land—of market trade. Likewise, there was encouragement—not with a lot of success—of foreign concessions and foreign investment in Soviet industry.

Now, this policy was attacked by various oppositions within the Bolshevik Party. And Lenin's speeches and the reports to the Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party deal with these positions in trying to hammer out a policy to deal with the catastrophic economic and social collapse. Under these conditions, the Kronstadt sailors revolt. This was a different generation from the Kronstadt sailors who formed the Red Guard and a cornerstone of the Red Army. Another generation had gone into the military, very closely tied to the countryside, which represented the peasant unrest there.

It was fundamentally a counterrevolutionary uprising. The main demand was: "Soviets without Bolsheviks!" This was also one of the main demands of the Workers Opposition. In a situation where the proletariat itself was shattered as a class, its only cohesive identity as an instrument of proletarian class-consciousness was the party, which itself, of course, was devastated. In the middle of this Congress it was necessary to take every delegate with military training and send them to Kronstadt to put down the uprising. That's what you call a working congress.

The reaction of the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) right wing, Dittmann and Crispian, was to say, 'You see, we're for the dictatorship of the proletariat. But in dark, backward Slavic Russia, to take power, to take responsibility for rebuilding from the devastation of the imperialist war, that is the source of all these problems. So, you see, yes we're for the dictatorship



of the proletariat, but not where it exists, not where it is struggling to survive.'

These policies were also attacked by the ultra-lefts in Germany and Holland. They were also attacked by the Italian Socialist leader Serrati—remember him from the Second Congress? He's the guy that kept interrupting John Reed's report on the black question. 'Let's get on to the real proletariat.' I guess he didn't know what was happening to America.

So, NEP and economic reconstruction was one of the important, fighting issues of the Third Congress of the Comintern. This was a retreat and it was necessary to lay this out before the Tenth Party Congress, but also before the highest tribunal of the Communist movement, the CI, at the Third Congress. Lenin treated the Comintern as an international soviet that would render the final judgment on the policies not only for Germany, not only for Italy, but also for the Soviet Union. He of course fought so that the policies he thought *should* win *would* win.

Lenin was orchestrating just about everything that happened at the Congress insofar as it was possible, as he was a sick man by this time. But his principal report was on the tactics of the Russian Communist Party. He tied these questions together with the policies that were necessary in Western Europe, especially in the advanced industrial countries, but not only there.

If you read Carr and Deutscher—especially Carr is very strong on this point—they basically see the Third Congress as a whole chapter called the "Congress of Retreat." Carr's point is that with the defeat of the march on Warsaw, with the defeats in Hungary and Italy, the Soviet Union was forced to be "reasonable" and "statesmanlike," forced to adopt *Realpolitik*, the politics of national interest, to which the policies of the Comintern would be subordinate. If you want trade and investment from the capitalists of other countries you have to tone down overthrowing them, don't you? Which is exactly what Serrati charged about the NEP.

But the reality was that the Bolshevik Revolution was made for the world revolution, and its survival depended on world revolution. With its delay the Bolsheviks were compelled on the one hand to take certain measures to buy time within the Soviet Union, and at the same time to struggle for the preparation of these new parties of the Comintern so that they could fulfill their task.

### **Split at Halle Wins Mass Base for KPD**

So what's happening in Germany? The USPD, which had considerable authority—it claimed at

least on paper 700,000 to 800,000 members—had a congress in Halle in October 1920 to decide on affiliation to the Comintern on the basis of the 21 Conditions that had been adopted at the Second Congress. The USPD split, a majority going with the KPD and Comintern, a minority retaining the "Independent" label for another year while fading back into the SPD. The Communist Party brought 40,000 members to this unification, the USPD left wing brought about 300,000 to 400,000. So the number of Communists after the fusion increased tenfold.

It was not accidental that this congress was held in Halle. Halle was a left-wing stronghold of the workers movement in Germany. It was the center of a region, the province of Saxony, which contained a strong component of radical miners. Like American miners, they lived in relatively backward, isolated communities. Nevertheless, radicalized by their experiences in the blood-soaked trenches of WWI, they very often came back left-wing Social Democrats, members of the USPD.

Also, the war had accelerated the development of a petrochemical industry in Halle-Merseberg. In 1895 there were a thousand workers. By the end of WWI there were 35,000 workers, 23,000 of whom worked in the Leuna Werke [plant] near Halle. It was the biggest industrial plant then in Germany. It was a real stronghold of the USPD that claimed a membership in this one district of 80,000. Not only did the Communist Party and the USPD have a substantial base there, but so did the ultraleft syndicalists of the KAPD.

This was reflected in the class struggle in this region as well. Now, you might have read in your history books that in the Weimar Republic, with that wonderful, democratic constitution, workers got the eight-hour day. But it was a six-day or 48-hour workweek, so don't get so excited. And it was not implemented anywhere but in some sections of the civil service and in this region. Everywhere else people were working 54 hours a week. That was the norm. Wages were higher in this region. People got a third more vacation. And if I told you how little vacation you got you'd think you must be in America! Nevertheless they got a third more in this region and this represented some sharp class struggle.

I'll just give you one example. In January the mine bosses decided, 'We're gonna bring in a special police to be guards in the mines.' And workers just walked out and said, 'We're gonna hire our own guards, they're gonna be war veterans and workers who've been injured working in the mines, and they're gonna be beholden to us and not the mine chiefs.' And they won.

This was a militant section of the working class with a huge industrial base that had, just like in Russia, grown up in a period of less than 15 or 20 years. It had won substantial gains and was strongly Communist.

On 20 February 1921, there were elections to the Prussian parliament (called the *Landtag*). In these elections to the Prussian state parliament the SPD got 70,000 votes. What was left of the USPD got 75,000 and the Communist Party got 197,000 votes. That is one-third more than the combined votes of the SPD and USPD.

This didn't go unnoticed to the rest of the ruling class in Germany and is the background to the 1921 March Action, that took place mainly in this region.

This was a red sore in the eyes of the German bourgeoisie at a time when they had to pay substantial reparations to the victors of WWI, especially France and Britain. In fact one of the demands raised by the Communists was, "Make the bourgeoisie pay for Versailles!" Lenin's attitude was, 'We don't care about Versailles, we've got other things on the agenda. If we took power in Germany, we might also be compelled to pay reparations. But the main thing is to get the power.' He drew a very hard line in this regard against the kind of nationalist propaganda that came out in this period, including from the Communist Party. This problem worsens and will be dealt with in greater detail in the next class.

Back to 1921: What's going on in the KPD? After the fusion they had two chairmen: one from the old USPD left wing, Ernst Däumig, and the other who was the chairman of the Communist Party after Luxemburg, Liebknecht and Jogiches were murdered, Paul Levi. Paul Levi was an attorney who had defended Luxemburg and Liebknecht before the Kaiser's court. He joined the Spartacists and the left wing of the Zimmerwald Movement during WWI. He was known to Lenin, so he had some authority, but he also had some other less sterling qualities which we'll get to in a moment.

Radek was the Comintern rep in Germany, or seemed to be. They have a phrase in German—"the man for all things." So he was the all-purpose representative for this and that. Imprisoned by the Social Democrats, he met in jail with one of Germany's foremost industrialists, Walter Rathenau, to discuss trade relations with Russia. Rathenau organized Germany's industrial supply line for WWI. He also happened to be Jewish. (Rathenau paid with his life for his trade and military negotiations with the Soviet Union, gunned down the following year by two fascist army officers.)

### **"Open Letter": Precursor to the United Front**

One of the more intelligent things Levi and Radek came up with was the "Open Letter," which was drafted and printed in the beginning of January 1921, right after the fusion of the KPD and the USPD left wing. It was short, punchy and to the point. It consisted of a bunch of what we would call economic and transitional demands: for example, higher wages; the unemployed should be paid at the standard wage rate of the industry from which they have been laid off; pensions for the old people; distribution of cheap food; workers control, etc. Germany went through all these wars and the castles still stand, right? Throw out the princes, bring in the homeless.

The "Open Letter" was an appeal to all the workers' organizations—from the SPD and the big trade-union federation to the KAPD (a left split from the KPD) and its little union organization called the "one big union." This document was published in the KPD newspaper *Rote Fahne* [Red Flag] in January 1921. It anticipated the "Theses on Tactics" that would be discussed at the Third CI Congress and the united-front tactic that was elaborated at the Fourth. And it anticipated the Transitional Program upon which the Fourth International was founded.

I've always believed this document had no impact except with people like Lenin and Trotsky. Wrong. The Social Democrats did not go rushing to endorse this document and to sign up to throw the princes out of the palaces and to seize the shut-down factories. But a big congress of metalworkers held in Berlin at the end of January unanimously adopted the demands of this document. No social-democratic representative from the union movement could vote against it, at most they could abstain, because the document was too powerful. There were meetings of what was called the trade-union *Kartell* or federation for Greater Berlin. The same thing happened, it was unanimously adopted. It was extremely popular.

It turns out the place where it had no impact was in the KPD, because the tactic was never fought out. Levi had a bright idea. He got together with Radek, they wrote it up—after all he's the Chairman, right—so it appears in their newspaper *Rote Fahne*, bang, that's it! Are we going to implement it? How are we going to implement it? Were there any discussions to that effect? No.

### **Livorno: "Unity" That Strangled Italian Revolution**

Now the next thing that shapes the history of the German party doesn't happen in Germany, it hap-

pens in Italy. And we get back to our old friend, Serrati. The Italian Socialist Party called a congress in Livorno in January 1921. This is after this party, through its reformist right wing and the trade-union bureaucrats, had sabotaged this great industrial and agrarian workers uprising. Because it didn't lead to workers revolution, they had in effect opened the road to the fascists. So now they're going to have a congress and decide what they're going to do about the Comintern and those 21 Conditions.

And everybody's there from Turati and Serrati to Bordiga—they're all there. What the Comintern wanted was for Serrati to break with the reformists. He refused. The Comintern sent two representatives—the Hungarian, Rakosi, and a Bulgarian, Kabakchiev. It was very hard to get people into Italy at this point. They traveled there under extreme difficulties. Comintern agents did not get the red carpet treatment from border guards.

Zinoviev, who opens the Third Congress with one of his usual pithy four-hour reports on the work of the ECCI, describes what happens to these guys when they get to Livorno. They walk into the Congress and are greeted with delegates yelling, "Long live the Pope!" This is in Italy! You thought the Pope lived in Rome? No, the Vatican is in Moscow. If you didn't know, you found out at this congress. Zinoviev even claims somebody released a bird at this point, a dove, into the congress. The Comintern reps come this great distance at great peril to be heckled and mistreated. This is internationalism?

Paul Levi got better treatment. He went down there in part at the initiative of Clara Zetkin. He pursued an entirely different policy, a policy counterposed to the Comintern. He argued, 'Well, if you've got a party that is outside the Comintern like the USPD, then it's okay to split it. But if you have a party that's already in the Comintern, like the Italian Socialist Party (the whole party had formally joined the Comintern), then how can you splinter them? It's like cutting off a part of the body, say the arm, to have such a split.'

And we're talking about 1921, that is several months *after* these same people that are sitting in the same hall had sabotaged the general strikes, the plant occupations, the occupation of land by agrarian workers, so magnificent and so betrayed. The bourgeoisie got scared enough that they then backed the fascists: 'We can't just rely on Serrati and Turati to keep this working class under control. Time to go for the surgical operation and apply the knife.'

Levi goes back to Berlin really proud of himself and makes a report to the Central Committee or *Zentralausschuss*—his report is counterposed to the

policy of the Comintern. Everybody knows that. His report is put up for a vote. He loses, narrowly. At this point, Levi, who is the chairman of the Party, Clara Zetkin, Däumig, who is co-chairman, and two other members of the *Zentralausschuss* resign, like it's a parliamentary vote of no confidence: 'You didn't vote for me, so I'm not going to be on your *Zentralausschuss* anymore. I'm taking a powder.' So they leave. However, they don't resign their actual seats in parliament. These they keep.

Now you had a party that was very much divided between the so-called left wing and a right wing of which Levi, and Zetkin, to a certain extent, were representative. They wanted to do things like the "Open Letter." They also wanted to do things like support Serrati at Livorno. But these issues were never fought out.

Lenin writes a personal letter to Levi and Zetkin in April 1921, after the March Action. And he says, 'On the Italian Question I think you're wrong. But I'm mad at you because you walked out of the central committee simply because you lost a vote. How are we ever going to build a collective leadership if we can't even have political struggle within the leadership? So, by doing this 1) you undermined the "Open Letter," which was never fought for anyway in the party, and 2) you opened the road to the so-called leftists in the party.' The leftists now felt they had a free hand.

Indeed they had. A funny thing, how often today's ultraleftists are tomorrow's rightists. Levi was replaced as chairman by Heinrich Brandler, who would go from being a leader of the so-called lefts to a leader of the Right Opposition associated with Bukharin in Soviet Russia. He was a construction worker, a union official from the age of 16, and an early supporter of the Spartacists. He would be chairman of the party again in the crucial months of 1923 when the KPD blew a final decisive revolutionary opportunity.

In Berlin the so-called leftists were represented by the Fischer-Maslow-Reuter group. You may have already heard of Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow. Ernst Reuter would go on to a short tenure as General Secretary of the KPD before following the road blazed by Levi back into the SPD.

Comrades who have visited Berlin may recall that in the center of the West part there is a traffic circle bordered by the Technical University called Ernst Reuter Platz. This was not named after Reuter for his service or disservice to German communism. At the beginning of the Cold War in 1947 when Berlin was under four-power occupation, Reuter was elected "Lord Mayor" of Berlin. Notorious for his anti-communist views, Reuter was vetoed by the

Soviets. The Lord Mayor returned the compliment, calling the country which freed Europe from fascism “a nation of slaves.”

The German bourgeoisie has a long history of dealing with revolution—in Germany, in France, in Hungary and elsewhere. It has a lot of experience and it augmented its experience by recruiting a number of ex-leftists through the instrumentality of the Social Democracy.

### The March Action

Back to Germany, early 1921. Who shows up in Germany but Béla Kun and Kun’s sidekick, József Pogány, a.k.a. John Pepper, who in the United States steered the CP into the Farmer-Labor Party mess. These people messed up the 1919 Hungarian Revolution—they fused with the Social Democrats and refused to give land to the peasants. They made every mistake you could make, for which the working class, as always, paid. Based on this authority they were sent as Comintern agents to Germany. How this happened is not well documented and remains a mystery.

Béla Kun was big on the “Revolutionary Offensive.” What is offensive about it we’ll find out shortly. Backed by Kun and Pepper, suddenly *Rote Fahne* started raising a lot of abstract propaganda: “Overthrow the bourgeoisie! Down with the regime!”

Lenin’s letters to the KPD after the Third Congress and Trotsky’s remarks in “School of Revolutionary Strategy” underlined the German bourgeoisie’s method of operation. The rulers set up the German proletariat where they are most left-wing and provoke a premature, isolated uprising and chop off its head. Then they send the armed forces and Nazi gangs city to city, chop, chop, decapitating the party, its work facilitated by the KPD’s federated structure. That’s what we saw in 1919, first in January and later in March. That’s what we saw in March of 1920 following the Kapp Putsch and what we see again in March of 1921. The architects of the bourgeoisie’s “March Action” were the very experienced social-democratic Prussian minister of police Carl Severing and Saxon President Otto Hörsing.

In war-devastated Germany, working conditions were terrible. Miners, in order to survive, got to take a couple of bags of scrap coal home. That was stopped. No more free coal; buy it on the market like everybody else. Then the bosses claimed that the workers were stealing. That’s always a big, explosive issue. The workers are the thieves, not the capitalists?

After WWI, most workers kept their guns. They thought they might come in handy for another kind of war. During the Kapp Putsch in the previous

year, armed workers militias sprouted up throughout Germany. Although their arms were pathetic compared to the state arsenal, they could deter fascist gangs and some paramilitary forces. Now the capitalist rulers declared they were going to disarm the workers and put an end to “unrest”—the code word for class struggle.

For this purpose they created a new paramilitary police force, the *Schutzpolizei* (*Schupos*) and organized it into groups of a hundred, or *Hundertschaften*. They were going to occupy the mines around Halle and search the homes of workers to suppress “stealing” and disarm the workers.

The Communist Party was also thinking of having a March offensive. Now, in Germany, everything revolves around holidays, like Easter. The country totally shuts down for the four-day Easter weekend. They wanted to have their general strike after Easter.

The bourgeoisie wouldn’t cooperate. They started their offensive before Easter. Around the 16-17 of March they started moving *Schupos* into Halle. The workers were outraged and looked to the Communist Party for leadership. The Communist Party was not prepared, even though they’d been calling for a “general strike” and to “overthrow the bourgeoisie” for two months. The secret police raided the CP headquarters in February and reported: ‘we can’t find the evidence that they’re preparing anything!’ They hadn’t prepared a damn thing.

Still the CP calls for a general strike. And it does get a response. In many of these small mining communities the workers took over, formed armed guards and set up committees that were embryonic soviets. You had dual power in this one little region. In the Leuna Werke solidarity demonstrations increased in size to some 18,000 before all hell broke loose.

The government purposely didn’t send enough troops to do the job. As the *Schupos* approached the Leuna Werke, the workers responded by occupying the plant and forming a workers militia and a commissary. So Red Leuna is born; followed by Red Merseburg, then Red Ammendorf.

Communists were subjected to savage persecution in all capitalist countries and had to take certain elementary measures of self-defense. Recall the Palmer Raids—mass deportation of foreign-born leftists and mass imprisonment of many more here. That edifice to bourgeois democracy, the Weimar Republic, was built over the broken and bullet-riddled bodies of Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Jogiches and thousands of the finest fighters. The KPD also took to heart the attack of many Communists throughout the world that they had not adequately

protected Karl and Rosa. The Comintern, in its statutes and the 21 Conditions for Membership, insisted that Communist Parties must conduct such defensive measures and must work even when they have been declared “illegal” by reactionary, witch-hunting laws or when work must be conducted “underground” due to persecution by the state or fascist bands.

For this work the KPD had set up military and counter-espionage organizations, the *Militärrat* and *Nachrichtendienst*. However, in the KPD this, like all work, was highly federated. Much was left to local initiative which sometimes got completely out of control. In the midst of all this, you’ve got the anarcho-syndicalist KAPD and a substantial current in the KPD that believes the philistine German working class isn’t going to respond unless we give them a kick in the ass.

And the KAPD had some assistance from Max Hoelz, the Robin Hood of the German proletariat. Hoelz was a very interesting guy. He was a very high-grade technician in the repair and servicing of railroads. He formed a workers militia in the November Revolution. The revolution was suppressed but his militia lived on. He would do bank jobs and distribute funds to the poor, in the tradition of Bertolt Brecht’s question: is it a greater crime to rob a bank or own one? Usually he’d pick targets that were often justly hated by the proletariat, like courthouses. He is reputed to have derailed just plain personnel trains that had nothing to do with the movement of military goods. If so, we would have opposed this. All of this was based on the “Theory of the Offensive,” that the working class cannot be motivated by consciousness of its own political interests and historical destiny; we need to ignite the working class with deeds of great daring. There was nothing new about this theory, it was not invented by Radek and Béla Kun. The Marxist movement had combated some anarcho-syndicalist tendencies since its birth in the 1840s.

The KPD with its own theory of the “Revolutionary Offensive” was not in too good a position to combat this—on the contrary. So the KPD sent Hugo Eberlein down to Halle to help out. He was the KPD representative at the founding Congress of the Comintern. A fine comrade, but he was a bit loony, and known among his comrades and fellow workers as “Hugo the Fuse,” as he was behind some of the military activity of the KPD. His advice was, ‘to really get workers moving here what we ought to do is take the two regional party secretaries, who seemed like pretty good guys, kidnap them and say the police did it. If that doesn’t work, then we’ll blow up a couple of party headquarters

and blame that on the police!’

I think those two regional party secretaries spiked Eberlein’s inventive proposals. But the main problem was that the action in the March Action was restricted to Saxony and Halle. The KPD did try to extend the strike into other sections of Germany. In Berlin they had almost no support and their appeal for a general strike resulted in fist-fights with workers in front of AEG and other big industrial plants. The KPD did write an appeal to social-democratic workers. It was called, “Either you’re for us or against us.” Paul Levi said this was a declaration of war on four-fifths of the working class. He was not wrong. It also had another charming quality. It called on them to hang their leaders from the lampposts. You might call this an early version of the united front from below. As comrade Robertson said, their hearts were in the right place. But as you can imagine, this didn’t make much of an impact in extending the strike to the social-democratic workers.

Hamburg was even more tragic. On the docks you had a division among longshoremen very much like the United States. You had steady guys who were social-democratic and then you had the casuals who were Communists. The steady guys had the jobs—there was high unemployment at that point in Hamburg. So the CP organized the unemployed to seize the docks. There were big physical fights, but the CP mobilized enough forces so they were able to occupy the docks. There was no attempt to win over the SPD workers except by the threat: “join us or else.”

The Hamburg KPD liked showy demonstrations so they marched off the docks and down to the nearby Fish Market while the police and the Social Democrats took back the docks. This was burned into the memory of the social-democratic work force. (In October 1923 when Thälmann tried to bring about the uprising not knowing it had been canceled—it had been voted down in Chemnitz again—many of the social-democratic workers joined the police as volunteers to suppress the KPD-led uprising.)

In other cities, where the CP had a base, there were short, one-day general strikes, such as Essen. But workers in the Ruhr and elsewhere were not aware of what was happening in Saxony. So there was no preparation and no apparatus to pull them into a struggle.

The KPD “Revolutionary Offensive” played right into the hands of the bourgeoisie, so that the general strike could be suppressed militarily. To take the Leuna Werke 1,200 *Schupos* backed up by the Reichswehr and artillery were used. They shot

into the plant that made ammonia knowing that it could set off an explosion. They captured several hundred workers, locked them up in a silo and kept them there for two weeks. Two dozen Communist youth who sought to liberate these workers—very courageous individuals—were all murdered, massacred. The number of dead is hard to estimate—there was a cover-up. The number of arrested is public record—6,000. Special courts were set up to deal with this. The *Rote Hilfe*, or Red Aid [the first Communist-affiliated defense league and an inspiration for the International Labor Defense], got its start providing legal defense and material support to the prisoners and their families, in many cases widows and families who had lost the breadwinner to this action. That was the March Action, which ended with the end of March.

Comrades asked me in Chicago, “What would have been a correct policy for Communists?” In fact in the “School of Revolutionary Strategy” Trotsky answers:

“The offensive was in reality launched by the Social-Democratic policeman Hoersing. This should have been utilized in order to unite all the workers for defense, for self-protection, even if, to begin with, a very modest resistance. Had the soil proved favorable, had the agitation met with a favorable response, it would then have been possible to pass over to the general strike. If the events continue to unfold further, if the masses rise, if the ties among the workers grow stronger, if their temper lifts, while indecision and demoralization seize the camp of the foe—then comes the time for issuing the slogan to pass over to the offensive.”

—p. 21

As this essay shows, there was a discussion in the Comintern of what should have been done and how the Party should be prepared to avoid a similar situation. That was a crucial fight.

Levi, as you’ll recall, had resigned as chairman of the party. And knowing that the March Action was about to happen—because Clara Zetkin made Béla go talk to him about it—he did the responsible thing...and went on vacation. He was in Vienna on his way to Italy where he seemed to enjoy spending time. Then the March Action started and he did come back. In the beginning of April he issued a brochure entitled “Our Way.” It contained many just criticisms of the March Action. But it also claimed that the March Action was the greatest putsch in history, that the CP had acted like General Ludendorff in WWI, sending endless waves of youth into a bloodbath on the front lines. It was a critique that lacked any solidarity whatsoever with the party but offered much material to the prosecutors. It was used, as he must have

known it would be, by those special courts that had been set up to sit in judgment on the Communists and their supporters. For this he was expelled from the Communist Party and the expulsion was confirmed at the Comintern Congress.

It’s clear in his 16 April letter to Clara Zetkin and Levi that Lenin didn’t know even at that late date what had happened in Germany. But he quickly figures it out. He calls Béla Kun back from Germany. Lenin calls him in for a talk, which, according to Béla Kun’s Hungarian biographer, resulted in Béla Kun, upon leaving Lenin’s office, having a heart attack.

But the problem was not just Béla Kun. The KPD claimed the March Action was nothing less than a great victory. It was hailed by the “ultralefts” listed in *“Left-Wing” Communism*, by the Amsterdam Bureau of the Comintern, by the Vienna Bureau, and by the Young Communist League. Everyone was on the March Action bandwagon, including Zinoviev, who was head of the Comintern, Radek, who was—insofar as he was official anything—official Comintern representative in Germany, and Bukharin. Lenin and Trotsky realized that they were about to lose the Comintern, that they were a minority, at least among the leading elements, probably in the IEC and several European parties.

Part of this was an understandable reaction against Social Democracy. But part of it was what Lenin described as infantile leftism: playing with phrases as a surrogate for the more arduous but essential task of forging a communist vanguard that wins the allegiance of a majority of the working class. Many “leftists” who attacked the necessary concessions to the peasantry for the survival of the Soviet workers state were the loudest champions of the “Revolutionary Offensive” and the March Action.

This fight had to take place simultaneously in the Russian delegation which had six members and was split evenly on the question of the March Action—between Lenin, Trotsky and Kamenev on one side and Radek, Bukharin and Zinoviev on the other. That is the background to the Third Congress that is best described in the *Prometheus Research Series* bulletin on the Organizational Resolution passed at the Third Congress (*Guidelines on the Organizational Structure of Communist Parties, on the Methods and Content of Their Work* [New York, 1988]).

### **Third Congress: School of Revolutionary Strategy**

The Congress is approaching: what is to be done? I encouraged comrades to read Lenin’s “Letter to

Zinoviev" on the "Thesis on Tactics" (CW, Vol. 42, pp. 319-323) because it shows how the fight would be waged before, during and after the Congress. Lenin decided that the cause of proletarian justice as well as Marxist clarity would best be served by having one of the principal malefactors, Radek, incorporate the lessons of the March Action *defeat* into his report "On Tactics" which would inform and guide all of the sections of the CI. Radek did a draft. As the delegates arrived Radek showed the draft to his buddies from Germany: Thalheimer, Brandler and Maslow. They suggested changes: 'You see, where it says "conquest of the majority of the working class," why don't you take that out and put in "important sections of the working class," or "decisive sections of the working class.'" Just tone down the main thing that was supposed to be emphasized at this Congress! And if that wasn't enough, they got together with a recovered Béla Kun to draw up their own amendments.

On 1 June they ship this all to Lenin in an envelope. He opens it, reads the contents and furiously makes notes on the envelope, which are in the Russian edition, but alas, not the English. These notes are then developed in the letter to Zinoviev which opens: "The crux of the matter is that Levi in very many respects is *right politically*. Unfortunately, he is guilty of a number of breaches of discipline for which the Party has expelled him" ("Letter to Zinoviev," p. 319). Lenin is categorical that the "Open Letter" tactic was correct and important:

"...[W]averings in regard to The 'Open Letter' are extremely harmful, shameful, and *extremely widespread*. We may as well admit this. All those who have failed to grasp the necessity of the Open Letter tactic should be *expelled* from the Communist International within a month after its Third Congress."

—*ibid.*, p. 321

To show how carefully crafted this congress was, it begins with an appeal to the German proletariat on behalf of Max Hoelz, who had just been captured and sentenced to life imprisonment. While fully incorporating the Marxist critique of individual terror, the resolution passed by the Congress declares: "But his actions emanated from his love of the proletariat and his hatred of the bourgeoisie," and "instructs the German proletariat to defend him." It was as if you say, 'OK young hot-heads and ultralefts, we will pound you politically, but we applaud your *élan* and seek only to give it Marxist direction and purpose.'

For the "rightists" you might say, there was also a celebration of Clara Zetkin's 65th birthday. Naturally a KPD "leftist," Fritz Heckert, gave a wonderful valedictory speech for Clara. The guy that did

the presentation on the organizational resolution was another KPD left-winger, Koenen.

If some of this seems mildly perverse, Lenin was trying to make a point here. He was struggling for genuine homogeneity, not by hiding the issues but by fighting them out among comrades. He felt that 'we have gotten rid of the people—or they have gotten rid of themselves—that we don't want in this Communist International. Now we've got to fight to forge cadre.' The lesson you get, how this Congress was orchestrated, is a lesson in party building.

If the "Theses on Tactics" read a little vacuous in parts, it's not accidental. At the last minute Lenin couldn't get Radek to do all that many changes. There are passages that read like: 'When there's a defeat, it's necessary to retreat.' Except, that was bold language for some in this Congress. But, there is one section that runs from page 285 to 286 (*Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International* [Ink Links, London, 1980]) which is a description of the role of transitional demands that motivates Trotsky's Transitional Program. It is a very powerful statement.

Trotsky's "School of Revolutionary Strategy" is his summary and analysis of the key debates of the Third Congress. They are relevant to fights that we've had in our own party around the general strike in Italy and Germany. When I was in the SpAD we were advocating an adventurist policy on paper. We didn't do much except put out propaganda filled with phrases about "general strikes" and "mass strikes" in precisely the region where the March Action took place—the mining, industrial region that includes Bischofferode, Wolfen (which had also developed a big chemical industry), the Halle Leuna Werke.

The problem is that by 1990-91, when we started to make this general strike agitation, these plants were finished. The bourgeoisie had decided to close them down. In the case of Bischofferode the workers were only fighting over who would get the last paycheck to turn off the lights. The empty propaganda we put out at that time was counterposed to explaining to the workers what was happening and what had happened to them because of capitalist counterrevolution.

In "School of Revolutionary Strategy," Trotsky has a devastating indictment of the Italian SP. He said: 'Yes, you called for the revolution. You called for mass strikes. You called for all these good things and you prepared nothing. You set these people up and led to a disaster.' In his criticism of the Comintern's draft program for the Sixth Congress Trotsky writes:

"The slogan of the Third Congress did not simply read 'To the masses!' but: 'To power through a previous conquest of the masses!' After the faction fight led by Lenin (which he characterized demonstratively as the 'Right' wing)...Lenin arranged a private conference toward the end of the Congress in which he warned prophetically: 'Remember, it is only a question of getting a good running start for the revolutionary leap. The struggle for the masses is the struggle for power.'"

—*The Third International After Lenin*, pp. 90-91

These documents for us are living documents. When you read the Third Congress "Resolution on Communist Work among Women" you should know that there was a fight in the SL about this question when we had the opportunity to recruit from radical, feminist collectives in the early '70s. These documents became for us a living reference point and are reprinted in the early issues of *Women and Revolution*. The same thing with the document on the youth question. The communist youth theses lay out very clearly the motivating principles that became fighting issues in the very birth, first of the Revolutionary Tendency and then, after another kind of faction fight over our orientation to SDS, the Revolutionary Marxist Caucus.

Because we claim the tradition of the October Revolution as ours, it is our obligation to examine critically our work and perspectives by the standards set at the first four congresses of the Comintern. I really appreciate the way Trotsky concluded *Lessons of October*. That is: revolutionary tradition is not a museum display, it's not an internet search engine. He writes:

"The party should and must know the *whole* of the past, so as to be able to estimate it correctly and assign each event to its proper place. The tradition of a revolutionary party is not built on evasions, but on critical clarity."

### Summary following discussion

On the USPD right wing and people like Serrati, regarding their criticism of NEP: their program was, 'The bourgeoisie destroyed everything with WWI. Now it has to take everything over again and develop the economy once more so that we can have the dictatorship of the proletariat without all this mess to clean up.' (But this is the bourgeoisie that had plunged the world into WWI and brought civilization to the brink of disaster; what stopped them was the October Revolution and the impact it had throughout Europe.) This is the revisionist theme from Kautsky to the USPD and the Italian Social Democracy. But not only that: The same arguments against NEP were also made by the so-called leftists in this period such as Bukharin.

Moscow station's access to the Moscow archives has given us a deeper appreciation of the Lenin-Trotsky bloc, the self-declared "right wing" at the Third Congress (see "Trotsky's Fight Against Stalinist Betrayal of Bolshevik Revolution," *Spartacist* [English Edition] No. 53, Summer 1997). Going into the Congress there was a so-called "peace agreement" or compromise between the Zinoviev wing and the Lenin-Trotsky wing in the Russian delegation over how to handle the critical review of the March Action. After Radek's report on tactics, Trotsky got on the discussion round pretty late, just after Thälmann had spoken in defense of the "Revolutionary Offensive." So Trotsky really did a number on him. After that, Béla Kun got up and said, 'This is outrageous, this is a breach of the peace agreement.' So, when they go back to the commission on tactics, Trotsky was taken apart. A declaration was submitted to the Congress (on behalf of several delegations including the Polish, German, German-Bohemian, German-Austrian and the Communist Youth International) which accepts the "Theses on Tactics" but expresses "emphatic reservations" regarding Trotsky's speech on its behalf (*Protokoll des III. Weltkongress*, Vol. 2, p. 671).

Lenin was not physically able to attend every session of the Congress, but based on the report he got from Trotsky, he showed up at the next session of the commission to say that he and Trotsky were as one in terms of these criticisms.

Now, in honor of anyone who has ever helped organize a conference, especially an international conference, I would like to call your attention to this side of the Congress into which Trotsky was also compelled to intervene: housing and amenities for the congress. Rosmer's *Lenin's Moscow* recalls the difficult conditions under which organizing of the Congress took place. Nonetheless, accommodations were so shabby as to create a scandal. So, delegates started complaining to Trotsky who had all kinds of other things on his plate: recall he was putting down unrest in the Ukraine, he was one of the main reporters, and so on. But he was not going to stand for shabby treatment of delegates who had traveled hundreds and thousands of miles under difficult conditions. He dashes off a telegram to Lenin and other Russian party leaders about the international delegates who:

"...lack the very minimal conveniences. So far as the dining room and so forth is concerned, the situation is the same. The officials of the Comintern, not wanting to leave the Lux [hotel, which itself is a sort of program at that point], brazenly boycotted the order which had been given for them to move to another house (they took to locking up their doors, absencing themselves, hiding motorcars and lorries and



so on and so forth). A commission consisting of Rosmer, Janson and Rudnjanskij keeps coming up against shameful sabotage at every turn. Visiting delegates at once get a horrifying impression of the way we do things. The most scandalous thing is the rude disregard for visiting comrades. There are no mattresses or pillows on the beds, no washbasins.... What is all this?"

—"Telegram to Lenin, Zinoviev, Bukharin, *et al.*,"  
5 June 1921, *Trotsky Papers 1917-1922*, Vol 2,  
p. 463

Regarding the fight we had with Norden over perspectives in Germany after capitalist reunification: The fight was concluded in an IEC meeting in London and the SpAD Conference in Berlin. Norden claimed there was nothing to fight about but the struggle must go on. We said "No!" We've had an extensive discussion, published a lot of bulletins, translated an enormous amount of material, got you and your documents around. At a certain point after the issues have been clarified you have to draw a balance sheet and say "Centrism is defeated!" That doesn't mean we're not going to have problems which he exploited or played into, they're going to continue to recur, but this specific fight had reached the point that it was time to draw a balance sheet and turn the party outward.

After Norden got himself expelled, the same thing happened in the French section with the Nordens of the second mobilization, the Permanent Revision Faction ["Permanent Revolution" Faction]. They were up to their eyeballs in working together and being a part of the Norden's IGs or Internationalist Group, at that point. They were permanently factionalizing until we called a halt to it and said: You're either going to uphold discipline and fight for your views inside the party or outside the party, but not both. That struggle also reached a conclusion, we had an international conference immediately after that.

The comrades did very well in this fight in France, but they wanted to continue to fight against centrism even after it had been defeated. Often "centrism" became a word of abuse. It was time to call a halt and turn this party outward.

Even though most if not all resolutions at the Third Congress were adopted unanimously, the votes papered over continuing differences, unclarity and personal grudges and bruised egos. In the case of the German party, centrism became a word of abuse against Clara Zetkin for her political bloc with Levi. For the "Lefts" she was a surrogate for Lenin and the political criticism to which they had been subjected at the Third Congress.

But at the Congress she had actually come over

for expelling Levi for his breach of discipline. Further, when she went back to Germany she did something that no one was in a better position to do. In 1922 Levi published Luxemburg's earliest impressions about the October Revolution and Soviet Russia. Written in prison in summer 1918, they were based on partial information and not meant for publication. Zetkin, a close collaborator and friend of Rosa, knew that one of her last wishes was that these documents not be published. And she knew Levi knew. She wrote a devastating attack on Levi ("Um Rosa Luxemburgs Stellung zur russischen Revolution" [On Rosa Luxemburg's Position on the Russian Revolution], *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften*, Band II). Zetkin pointed out the next logical step for Levi, return to the party of her murderers, which he did.

Here again is Trotsky on the Italian Socialist Party, where he denounces them:

"The Socialist Party was guilty in the main of 'calling' for a revolution without first drawing all the necessary conclusions, that is, it really made no preparations for the revolution, failed to explain to the advanced workers the questions bound up with the conquest of power, failed to purge its ranks of those who did not want the conquest of power, failed to select and train reliable cadres of fighters, failed to create assault groups capable of handling weapons and capable of seizing weapons at the necessary moment.... In brief, *the Socialist Party called for the revolution but did not prepare for it*. If the Italian Communists were now simply to call for revolution, they would be repeating the mistake of the Socialists—only under far more difficult conditions. The task of our sister party in Italy is to *prepare* for the revolution. That is to say, first of all conquer the majority of the working class and organize its vanguard in a proper way.... Before calling for the uprising you must first win over the worker-Socialists, cleanse the trade unions, elect Communists there in place of opportunists to responsible posts...."

—"School of Revolutionary Strategy," *FFYCI*,  
pp. 16-17

To come back to this question of the fight against centrism. If you look at Lenin's letter to Zinoviev on the "Theses on Tactics," he's got a special message for the Bordigists: 'So we fought the centrists, and you think we won, but let me tell you, until you guys win over the Serrati workers to communism, don't brag. Stop these gestures, these phrases.' To refuse to fight for the workers that follow Serrati, to refuse to fight for the majority of the working class and break it from Social Democracy is to unconditionally surrender to both centrism and the reformists.

You know what comrade Robertson says about

Zinoviev. It's like football. You've got two platoons, the offensive team and the defensive team. The problem with Zinoviev is he always got it backward. He always had the offensive team in when it was time for a defensive and vice versa. Then he had guys like Brandler and Thalheimer who got to play on both platoons and always be on the wrong team.

A comrade said, going into this class she thought that Lenin made too many smarmy compromises like calling the March Action a "step forward" in the "Theses on Tactics." Well, the party fought. There was a real provocation. The party fought, it fought stupidly, it didn't prepare, but it's a step forward for a party that up to now had basically been based on empty posturing and big demonstrations.

Another criticism: In apportioning the blame for the March Action nobody mentioned any names of members of the ECCI. A lot of histories say there was a cover-up. No, there was no cover-up. Having Radek give the report on tactics was not considered a cover-up. According to Rosmer, "Throughout the debates, Lenin covered Béla Kun with sarcasm; expressions such as 'stupidity of Béla Kun,' 'foolishness of Béla Kun' recurred time and time again" (Rosmer, *Lenin's Moscow*, p. 129).

Internal party fights do not have a *sui generis* worth. Fights have to be conditioned by the tasks of the party, which is to prepare the party to become the instrument, the leadership for the struggle for proletarian power. The work of demo-

cratic centralism has to be a dialectical interaction between the necessity for democracy in deciding what to do and the necessity for centralism in carrying out the policy that has been decided.

To conclude, I want to refer again to Trotsky's *Lessons of October*. "The tradition of a revolutionary party is not built on evasions, but on critical clarity." A good example was the resulting discussion I kicked off with my "shiftiness and evasiveness" regarding the KPD entry into the Saxony and Thuringia governments during the aborted October 1923 German revolution. We had a critical reevaluation of questions that had been on the agenda for years. It's not as if comrades who had read the material, gone through the history, didn't shake their heads and ask: 'What about this entry into social-democratic governments; the country is capitalist, the governments are a subordinate part of the bourgeois state apparatus—the government and bourgeois state—yet we have Communists doing an entry supposedly to arm the workers. What about this?'

We finally thrashed out some material; we came to a critical evaluation of our own history, our history as Communists (see "Rearming Bolshevism: A Trotskyist Critique of Germany 1923 and the Comintern," *Spartacist* [English Edition] No. 56, Spring 2001). The first four congresses of the Comintern live for us because the CI was an organization built to carry out new Octobers, the same goal that we have set ourselves.

# Fourth Congress (1922): The “Workers Government” and the Road to the German Revolution

by T. Marlow

New York, 23 January 1999

## Overview

The Fourth Congress of the Communist International opened on 5 November 1922, 16 months after the Third Congress. In broad strokes, not much had changed: the precarious equilibrium of post-war capitalist rule still obtained, given the absence of Communist parties with sufficient authority in their native working classes to present a real threat to the bourgeois order. The Fourth Congress was also the last that Lenin was able to attend—from the *Collected Works*, it is clear he gave but one speech to the Congress on 13 November.

The real backdrop was the disintegration of the Versailles “peace” and resumption of inter-imperialist rivalries, and the increased role of U.S. imperialism in the world. As stated in the Fourth Congress resolution on the Versailles treaty:

“The World War ended with the downfall of three imperialist powers: Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia. Four exploiting Great Powers emerged from the war as victors: the United States, Britain, France and Japan.

“The peace treaties, the crux of which is the Versailles peace treaty, are nothing other than an attempt to stabilize the world domination of these four victorious powers; politically and economically, by reducing the rest of the world to the level of a single colony exploited by them, and socially, by creating an international union of the bourgeoisie designed to strengthen bourgeois rule both over the proletariat of their own countries and over the victorious revolutionary proletariat of Russia....

“At first glance it might appear that, of all the victorious powers, France has gained the most. Besides the seizure of Alsace-Lorraine, the occupation of the left bank of the Rhine and the claim to countless billions of German reparations, it has in military terms become the strongest power on the European continent.... However, its economy, diminishing population, enormous domestic and foreign debts and consequent economic dependence on Britain and America do not provide a firm enough basis for its insatiable imperialist appetite. British control of all the important naval strongholds, and the British and American oil monopoly, greatly limit its political power.... All the financial experts are agreed that Germany cannot possibly pay the sums needed by France to revive its finances.”

The resolution then goes on to Britain, noting its continuing possession of a vast colonial empire and its control of outlets to the oceans, and also its conflict with France over Germany:

“Here the interests of Britain and France violently clash: Britain wants to sell its goods to Germany, but this is prevented by the Versailles peace treaty; France wants to squeeze huge sums out of Germany as compensation for war losses, but this threatens to destroy German purchasing power. Hence Britain favours a reduction of reparations, while France is carrying on an undercover war against Britain in the Near East to compel greater flexibility on the question of reparations.”

—*Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Communist International* [hereafter *FFC*], pp. 383-385 (Ink Links)

As an example of U.S. imperialism’s new power, there was a conference held at the end of 1921 in Washington, D.C. nominally to discuss “disarmament.” The various imperialist powers were forced to accept U.S. conditions limiting the displacement, gun caliber and number of each country’s battleships, which at this time represented the highest expression of military power. In reality, this was directed primarily against Japan, whose navy was limited to a size comparable to that of Italy. As a documentary film on sea power put it, the Second World War began, in effect, with Japanese resentment of its being forced to accept second-class status. And the Fourth Congress resolution noted:

“By using its economic supremacy to build a strong navy, the United States has forced the other imperialist powers to sign the Washington agreement on disarmament. In doing this, it undermined one of the most important bases of the Versailles peace treaty—British world supremacy at sea—and so has removed any interest Britain had in preserving the alignment of powers envisaged by the Versailles treaty.”

—*FFC*, p. 386

France and Britain were also at loggerheads concerning their policies toward Soviet Russia. This of course proved quite useful to the Soviets. The imperialists had set up their League of Nations, a body which Lenin dismissed as follows in a June 1920 speech:

"...their League of Nations is a league only in name; in fact it is a pack of wolves that are all the time at each other's throats and do not trust one another in the least."

—"Speech delivered at the Second All-Russia Conference of Organisers Responsible for Rural Work," 12 June 1920, *Collected Works (CW)*, Vol. 31, p. 172

Lenin noted in a speech to the Moscow Gubernia party organization (21 November 1920) how the Soviets had used the dissension between the imperialists, particularly Britain and France, after the war:

"The bourgeois states were able to emerge from the imperialist war with their bourgeois regimes intact. They were able to stave off and delay the crisis hanging over them, but basically they so undermined their own position that, despite all their gigantic military forces, they had to acknowledge, after three years, that they were unable to crush the Soviet Republic with its almost non-existent military forces.... Without having gained an international victory, which we consider the only sure victory, we are in a position of having won conditions enabling us to exist side by side with capitalist powers, who are now compelled to enter into trade relations with us. In the course of this struggle we have won the right to an independent existence."

—*CW*, Vol. 31, p. 412

It's very important to remember how isolated the young Soviet Republic was in this period. The defeat of the German March Action in 1921 signaled that proletarian revolution in Germany was not to be immediately forthcoming and in fact one of the main features of the Third Congress was to deal with the problems of the German party. British imperialism continued to make trouble in the countries on Russia's southern flank, e.g., Afghanistan, Persia and Turkey, while France pursued an active military policy against the Soviets, both in East Europe and in the Crimea where they supported the White forces.

However, with the defeat of the Red Army at Warsaw and the Soviet-Polish armistice of 12 October 1920 and the smashing of Wrangel's forces in the Crimea in November 1920, British fears of the Red Army conquering Europe and hopes of immediate counterrevolution were both dashed. David Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, could hardly be accused of being soft on the Bolsheviks, but he was astute enough to realize that the recovery of the English, and in general the European, economies required some resumption of trade with Russia. After a spate of negotiations in late 1920, an Anglo-Soviet trade agreement was finally signed on 16 March 1921. British concerns had less to do with trade than with political concerns in the East. This

is clear from one of the stipulations in the agreement:

"That each party refrains from hostile action or undertakings against the other and from conducting outside of its own borders any official propaganda, direct or indirect, against the institutions of the British Empire or of the Russian Soviet Republic respectively, and more particularly that the Russian Soviet Government refrains from any attempt by military or diplomatic or any other form of action or propaganda to encourage any of the peoples of Asia in any form of hostile action against British interests or the British Empire, especially in India and in the independent state of Afghanistan. The British Government gives a similar particular undertaking to the Russian Soviet Government in respect of the countries which formed part of the former Russian Empire and which have now become independent."

—E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*, Vol. 3, p. 288

The abstinence on the British side is laughable, since France had undertaken the anti-Soviet campaign in East Europe, particularly Poland. Carr notes an interesting exchange of diplomatic correspondence between Britain and Russia in the fall of 1921 where the Russians were accused of having violated the above terms of the trade agreement:

"The Soviet authorities, who had been willing almost from the moment of the revolution to undertake to abstain from hostile propaganda against other states, interpreted that undertaking in a purely formal sense. It applied, so far as they were concerned, only to direct and avowed government policy and did not cover the action of agents in receipt of confidential instructions. Thus, they felt entitled to deny, in the face of well-known facts, that there was a propaganda school in Tashkent for Indian revolutionaries...; and the whole rejection of responsibility for the activities of Comintern and its agents rested on no more than a formal distinction.... In fact, both sides, undeterred by the agreement, continued to regard the activities of their own agents as legitimate retaliation or legitimate self-defence and those of the other party as unprovoked aggression."

—*ibid.*, p. 345

Whereas the British were willing to explore the possibilities of economically sabotaging the Bolsheviks, the French were implacable. The holders of tsarist bonds would never forget or forgive the renunciation of tsarist debts. In the spring of 1921, Poland and Rumania signed a treaty of alliance, with scarcely disguised encouragement from France. And as Carr states:

"In December 1921 the foreign ministers of Finland, Poland, Latvia and Estonia met in conference in Helsingfors and decided to nego-

tiate a mutual assistance pact. Poland was the driving force in the alliance; and behind Polish initiative the hand of France, then at the height of her post-war military power and prestige, was plainly seen. Little attempt was made to deny that Soviet Russia was the potential enemy against whom protection was to be sought through common action. Far from having succeeded in opening a window towards the west, the Soviet Government began to have visions of a revival of the *cordon sanitaire*.”

—*ibid.*, pp. 348-349

In what Carr calls a rare excursion into international affairs, Stalin wrote in the pages of *Pravda* in December 1921:

“Gone on the wing is the ‘terror’ or ‘horror’ of the proletarian revolution which seized the bourgeoisie of the world, for example, in the days of the advance of the Red Army on Warsaw. And with it has passed the boundless enthusiasm with which the workers of Europe used to receive almost every piece of news about Soviet Russia....

“But we should not forget that commercial and all other sorts of missions and associations, now flooding Russia to trade with her and to aid her, are at the same time the best spies of the world bourgeoisie, and that now it, the world bourgeoisie, in virtue of these conditions knows Soviet Russia with its weak and strong sides better than ever before—circumstances fraught with serious dangers in the event of new interventionist actions.”

—*ibid.*, p. 349

It’s pretty cheeky for Stalin to comment on the advance of the Red Army on Warsaw, since it was due to his efforts that the Red forces were fatally split, allowing the Poles (with the aid of French officers) to defeat the Red Army. Carr notes the deeper significance of Stalin’s piece:

“The article, which bears marks of Stalin’s long-standing antipathy to Chicherin, was significant, not because Stalin was at this time concerned in the framing of Soviet foreign policy, but because it appealed to prejudices and discouragements common in party circles about the policy of *rapprochement* with the western capitalist world which had been inaugurated in March 1921, and of which Chicherin and Krasin, with Lenin’s support, were the most active exponents.”

—*ibid.*, p. 350

But in the absence of proletarian revolution in Europe, Russia’s only hope was to play the imperialists off against each other and to expand whatever opportunities for trade relations there were. Lenin was willing to offer significant concessions to foreign investors. Carr cites Lenin’s report to the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921:

“In order to obtain the necessary assistance, he was ready to give extensive concessions ‘to the most powerful imperialist syndicates’—for example, ‘a quarter of Baku, a quarter of Grozny, a quarter of our best forests’; later he named timber and iron ore as typical products for concessions.”

—*ibid.*, pp. 352-353; c.f. Lenin, *CW*, Vol. 32, pp. 182-183

Contrary to Stalin’s distrust of everything foreign—expressing the limited worldview of the Russian *muzhik* (peasant)—Lenin understood that, without revolutionary help from the West, it was only through such concessions that Soviet industry could be built. Thus despite the dangers inherent in the concessions policy, the Anglo-Soviet trade agreement gave the Bolsheviks a respite and recognition which they desperately needed. Carr notes that the de facto recognition of the Soviet government by Great Britain meant that the Soviets no longer had to fear that goods exported by them or gold issued for payment for imports would be subject to impoundment by creditors of the former tsarist regime.

One problem in terms of trade was the deplorable state of Russian industry—what she could export was mostly agricultural products and natural resources, and not too much of either because of the devastation of the economy after the war.

But the major problem in terms of concessions was that the Soviet government represented state power in the hands of the proletariat. The state monopoly over foreign trade meant that the flow of foreign capital was subject to strict regulation. Trotsky referred to the significance of the monopoly of foreign trade in his report to the Fourth Congress:

“It is one of our safeguards against capitalism which, of course, would not at all be averse under certain conditions *to buy up* our incipient socialism, after failing to snuff it out by military measures.

“So far as concessions are concerned today, Comrade Lenin has here remarked: ‘Discussions are plentiful, concessions are scarce’.”

—Trotsky, *The First Five Years of the Communist International* [hereafter *FFYCI*], Vol. 2, p. 242

### The Genoa Conference and the Rapallo Treaty

The subject of normalizing relations with Soviet Russia had been one of intense interest, particularly to Britain. As Trotsky noted in his speech to the Fourth Congress, it was not possible that collaboration and trade with Soviet Russia would bring immediate solutions to Europe’s (and England’s) economic woes. But Britain certainly had reasons to worry over the increasing French dominance of the

European continent. On Lloyd George's initiative, the allied Supreme Council decided on 6 January 1922 to convene an economic and financial conference to which all the European countries, including Soviet Russia, would be invited. "A united effort by the stronger Powers,' declared the resolution, 'is necessary to remedy the paralysis of the European system'" (E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*, p. 358). The question of German reparations was to be discussed and Rathenau, the German Minister of Reconstruction, participated in the talks.

The bright prospects Lloyd George had were cut short by the elections in France: Briand's government was replaced by that of Poincaré, who was a bitter opponent of any *rapprochement* with Russia and also any relaxation of the reparations against Germany.

Behind the scenes, secret negotiations had been undertaken between German and Russian representatives—as Carr put it the two outcast nations of the Europe of Versailles. Despite the visceral anti-Sovietism of the German right, more far-seeing elements of the German bourgeoisie understood the advantages of an agreement with Soviet Russia. Ostensibly, these were about trade, and the technical details of how to deal with the Soviet trade bureaucracy. In fact, the real questions revolved around production of weapons, training of officers, which were forbidden to Germany by the terms of the Versailles treaty. To Soviet Russia, this offered the possibility of obtaining the latest in military arms and training for the Red Army; for the Germans, it meant a means to obtain the same outside of the eyes—and control—of the Entente. So German officers were dispatched along with technical experts.

Thus when the Allies opened the Genoa conference on 10 April 1922, the Russians were in a relatively strong position. Given French intransigence, Lloyd George wasn't able to get the agreement he needed, and the Germans were frightened at rumors that they were being cut out of a deal with Soviet Russia under article 116 of the Versailles treaty which had canceled the Brest-Litovsk accords. After some last minute waffling by the German delegation, the treaty of Rapallo was signed at 5 o'clock on 17 April. As Carr states:

"This major diplomatic event shattered the already creaking structure of the Genoa conference. The allied Powers had attempted to come to terms with Soviet Russia behind the back of Germany: Soviet Russia had come to terms with Germany behind their back."

—*ibid.*, p. 376

Carr's interpretation of the accommodation to Western capitalism (after noting the emergency of the civil war, necessary concessions to the peasantry, i.e., NEP, and so on) is that the interests of

the Soviet state came to predominate over that of the Comintern and world revolution; in fact, Carr predates the switch to the autumn of 1920, when the Soviets pursued a strong diplomatic policy in the East; these culminated in various treaties which were signed in the Spring of 1921:

"In the east, as in the west, the autumn of 1920 had been a high-water mark of world revolution as the driving force of Soviet foreign policy, and of Comintern as its chief instrument, and was succeeded by a certain reaction. The idea of Moscow as the deliverer, through the processes of national and socialist revolution, of the oppressed masses of the east was not abandoned. But it began to take second place to the idea of Moscow as the centre of a government which, while remaining the champion and the repository of the revolutionary aspirations of mankind, was compelled in the meanwhile to take its place among the great Powers of the capitalist world."

—*ibid.*, pp. 289-290

In other words, having defeated the forces of counterrevolution, the Bolsheviks regarded the Soviet workers state as the *sine qua non*, and that the affiliated parties of the Comintern were henceforth required to kowtow to the interests of Soviet Russia, even if at the expense of their own revolutions. Carr is wrong—while the delegates to the Fourth Congress certainly understood the necessity of defending Soviet Russia and admired the Bolsheviks who had made the revolution, they were not afraid to express differences with the leadership of the CI. The subsuming of the Comintern to the wishes of the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy would come later, at the Fifth Congress which initiated the program of "Bolshevization."

### The Famine of 1921

If the troubles of the Civil War were not enough, Soviet Russia was afflicted with a severe drought which hit the Volga basin in the summer of 1921. By the end of the year, it was estimated that some 22 million people were seriously affected by the crop failures. In August, agreements were signed with the American Relief Administration (ARA), under no less than Herbert Hoover, and with the Red Cross. The terms were humiliating since they meant the admission into Russia of foreign agents, ostensibly to oversee the distribution of food aid. The ARA was especially suspect: its staff was widely seen to be spies or agents to secure their own or U.S. commercial interests. In an 11 August 1921 letter to Molotov and the Politbureau, Lenin wrote:

"There is rank duplicity on the part of America, Hoover and the League of Nations Council.

"Hoover must be punished, he must be *slapped in the face publicly, for all the world to see*, and the League of Nations Council as well."

Lenin added the following postscript:

“The conditions must be of *the strictest*: arrest and deportation for the slightest interference in our internal affairs.”

—*CW*, Vol. 45, pp. 250-251

(Fortunately, the harvest of 1922 was excellent, the famine was outlived and the economy began to revive under the NEP.)

This calamity was no small political factor: Zinoviev in his report to the Fourth Congress noted how the Social Democrats of the Second and Two-and-a-Half Internationals used it against Russia:

“For the non-party workers, lacking in political training to be faced with the fact that famine reigned in the first Soviet Republic and that the life of the Russian workers and peasants was one of suffering and hardships, it amounted to a great disappointment in the revolution in general.”

—*Fourth Congress of the Communist International, Abridged Report of Meetings*, p. 15  
(Communist Party of Great Britain, London)

But in a report to the Moscow party organization on 22 October 1922, Trotsky noted that a temporary fall in the living standards was one of the overhead costs of every social revolution, including the French. He cited the conservative historian, Taine, who affirmed that even eight years after the Great Revolution, the French people were poorer than before its eve. At the same time, the French Revolution laid the basis for the further expansion of the French economy and culture on the basis of the overturn of feudalism. All the more wrenching would be the process in the course of a proletarian revolution which unfolded in a backward country:

“In other words, what I wish to say is that the five-year period (and we must say this to all our critics, malicious and well-meaning alike who employ this argument) does not provide a historic scale by means of which it is possible to weigh the economic results of the proletarian revolution. All that we see up to now in our country are the overhead expenditures in the production of the revolution.”

—*FFYCI*, Vol. 2, pp. 191-192

Trotsky then posed the question which he intended to present at the Fourth Congress of the CI:

“How do matters really stand with regard to the chances for the development of the European revolution? Because it is perfectly self-evident that the tempo of our future construction will in the highest measure depend upon the development of the revolution in Europe and America.”

—*ibid.*, p. 192

### The Fourth Congress

As said above, the Fourth Congress was really an affirmation of the Third in terms of its basic poli-

cies. Trotsky gave the major report at the session of 14 November 1922, “Report on the New Soviet Economic Policy and the Perspectives of the World Revolution,” (*FFYCI*, Vol. 2, pp. 220-263). He began with a capsule description of the Russian Civil War:

“We made mistakes in various fields, including, of course, politics as well. But by and large we did not set the European working class a poor example of resoluteness, of firmness and, when need arose, of ruthlessness in revolutionary struggle.... The Civil War was not only a military process, but something more. It was also—and even above all—a political process. Through the methods of war, the struggle unfolded for the political reserves, that is, in the main, for the peasantry. After vacillating for a long time between the bourgeois-landlord bloc, the ‘democracy’ serving this bloc, and the revolutionary proletariat, the peasantry invariably—at the decisive moment when the final choice had to be made—cast in their lot with the proletariat, supporting it—not with democratic ballots but with food supplies, horses, and force of arms. Just this decided the victory in our favor.”

—*ibid.*, p. 222

Trotsky also does a nice job demolishing the criticisms of those such as Otto Bauer, an Austrian Social Democrat, who from the right saw the NEP as a stage toward capitalist restoration. Trotsky first traced the existence of “War Communism” from the requirements of civil war:

“The military victory which would have been excluded if not for War Communism, permitted us, in turn, to pass over from measures dictated by military necessity to measures dictated by economic expediency. Such is the origin of the so-called *New Economic Policy*.”

—*ibid.*, p. 231

Trotsky then goes on to explain the real significance of the NEP:

“In March 1917 Czarism was overthrown. In October 1917 the working class seized power. Virtually all of the land, nationalized by the state, was handed over to the peasants. The peasants cultivating this land are now obliged to pay the state a fixed tax in kind, which forms the main fund for socialist construction....

“The contention that Soviet economic development is traveling from Communism to capitalism is false to the core. We never had Communism. We never had socialism, nor could we have had it. We nationalized the disorganized bourgeois economy, and during the most critical period of life-and-death struggle we established a regime of ‘Communism’ in the distribution of articles of consumption. By vanquishing the bourgeoisie in the field of politics and war, we gained the possibility of coming to grips with economic life and we found

ourselves constrained to reintroduce the market forms of relations between the city and the village, between the different branches of industry, and between the individual enterprises themselves.”

—*ibid.*, p. 232

Most to the point:

“Our most important weapon in the economic struggle occurring on the basis of the market is—state power. Reformist simpletons are the only ones who are incapable of grasping the significance of this weapon. The bourgeoisie understands it excellently. The whole history of the bourgeoisie proves it.”

—*ibid.*, p. 239

As to the encroachments of private capital under the NEP, Trotsky provided some interesting statistics: the private enterprises, about 4,000, employed only about 80,000 workers; the 4,000 state enterprises employed about a million workers. He adds:

“In reestablishing the market, the workers’ state naturally introduced a number of juridical changes indispensable for obtaining a market turnover. Insofar as these legal and administrative reforms open up the possibility of capitalist accumulation they constitute indirect but very important concessions to the bourgeoisie. But our neo-bourgeoisie will be able to exploit these concessions only in proportion to its economic and political resources. We know what its economic resources are. They are less than modest. Politically its resources are equal to zero. And we shall do everything in our power to see to it that the bourgeoisie does not ‘accumulate capital’ in the *political* field. You ought not to forget that the credit system and the tax apparatus remain in the hands of the workers’ state and that this is a very important weapon in the struggle between state industry and private industry.”

—*ibid.*, pp. 240-241

As to the political and economic conjuncture obtaining at the end of 1922, Trotsky basically reaffirmed the lessons and decisions of the Third Congress:

“As against a number of comrades [and here he is referring to the ‘Lefts’] we defended the viewpoint that in the historical development of capitalism we must differentiate sharply between two types of curves: the *basic* curve which graphs the development of capitalist productive forces, growth of the productivity of labor, accumulation of wealth, and so on; and the *cyclical* curve which depicts a periodic wave of boom and crisis, repeated on the average every nine years....

“In 1920 there ensued—on the basis of universal capitalist decay—an acute cyclical crisis. Some comrades among the so-called ‘Lefts’ held that this crisis must uninterruptedly deepen and sharpen up till the proletarian

revolution. We, on the other hand, predicted that a break in the economic conjuncture was unavoidable in the more or less near future, bringing a partial recovery. We insisted, further, that such a break in the conjuncture would tend not to weaken the revolutionary movement but, on the contrary, to impart new vitality to it....

“Today however, we have no reason to revise or modify our position. We did not judge our epoch to be revolutionary because the sharp conjunctural crisis of 1920 swept away the fictitious boom of 1919. We adjudged it to be revolutionary because of our general appraisal of world capitalism and its conflicting basic forces. Lest this lesson be wasted, we ought to reaffirm the theses of the Third Congress, as fully applicable at this very hour.”

—*ibid.*, pp. 258-259

This in fact was done: the very first section of the Fourth Congress resolution on tactics, adopted 5 December 1922, reaffirmed the Third Congress resolutions on the world economic situation and the tasks and tactics of the CI.

Trotsky then summed up the tasks of the Communist parties:

“Today revolutionary parties exist in all countries, but they rest directly only upon a fraction of the working class, to be more precise, a minority of the working class.... Upon becoming convinced through experience of the correctness, firmness and reliability of Communist leadership, the working class will shake off disillusionment, passivity and dilatoriness—and then the hour for launching the final assault will sound. How near is this hour? We make no predictions on this score. But the Third Congress did fix the task of the hour as the struggle for influence over the majority of the working class. A year and a half has elapsed. We have unquestionably scored major successes, but our task still remains the same: We must conquer the confidence of the overwhelming majority of the toilers. This can and must be achieved in the course of struggle for the transitional demands under the general slogan of the proletarian united front.”

—*ibid.*, p. 260

Exactly what that meant was the subject of no small amount of confusion in the discussions at the Fourth Congress when it dealt with the slogan of the workers government.

### The Workers and XYZ Government

Debate on the “Theses on Comintern Tactics” took place from 9 to 12 November 1922, in conjunction with Zinoviev’s report on the activities of the ECCI [Executive Committee of the Communist International] since the Third Congress. Before going into the discussion itself, it’s worth examining what the



“Theses on Comintern Tactics” actually said.

Its second thesis, on “The Period of Capitalist Decline,” ends with the following two paragraphs:

“Capitalism to its very end will be at the mercy of cyclical fluctuations. Only the seizure of power by the proletariat and a world socialist revolution can save humanity from permanent catastrophe, caused by the existence of the modern capitalist system.

*“What capitalism is passing through today is nothing other than its death throes. The collapse of capitalism is inevitable.”*

—FFC, p. 389

The first paragraph is incontestable; the second is not, and perhaps contributed to the confusion. As I recall, Lenin said that there was no impossible situation for the bourgeoisie; they would not simply fall from power but would have to be thrown out. This implies the necessary existence of the subjective factor—the revolutionary party.

The tenth thesis, “The United Front Tactic,” actually presents a correct description of the proletarian united front, contrasting the efforts of the reformists to split the working class to the necessity of working-class unity in the face of a capitalist offensive against wages and working conditions:

“The united front tactic is simply an initiative whereby the Communists propose to join with all workers belonging to other parties and groups and all unaligned workers in a common struggle to defend the immediate, basic interests of the working class against the bourgeoisie....

“It is particularly important when using the united front tactic to achieve not just agitational but also *organizational results*. Every opportunity must be used to establish organizational footholds among the working masses themselves....”

—*ibid.*, p. 396

Any read of that is what we understand as the united front: a common bloc in a particular action, but not an overall political bloc. [This section of the Theses explicitly refers to “Every action, for even the most trivial everyday demand...”] Unfortunately the Theses were far from clear; the eleventh thesis outlined five possible “workers’ governments”:

“1. A liberal workers’ government, such as existed in Australia and is possible in Britain in the near future.

“2. A social-democratic ‘workers’ government’ (Germany).

“3. A workers’ and peasants’ government. Such a possibility exists in the Balkans, Czechoslovakia, etc.

“4. A social-democratic/Communist coalition government.

“5. A genuine proletarian workers’ government, which can be created in its pure form only by a Communist Party.”

—*ibid.*, pp. 398-399

The eleventh thesis noted that Communists must be ready to “form a workers’ government with non-Communist workers’ parties and workers’ organizations.” But only on the conditions that the Communists were under the strictest control of the party, that they be in close contact with the revolutionary masses and that they have the unconditional right to maintain their identity and independence of agitation.

This is all very well and good, but it applies to how Communists engage in a united front action, “march separately, strike together,” as Lenin put it. This is an entirely separate question from forming or entering a governmental coalition, which by definition is a political bloc. The thesis went on to offer every opportunist an open door:

“Communists are also prepared to work alongside those workers who have not yet recognized the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Accordingly Communists are also ready, in certain conditions and with certain guarantees, to support a non-Communist workers’ government. However, the Communists will still openly declare to the masses that the workers’ government can be neither won nor maintained without a revolutionary struggle against the bourgeoisie.”

—*ibid.*, p. 399

Unfortunately we are not told what the conditions are nor who will give the guarantees.

It’s no accident that the SWP [U.S. Socialist Workers Party] in the person of Joseph Hansen himself devoted an entire “Educational for Socialists” bulletin (April 1974) to the “Workers and Farmers Government,” one which quoted from the Fourth Congress resolution and the discussion. Hansen was no fool, and was able to use the ambiguous formulations of the Fourth Congress to justify the SWP’s capitulation to Pabloite revisionism over Castro’s Cuba and the Algerian revolution. While the Castroites did in fact expropriate the Cuban bourgeoisie, the Algerian FLN did not.

I took the quotes from the CI theses from the Ink Links edition, which according to its translator’s foreword was based on the 1933 Russian edition of the Comintern documents edited by none other than Béla Kun. It is interesting that Hansen’s 1974 bulletin uses a translation from a French source which contains passages not included in the Ink Links version. If anything Hansen’s version is more explicit in its confusion. In it, Communists are told not to participate in the first two types of “workers’ governments” (the Australian and German varieties)

since they “are not revolutionary workers governments but rather governments that camouflage a coalition between the bourgeoisie and the counter-revolutionary leaders of the working class.” It adds:

“To the contrary, they [the Communists] must relentlessly expose to the masses the real character of these phony ‘workers governments.’ In the period of the decline of capitalism, a period in which the principal task consists in winning a majority of the proletariat over to the revolution, these governments can objectively contribute to accelerating the process of the decomposition of the bourgeois regime.”

—Hansen, p. 40

So, what it condemns in the first sentence, it gives back in the second. Hansen’s version is even worse when describing the third and fourth possibilities (the “workers and peasants government” and a coalition government with Communists and Social Democrats):

“The other two types of workers governments are types that the Communists can participate in, although they still do not represent the dictatorship of the proletariat; they do not represent a necessary form of transition toward the dictatorship, but they can serve as a point of departure for attaining this dictatorship.”

—*ibid.*, p. 40

Think about the above citation: Communists can participate in these governments even though they are not the dictatorship of the proletariat, nor are they a necessary form of transition to the dictatorship of the proletariat, but they can serve as a point of departure to...the dictatorship of the proletariat!

### The Fourth Congress Discussion

Remember that this resolution was the result of the consensus of the November 1922 discussion on Comintern tactics and the activities of the ECCI since the Third Congress. It certainly bears the stamp of Zinoviev and Radek; neither Trotsky nor Lenin participated in that discussion, according to the English-language proceedings. Zinoviev was the main reporter and spoke at length, as was his wont.

Zinoviev gave a brief précis of the problems of the major Comintern sections. These featured the French, which was a major focus of Trotsky’s attention as well. Needless to say, having a section which tolerated leading members who were Freemasons, and allowed various holdovers from the old French SP to publish newspapers in the name of the new French CP which were opposed to the line of the CI—all this indicated the need for some severe internal housekeeping. The problems of the German section were interwoven with the “workers government” question, which has been addressed earlier and will be further.

Among the problems Zinoviev outlined there was that of the (now émigré) Hungarian party. This is one time I can really feel for Zinoviev and his exasperation:

“In Hungary, on the contrary, the situation is pitiful. I see many comrades here who have taken part energetically in factional strife and have contributed not a little to make the situation worse.... We have sometimes thought that political emigration was a necessity. But there are emigrations and emigrations.”

—*Fourth Congress of the Communist International, Abridged Report of Meetings*, p. 26  
(Communist Party of Great Britain, London)

Unfortunately for the American party, some of those émigrés were cast out of Europe and sent to America with unspecified roles. One of these, József Pogány (a.k.a. John Pepper) was to play a very malevolent, albeit energetic, role in the early American CP.

Zinoviev then turned to the international situation; he urged that the Congress reaffirm the Third Congress theses on the economic situation which had been presented by Trotsky and Varga. He then added his own flourish:

“What we are now living through is something more than one of the periodical crises of capitalism; it is THE crisis of capitalism; it is the twilight, the collapse of capitalism.”

—*ibid.*, p. 29

Perhaps one of the more bizarre portions of Zinoviev’s speech was when he addressed the question of fascism. On 28 October 1922 Mussolini’s forces marched on Rome and shortly later he was empowered by the Italian king to form a cabinet and was granted unrestricted power by the Parliament. Zinoviev stated:

“If the Fascisti maintain power in Italy (and it seems probable that they will do so during the immediate future), there can be little doubt that similar occurrences will take place in Germany, and perhaps throughout Central Europe. A Stinnes Government in Germany would be somewhat different in form from the Fascist Government in Italy. In substance, the two would be identical. Again, what is now happening in Austria is closely akin to the Italian situation. It, too, is a blow directed against bourgeois democracy, which in Austria has hitherto been defended, not only by the capitalist parties and the Second International, but also by the Two-and-a-Half International.”

—*ibid.*, p. 30

So, fascism here is seen primarily as a blow against bourgeois democracy, which served to undermine the position of the reformist Social Democrats! To be fair, Zinoviev did note that this would be “a time of trial for our Communist Parties” and prepara-

tions would have to be made for work underground. He then added:

"It is part of the process of revolution, for the revolutionary movement does not proceed along a straight line.... What we are witnessing in Italy is a counter-revolutionary movement. But when we take a broad view, we see that it is only an episodic intensification, a stage in the maturing of the proletarian revolution in Italy."

—*ibid.*, p. 31

The whole thrust of this line—with the inevitable collapse of capitalism, fascism as a stage in the maturing of the revolution—reduces to a mechanical inevitability of the revolution. This of course leaves out the necessity of organizing the revolution, the formation of organs of dual power, be they soviets as such or other similar proletarian organizations, and lastly the organization of the insurrection itself, i.e., the question of the revolutionary party. This was to prove fatal in Germany in 1923.

I believe that a lot of the confusion over the workers government came from the slogan (and its implementation) being seen as a natural extension of the united front tactic, albeit with conditions. Zinoviev said as much near the end of his speech:

"The tactics of the united front are almost universally applicable. It would be hard to find a country where the working class has attained notable proportion but where the tactics of the united front have not yet been inaugurated.... By no means can the same thing be said of the watchword of the Labour Government [by which he means the Workers Government]. The latter is far less universally applicable, and its significance is comparatively restricted. It can only be adopted in those countries where the relationships of power render its adoption opportune, where the problem of power, the problem of government, both on the parliamentary and on the extra-parliamentary field, has come to the front."

—*ibid.*, pp. 36-37

In other words, the workers government "tactic" can only be used where the question of power is being raised both in the parliament and on the streets. But by definition if the question of power is being raised in the streets, that is a pre-revolutionary situation where the most fatal mistake is to confuse the workers as to the class nature of the state. Any coalition with the Social Democrats (the fourth "possibility" in the Theses) would of necessity still be a bourgeois government. The point is not to build illusions in such a government but to overthrow it!

During the discussion, one of the German delegates, Ernst Meyer, noted the troubles that the German Party had had with the question of the "workers' government":

"The most difficult question which we had to solve in connection with the United Front tactics—and which we have probably not yet solved—is the question of the Workers' Government. We must differentiate between social democratic governments and Workers' Governments. We have social democratic governments in Germany—in Saxony, Thuringia and formerly also in Gotha—governments which we had to support but which have nothing in common with what we understand by Workers' Government.... The chief difference between a Workers' and a social democratic government is—that the former, without bearing the label of a socialist policy, is really putting socialist-communist policy into practice. Thus, the Workers' government will not be based on parliamentary action alone, it will have to be based on the support of the wide masses, and its policy will be fundamentally different from that of the social democratic governments such as those existing in some of the countries of Germany."

He then noted that at an enlarged ECCI meeting Zinoviev had earlier described the workers government as follows: "The workers' government" is the same as the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is a pseudonym for Soviet Government." This is not the position Zinoviev was arguing at the Fourth Congress. Meyer then continued:

"According to our conception this is wrong. The workers' government is not the dictatorship of the proletariat (quite so, from the German Delegation), it is only a watchword which we bring forward, in order to win over the workers and to convince them that the proletarian class must form a United Front in its struggle against the bourgeoisie."

—*ibid.*, p. 41

One wonders why the KPD "had to support" those social-democratic governments in Saxony, Thuringia and Gotha, given that even in Meyer's terms they were not "workers' governments." Then he exposes Zinoviev's earlier comment that the "workers' government" is the same as the dictatorship of the proletariat, which Zinoviev "clarified" in the discussion. What is most telling is Meyer's idea that this mythical "workers' government" would implement "socialist-communist policies," whatever that means.

Radek tried to clarify the muddle Zinoviev had created. He noted the dangers of the united front policy as applied to the workers government:

"We are living in a period of transition to a new wave of revolution. In the meantime, however, there is no present opportunity for revolutionary action, and a sort of twilight mood may easily creep in among the ranks of the party: a sort of lonely feeling may urge some

Communists to walk arm-in-arm with Scheidemann along Unter den Linden....

"With regard to the demand for a Workers' Government. A Workers' Government is not the Proletarian Dictatorship, that is clear; it is one of the possible transitory stages to the Proletarian Dictatorship....

"I believe one of the comrades has said, 'The Workers' Government is not a historic necessity but a historical possibility.' This is, to my mind, a correct formula. It would be absolutely wrong to assert that the development of man from the ape to a People's Commissar must necessarily pass through the phase of a Workers' Government."

—*ibid.*, pp. 51-52

For his part, Zinoviev added to the confusion in his statement during the discussion itself:

"A third type is the so-called Coalition government; that is, a government in which Social-Democrats, Trade Union leaders, and even perhaps Communists, take part. One can imagine such a possibility. Such a government is not yet the dictatorship of the proletariat, but it is perhaps a starting point for the dictatorship. When all goes right, we can kick one social-democrat after another out of the government until the power is in the hands of the Communists. This is a historical possibility."

—*ibid.*, p. 88

No! In all cases where a Communist party with some mass base has tried such an experiment, such a government—a popular front to be accurate—has proved to be the prelude to the crushing of the proletariat. As comrade Robertson noted, this whole conception expressed a rather stupid assumption that the other side—the Social Democrats and the bourgeoisie—were incapable of thinking.

It was left to the Polish delegates to cut through at least some of the confusion. The first, listed in the discussion as Marklevsky [Julian Marchlewski, one of the members elected to the Fourth Congress Presidium] noted the electoral successes of the Polish Communists, despite their repression by the Polish bourgeois state, as an example of the combination of legal and illegal work. He then added:

"I would like to speak a few words on the slogan of the Workers' Government. I believe there has been too much philosophical speculation on the matter. ('Very true,' from the German benches.) The criticism of this slogan is directed on three lines—the Workers' Government is either a Scheidemann Government or a coalition government of the Communists with the social traitors. It finds support either in Parliament or in the Factory Councils. It is either the expression of the dictatorship of the proletariat, or it is not. I believe that philo-

sophical speculation is out of place—for we have practical historical experience. What did the Bolsheviks do in 1917 before they conquered power? They demanded 'All Power to the Soviets.' What did this mean at the time? It meant giving power to the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries [SR] who were in the majority in the Soviets. It meant at that time a Workers' Government in which social traitors participated, and which was directed against the dictatorship of the proletariat. But this slogan was a good weapon of agitation in the hands of the Bolsheviks."

—*ibid.*, p. 60

This is a bit off, but its thrust is toward the dictatorship of the proletariat. The essence of Bolshevik policy was to push the organs of dual power toward the insurrection. In fact, after the July days in 1917, Lenin was looking to factory committees as an alternative to the formal soviets, then under a Menshevik-SR majority, which were repressing the Bolsheviks. The whole point of Lenin's policy was to break the proletariat from the bourgeoisie; this meant the organs of *dual power*. And by October 1917, when the Petrograd garrison said it would only accept orders from the Workers and Soldiers' Soviets, one had armed bodies of men whose allegiance was to a different social formation than the crumbling provisional government.

The second Polish delegate, Dombisky, really pointed to the problems raised in the formulations of Zinoviev and the ECCI:

"We have already accumulated a good deal of experience, and I believe that this experience is not encouraging to the adherents of the tactics of the United Front, as it has been applied of late. Of course, every time one says something against the United Front one gets the reply: But you do not understand that we must have the majority behind us!... Of course, we ought to win a majority of the proletariat, but it has to be a majority for a Communist Party, not for a hotch-potch of hazy and nebulous ideas....

"As regards the workers' government, I was in the same boat as my friend Comrade Duret, I could not understand the meaning of workers' government in our tactics. At last I have heard a clear definition of this government. Comrade Radek has solaced me in private conversation that such a government is not contemplated for Poland (Comrade Radek: I never said that). Oh, then Poland will also have to bear the punishment of this sort of government. It is thus an international problem. Comrade Radek says that the workers' government is not a necessity but a possibility, and it were folly to reject such possibilities. The question is whether if we inscribe all the possibilities on our banner we try to accelerate the realization of these possibilities. I believe that it is quite possible that at

the eleventh hour a so-called workers' government should come which would not be a proletarian dictatorship. But I believe when such a government comes, it will be the resultant of various forces such as our struggle for the proletarian dictatorship, the struggle of the social-democrats against it and so forth. Is it proper to build our plans on such an assumption? I think not, because I believe that we should insist on our struggle for the proletarian dictatorship."

—*ibid.*, pp. 76-77

### A Brief Tour of the 1923 German Revolution

By late 1922, the Weimar government had failed to make reparation payments, or to be more precise, requisitions of coal and other basic commodities as dictated by the Versailles treaty. This prompted the French government to militarily occupy the Ruhr in January 1923. The German government, then under Chancellor Cuno, adopted a policy of "passive resistance"—i.e., civil disobedience toward the French and Belgian occupation authorities. Rightist paramilitary groups (who had been maintained by conservative industrialists both with private and government funds siphoned from the army budget) quickly infiltrated the Ruhr. There, they carried out provocative, albeit largely ineffectual, guerrilla warfare against the French troops. The occupation of the Ruhr triggered a massive burst of German nationalism—even the Ruhr workers responded with work stoppages.

The occupation also triggered massive financial chaos in Germany. Under armed guard, the French bourgeoisie got some of the raw materials for its blood-sucking reparations, but it crippled the rest of German industry. The result was inflation on a scale which is hard to believe. Werner Angress, in his book *Stillborn Revolution*, notes that the value of the German mark depreciated from 4,800 to the U.S. dollar in May to an astronomical 4.6 billion in August! That's a factor of a million in three months! Angress described the devastation wrought upon the German middle class and on the workers:

"Savings accounts melted into nothing; pensions became worthless; heirlooms had to be sold for worthless paper marks, with denominations in billions stamped upon them, in order to buy food for the family. Respectable old civil servants living on retirement pay found themselves paupers overnight. Salaried employees and wage earners were paid several times a day during the height of this cataclysm, collecting the money in burlap bags. With these, their waiting spouses rushed to the grocer to buy bread before the store owner scribbled the new, always more astronomical exchange rate, on the

blackboard which had become a necessary fixture in every retail business."

—pp. 285-286

The situation in Germany in the summer of 1923 presented a revolutionary opportunity unparalleled in history. The economic crisis had shaken even the faith of the civil servants in the bourgeois order, workers were flocking to the KPD, the influence (or rather control) of the SPD over the workers was waning, and the ruling class was paralyzed. Contrary to *Revolutionary History*, if ever there was a revolutionary situation, this was it. The climax came on 10 August, when the Berlin printers union struck against the wishes of the executive of the ADGB [Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund—the German Trade-Union Federation—the majority of its seven million members were not members of any political party, but tended to vote SPD. The ADGB executive had sanctioned the strike vote but wanted government printing exempted]. The printers were soon joined by power workers, construction workers and those of the municipal transport system. To their credit, KPD activists were involved in some of the spread of the printers strike. But the possibility of a general strike was successfully spiked by the SPD.

On the same day that the printers went out, there was a meeting of the Berlin Trade-Union Commission, which invited representatives of the SPD, the USPD and the KPD. As Angress relates, the KPD delegation put forward a motion for a three-day general strike "to obtain the following main objectives: a minimum hourly wage of 0.60 gold marks; the overthrow of the Cuno government; and the establishment of a workers' and peasants' government. Considering the tense circumstances under which the meeting was held, it is at least conceivable that a majority of delegates might have declared in favor of such a strike" (Angress, p. 371). However, the SPD moved in quickly with the promise of parliamentary reforms to end the inflationary spiral and the Communist motion was defeated.

While, as Angress notes, the KPD didn't simply accept the defeat of their motion as reason to pull up stakes (as they would in October), the party clearly carried with it the hoary ghost of the failed March Action of 1921. On 2 August, *Die Rote Fahne* carried an article which stated:

"We must fight the battles to which we are destined by history, but we must always keep in mind that we are at the moment still the weaker. We cannot as yet offer a general battle, and we must avoid everything which would enable the enemy to beat us piecemeal."

—quoted in Angress, p. 367

What is so excruciating is that a sizable portion of the working class clearly was willing to fight. Even

Angrès states that the Communists got “a surprisingly strong response” and that wildcat strikes erupted in various parts of the country. He adds:

“There was a distinct possibility that these intermittent strikes might have turned into a general one, as had happened in March 1920 during the Kapp putsch. But before the Communists were able to fan these brush-fires into a major conflagration, their designs were thwarted by the announcement, on August 12, that Chancellor Cuno and his cabinet had resigned.”

—*ibid.*, pp. 371-372

In a distorted way, this probably reflects the thinking of the KPD leadership, more particularly Brandler. Why, one might ask, didn't the strikes spread as they had in March 1920? Well, Germany in 1923 wasn't Germany of 1920. The German workers, especially the advanced elements, had learned something from the bloody Kapp Putsch of 1920 and the bloody suppression of the March Action of 1921. They were certainly ready to fight but this time they wanted a leadership with the ability to not only recognize that it was time for the decisive struggle, but also to *organize* it. This the KPD manifestly failed to provide, and the recession of the August strikes had more to do with that than the parliamentary follies in the Reichstag.

What is strikingly lacking is the absence of any conception of dual power on the part of the KPD during this period. In fact, Reuben has been reading some German sources and he says the thrust of their stuff was fighting against fascism, which was growing, but they said nothing about getting rid of the bourgeoisie. No idea that the existing state power would have to be replaced, that organs of proletarian power would have to be created and that the process would entail a *military conflict*. This was one point Jim really stressed. The KPD was facing a small army, 100,000 men, but these were hard core volunteers and many were drawn from the ranks of the Freikorps units which had systematically smashed the workers' uprisings which had occurred in the aftermath of the November 1918 revolution. The idea that one would need very disciplined units of men armed not only with rifles but with machine guns and heavy weapons seems to have been totally beyond the ken of the KPD leadership.

Rather, the KPD leadership operated on the false view that the crisis would continue, and that the party's influence would increase in linear fashion and eventually the revolution would come, more or less on its own. Essentially, their tactic was to pressure the “left” SPD in a revolutionary direction. This was a fatal misreading of the situation.

The replacement of Cuno by Stresemann on 13 August hardly solved the problems of the German bourgeoisie. Stresemann, leader of the German People's Party, formed the so-called “Great Coalition” government, whose cabinet included four SPD members. Despite its name, Stresemann's party was really that of the large industrialists; his (and probably their) faith in bourgeois democracy is captured in a statement by Stresemann quoted by Trotsky: “We are the last bourgeois parliamentary government. After us come either the communists or the fascists” (“On the Road to the European Revolution,” 11 April 1924, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition, 1923-1925*, p. 165).

The fact that the head of the German government would state such a thing is evidence alone that the possibilities for a German proletarian revolution were far from lost. However, the KPD had missed its best opportunity in the late summer; by the fall the Stresemann government had brought the inflation under control and the bourgeoisie began to regain its confidence.

Trotsky had been following the German events closely since the spring and was convinced—rightly—that Germany had entered a revolutionary situation and that the KPD had to re-orient. But it wasn't until late August that the Russian PB finally met to discuss the possibility of an insurrection; Trotsky estimated that this could happen in a matter of weeks. Somewhat surprisingly, Zinoviev, heretofore a champion of the “Lefts,” was equivocal, although one does recall Zinoviev's flinch on the eve of the October Revolution. Trotsky's *Lessons of October* cites the letter issued by Zinoviev and Kamenev on 11 October, two weeks before the October Revolution, which states: “We are deeply convinced that to call at present for an armed uprising means to stake on one card not only the fate of our party but also the fate of the Russian and international revolution” (*The Challenge of the Left Opposition, 1923-1925*, p. 227). For his part, Stalin made a cautious venture into the realm of international politics in a secret letter to Zinoviev and Bukharin [in 1923] in which he stated that “the Germans must be curbed and not spurred on” (quoted in Maurice Spector's introduction to the New Park edition of Trotsky's *Lessons of October*).

Representatives of the various factions in the KPD were summoned to Moscow for consultations. Brandler was pessimistic regarding an insurrection—he felt the party was insufficiently prepared both politically and technically. Brandler eventually agreed to the decision to launch a bid for power, but he stood fast against Trotsky's proposal to fix a date. A compromise was reached whereby the German party was to initiate the preparations for insurrec-

tion but the exact date was left to them to decide. It should be clear that Trotsky's motivation was not to mechanically require that the German revolution take place on a particular day, but rather that without some kind of a timetable, the KPD would never get around to organizing it.

One wonders about what alarm bells were going off in Trotsky's head. Brandler was quite honest about his doubts regarding the insurrection and his abilities—he specifically said that he was no “German Lenin” and asked the Russians to send Trotsky to Germany. Jim told me that Brandler was hoping that Trotsky could conjure up soviets and the revolution out of the ground, i.e., Brandler understood the inadequacies of the KPD. Unfortunately for Brandler, and the rest of the world, German considerations were increasingly becoming subordinate to the vicissitudes of the factional struggle within the Russian party. There was no way that the triumvirate of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin would let Trotsky leave Russia. They made polite excuses as to why the Russian PB could not possibly spare Trotsky, but behind it, I believe, was a real fear on the part of the emerging bureaucracy—if Trotsky was to lead a German revolution, it would re-energize the Soviet workers and in any case would explode the whole *raison d'être* for the bureaucratic caste.

Brandler returned to Germany in early October, not exactly enthused, but willing to go through the motions. The most favorable opportunities were in Saxony and Thuringia where the KPD had a base of support and nominally “left” SPD governments were in power. There had been a long festering fight over the KPD's attitude toward these provincial governments, in particular to the one in Saxony led by the SPDer Zeigner.

The question was whether or not the KPD should actually join a coalition government, together with the SPD. In fact, around the time of the Fourth Congress, a decision had been made that the KPD *not* enter the Saxon government, since they would only do so as an appendage to the Social Democrats.

But on 1 October, the ECCI, in the person of Zinoviev, sent a telegram ordering the KPD to enter the Saxon government, ostensibly because an insurrection was estimated in four to six weeks:

“The situation compels us to raise in a practical form the question of our entry into the Saxon Government. On the condition that the Zeigner people [i.e., the Social Democrats] are really prepared to defend Saxony against Bavaria and the Fascists, we must enter. Carry out at once the arming of 50,000 to 60,000 men, ignore General Müller. The same in Thuringia.”

—E. H. Carr, *The Interregnum*, pp. 207-208

The motivation was supposedly to be able to use ministerial posts in these provincial governments to obtain weapons for the proletarian “Red Hundreds,” which were to be the spearhead of the revolution.

The end result proved less than spectacular. Brandler and two other KPDers got minor ministerial posts in the Saxon government. But while Zeigner may have been a sincere left Social Democrat, he was still a Social Democrat! The KPD did attempt to organize some “military-technical” groups, but despite assistance from Moscow, these remained disorganized or simply on paper. Most to the point, the arming and organizing of the “Red Hundreds” was woefully inadequate.

While the Berlin government was weak, it wasn't totally impotent. As usual it had the service of the SPD tops (e.g., Ebert) who could recognize that the mere participation of the KPD in the Saxon government was enough of a red flag: it wasn't necessary for the KPD to call for soviets. And while the Weimar government faced a stronger challenge from the rightist/Nazi forces in Bavaria, it was against “Red Saxony” that the government proceeded. As Angress notes, Stresemann attacked his weaker foe first.

The sad denouement came in a conference of labor leaders, held in Chemnitz on 21 October 1923. This was a fairly representative gathering in terms of the [Saxon workers] organizations; it probably did not reflect the mood of the German proletariat as a whole. Of some 300-400 delegates, 66 were from the KPD, about 240 from the factory councils and unions and only seven from the SPD. After reports on the political and economic crisis, Brandler presented a motion for an immediate call for a general strike, which was to be the spark for insurrection. Then the Saxon labor minister, an SPDer named Graupe, rose and said that if the KPD insisted on pressing Brandler's suggestion, he and the other SPDers (all seven of them!!) would walk out. There was no protest, and Brandler basically threw in the towel. It was, in Thalheimer's words, a “third-class” funeral.

As Trotsky later noted:

“It [the German party] continued even after the onset of the Ruhr crisis to carry on its agitational and propagandist work on the basis of the united front formula—at the same tempo and in the same forms as before the crisis. Meanwhile, this tactic had already become radically insufficient. A growth in the party's political influence was taking place automatically. A sharp tactical turn was needed. It was necessary to show the masses, and above all the party itself, that this time it was a matter of immediate preparation for the seizure of

power. It was necessary to consolidate the party's growing influence organizationally and to establish bases of support for a direct assault on the state. It was necessary to shift the whole party organization onto the basis of factory cells. It was necessary to form cells on the railways. It was necessary to raise sharply the question of work in the army. It was necessary, especially necessary, to adapt the united front tactic fully and completely to these tasks, to give it a firmer and more decided tempo and a more revolutionary character. On the basis of this, work of a military-technical nature should have been carried on.

"The question of setting a date for the uprising can have significance only in this connection and with this perspective. Insurrection is an art. An art presupposes a clear aim, a precise plan, and consequently, a schedule.

"The most important thing, however, was this: to ensure *in good time* the decisive tactical turn toward the seizure of power. And this was not done. This was the chief and fatal omission. From this followed the basic contradiction. On the one hand, the party expected a revolution, while on the other hand, because it had burned its fingers in the March events, it avoided, until the last months of 1923, the very idea of organizing a revolution, i.e., preparing an insurrection."

—Trotsky, "Through What Stage Are We Passing?", 21 June 1924, *The Challenge of the Left Opposition, 1923-1925*, pp. 170-171

### Trotsky's Position vis à vis the Workers Government

Trotsky's position in favor of the KPD entry into the "left" SPD governments in Saxony and Thuringia was not some sort of aberration in some speeches in the military writings in the fall of 1923. He clearly was in agreement with the Fourth Congress notions on the slogan of the workers government. In a report given after the Fourth Congress, Trotsky states:

"From the united front flows the slogan of a workers' government. The Fourth Congress submitted it to a thorough discussion and once again confirmed it as the central political slogan for the next period."

—*FFYCI*, Vol. 2, p. 324

He clearly differentiated the "workers government" from a genuine workers government which will be established in Europe after the proletariat overthrows the bourgeoisie. But in order for that to happen, the proletariat in its majority must support the Communist Party. But since that wasn't true at the end of 1922, Trotsky states:

"And the slogan of a workers' government thus becomes a wedge driven by the Communists between the working class and all other classes:

and inasmuch as the top circles of the Social Democracy, the reformists, are tied up with the bourgeoisie, this wedge will act more and more to tear away, and it is already beginning to tear away the left wing of the Social Democratic workers from their leaders."

—*ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 324

He then goes on that under certain conditions, "...a moment may arise when the Communists together with the left elements of the Social Democracy will set up a workers' government in a way similar to ours in Russia when we created a workers' and peasants' government together with the Left Social Revolutionaries." And in his article on the slogan on the United States of Europe (30 June 1923), Trotsky repeats much of the same argumentation:

"Is the realization of a 'Workers' Government' possible without the dictatorship of the proletariat? Only a conditional reply can be given to this question. In any case, we regard the 'Workers' Government' as a *stage* toward the dictatorship of the proletariat."

—*ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 345

There are several problems here, to say the least. First, the comparison with the Bolshevik-Left SR government is way off base: (1) that government was installed *after* the proletarian revolution and the seizure of state power; (2) prior to October (and of course after) the Bolsheviks had secured a majority in the soviets, which formed the basic organ of the newly created state power. As applied to the entry of the KPD into the Saxon SPD government in 1923, neither of these conditions obtained, in particular there were no soviets or their equivalent. In fact, Trotsky notes that after the Fourth Congress in 1922, the KPD was advised not to enter because at best they would be an appendage to the SPD government.

Overall, I think that the two Polish comrades really had it right during the CI discussions. The playing with ambiguous formulations about the types of "workers governments" is really playing with the central question of the class nature of the state. Communists are for the dictatorship of the proletariat and any attempt to bring it in through a back door is destined to fail. A proletarian revolution obviously cannot succeed unless the majority of the advanced workers are animated by clear class interests, a revolutionary program and above all the leadership of the Leninist party. Especially in the immediate period prior to the insurrection, it is above all necessary to keep the party banner clear. By entering into a coalition with the Social Democrats—which in this case would necessarily be on their terms—it throws confusion in the minds of the workers: If our job is to overthrow this bourgeois



state, run by the reformists for the bourgeoisie, then what are the Communists doing accepting ministerial posts in that government? To ask the question is to answer it.

So how could Trotsky have supported the “workers government” such as posed at the Fourth Congress? Al made a very important contribution in the discussion in the Bay Area. He looked at it less in terms of the problems of the German party leadership and more from the standpoint of what was going on in the Russian party and the CI. One must remember that the Bolshevik Party was *Lenin’s* party, and it had been split at the top at the time of Lenin’s return to Russia in February 1917. Stalin, Molotov and many of the “Old Bolsheviks” were ready to give support to the Provisional Government, and they were taken by surprise at Lenin’s vehement opposition. Lenin won the fight over the April Theses, but differences over the course of the insurrection carried over to its very eve—recall Zinoviev’s and Kamenev’s flinch. So by 1922, with the post-war revolutionary wave clearly over and with a new period of reaction, you get a back-sliding and what Al characterized as half-assed responses by the likes of Zinoviev, Stalin and Radek.

Al also noted that Lenin’s absence in the period of the Fourth Congress was really telling—in fact he was writing his Testament in December 1922. Earlier, he had asked Trotsky to take up senior positions in the Soviet government, which Trotsky refused. One factor was that Trotsky was Jewish and feared an anti-Semitic reaction if he put himself forward. But in late 1923 he did launch a fight in the Russian party, which is detailed in the review of the Vilkova book in English *Spartacist* No. 53.

Trotsky learned from the 1923 German experience and underwent a steeling as the struggle within the Russian party emerged. One of the KPDers visited Trotsky in 1924 and told him about how disorganized the KPD really was in 1923, something which was a real eye-opener for Trotsky. What is really clear is that Trotsky’s assessment of the German situation in 1923 underwent a qualitative change in about mid-1924. I cited his critical assessment of the failures of the KPD—this was written in June. More important was the classic *Lessons of October*, written in September 1924, which certainly has applicability outside the narrow question of Germany.

It is important to keep in mind that in the early 1920s, the Bolsheviks were facing new situations. Further experiences such as the Chinese revolution were still to come, and these served to convince Trotsky that rather than an exception, the Russian Revolution really showed the fundamentals which

would apply to all future proletarian revolutions.

I would like to emphasize again how closely linked were the fates of the German revolution and that of the Comintern. Lenin took the *foundation* of the KPD as an independent party as the *basis* upon which the Third International could be launched. The Second Congress carried forth the work of weeding out the reformists while seeking to bring left elements into the fold—particularly the USPD in Germany. The German March Action convinced Lenin and Trotsky that a change was necessary to curb the ultralefts and to turn the European parties toward the difficult task of winning over the working-class masses from their traditional social-democratic leaders. The Third Congress codified this work, both in the tactical theses and the organizational guidelines which serve as our model to this day.

Secondly, one has to appreciate that the lessons of the history of the Leninist Comintern do not come to us as revealed wisdom, as Moses received the Ten Commandments. Rather, they represent the distillation of revolutionary experience, often paid for by cruel defeats. Lenin, Trotsky and the early Comintern made *mistakes*—fewer than most to be sure—and they *learned* from their mistakes. Trotsky’s *Lessons of October* is a work that you should read and re-read—no matter how many times, it will always provide fresh lessons. In it he hammered home the point that above all else, the necessity in every revolutionary situation is to have a vanguard party with a *leadership* capable of switching gears in time and actually organizing the insurrection.

1923 marked a real watershed. As Trotsky wrote in 1928:

“The fundamental cause of the crisis of the October Revolution is the retardation of the world revolution, caused by a whole series of cruel defeats of the proletariat. Up to 1923, these were the defeats of the post-war movements and insurrections confronted with the non-existence of the communist parties at the beginning, and their youth and weaknesses subsequently. From 1923 on, the situation changed sharply. We no longer have before us simply defeats of the proletariat, but routs of the policy of the Comintern.”

—Trotsky, *The Third International After Lenin*, p. 246

It had taken the fights in the Russian party in the late 1920s to really harden up Trotsky as a Leninist, most particularly in the need for the struggle for leadership. In a fragment of his writings, which came from notes unfinished at the time of his murder, Trotsky noted the intimate connec-

tion needed between the party and the workers, and especially the party leadership:

“To cancel these elements from one’s calculations is simply to ignore the living revolution, to substitute for it an abstraction, the ‘relationship of forces’; because the development of the revolution precisely consists of the incessant and rapid change in the relationship of forces under the impact of the changes in the consciousness of the proletariat, the attraction of the backward layers to the advanced, the growing assurance of the class in its own strength. The vital mainspring in this process is the party, just as the vital mainspring in the mechanism of the party is its leadership. The role and the responsibility of the leadership in a revolutionary epoch is colossal.”

—Trotsky, “The Class, the Party, and the Leadership,” *The Spanish Revolution (1931-39)*, p. 360

It was true in 1917. It was true in 1919, and in 1923, and it’s true today. Our tendency is not here to comment on history—it is vitally necessary to *change* it.

### Summary following discussion

I’m going to try to keep this short. George just passed me a couple of notes. One of which is a quote from Newton, “If I see further I stand on the shoulders of giants.” Look, the whole question about the four congresses—these people led the revolution in Russia. And the question of whether or not we support the Fourth Congress, George noted that what’s required is a critical assimilation of this history. The definitive break in the Soviet party did not take control until late ’23, early ’24 with the Thirteenth Party Congress where it was very clear who was running the show politically. There was confusion (obviously, that’s the point of this class) on the slogans that developed at the Fourth Congress. But you know, Lenin was there, Trotsky was there. I don’t think you can just rule it all out.

I didn’t read it out, but there is a note that was sent in by Jim which is worth reading:

“The 1921 March Action set up the failure in Germany 1923; what support the KPD had among the membership of the trade unions, which were co-equal to the Social Democratic trade unions, was mostly shattered after that. [There were actually fights between the social-democratic workers and the communists, who were trying to force them out on strike.] The typical KPD local thereafter had a thin layer of skilled workers—and masses of unemployed workers and youth.

“So the party went into 1923 with little support in the trade unions. But it is precisely the trade unions that are the logical locus on which to

base the embryonic proletarian military opposition to the bourgeoisie—*trade union militias* (a key plank in the Transitional Program). In 1923 the workers were breaking with the SPD and toward the KPD, but it was expressed *electorally*. The SPD kept its stranglehold on the trade unions. All the KPD had was its own party organization; there was no organizational way for its growing support among the working class to take expression.

“So what was Trotsky left with...organizing ‘dual power’ on the basis of local bourgeois governments in Saxony or Thuringia.”

There is also a section in the Transitional Program which is worth reading. Talking about the ‘workers’ and farmers’ government’:

“Is the creation of such a government by the traditional workers’ organizations possible? Past experience shows, as has already been stated, that this is to say the least highly improbable. However, one can not categorically deny in advance the theoretical possibility that under the influence of completely exceptional circumstances (war, defeat, financial crash, mass revolutionary pressure, etc.), the petty-bourgeois parties including the Stalinists may go further than they wish along the road to a break with the bourgeoisie. In any case one thing is not to be doubted: even if this highly improbable variant somewhere, at some time becomes a reality and the ‘workers’ and farmers’ government’ in the above-mentioned sense is established in fact, it would represent merely a short episode on the road to the actual dictatorship of the proletariat.”

And I think back to the amendments that the Revolutionary Tendency [see *Marxist Bulletin* No. 8, “Cuba and the Marxist Theory”] submitted in the SWP on the Cuban Revolution, which took place under very highly exceptional circumstances and Cuba was one example where the U.S. imperialists did not immediately intervene and you had this basically peasant guerrilla movement take power. They were forced to expropriate the bourgeoisie shortly thereafter. But that’s hardly the historic norm. I mean you could name any other country where—Algeria for example—this had not taken place.

So, I liked a lot of the comments that comrades made on the round, but the sliding over of this “workers’ government” slogan really allows the reformists to play with politics and pretend to be revolutionary, while gutting the essence of Lenin’s whole program.

Now on the German party, you had to remember, it wasn’t just the murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht, but they went through the whole war while still in the USPD. The KPD wasn’t founded until after the November Revolution in 1918. So

you had about 300 or 400 members, I don't know, but it was a very small organization as opposed to what the Bolsheviks got in splitting from the Second International in 1914 and campaigning essentially for the forming of a new International, making the political split very clear. And Reuben was reading Luxemburg's speech at the KPD founding conference in which, while she repudiates some of her criticisms that were written in prison, she's extremely unclear, she has really no conception that we would think of as the Marxist understanding of the state. And she's going back to Marx in 1848 and downplaying, in fact, the experiences of the Paris Commune. So there were some theoretical problems at the top of the party.

Then that whole layer got murdered after the Spartakus uprising and you get these second- and even third-tier cadre coming and taking over this party without any real previous steeling such as the Bolsheviks' experience in the whole decade before WWI. The German workers had a tradition of these factory-based militias. Reuben said from his reading that when they demobilized the German army most of the guys took their guns home. So there was this tradition and in the Ruhr there was this proletarian army after the Kapp Putsch. When Kapp comes in, the head of the SPD trade unions, Legien, calls a general strike (I don't know if he really believed that would happen) but it was widely supported and the country was basically shut down. Four days later the coup failed. Ebert, Scheidemann and Co. fled Berlin and went to Stuttgart. Then they came back and they started immediately organizing the destruction of these red armies, especially in the Ruhr. Reuben told me that the casualties in the fighting after the Kapp Putsch were greater than in the March Action. It was really a bloody situation.

Alison asked what happened to Dombbsky—I don't know. Well, unfortunately I do know what happened; most of the Poles were killed by Stalin in the '30s. I really don't know about the French party to say very much, except that when the French Communist Party emerged out of a split at the Tours convention, they actually got a majority of the old SP. The real hard-right elements broke off but you had a lot of these characters running around, these Freemasons and all that. And there was no concept of an internal fight. Plus the fact that when the CP got this majority, along with it came the affiliations to its trade unions. So they

opposed the united front—'well we don't need it, we already have our trade union base,' ignoring the fact that only 10 percent of the French working class was organized at that point. How are you going to lead the French revolution without 90 percent of the working class? Trotsky had a nice little quote concerning these types:

"That it was possible for the fence-straddling leaders of the Social-Democratic opposition to place themselves at the head of the Communist Party is explained by the circumstance that the genuine revolutionary section of the working class was unable in the space of a few months to find or educate new leaders.... But the qualitative sameness of the politics of Paul Levi, of Frossard and the rest shows that involved here are not at all peculiarities inherent in any specific national situation—which of course must be carefully taken into account—but a whole international tendency, in the spirit of Left Centrism, which is prepared to adopt the external ritual of the Communist International, to swallow 21 and more conditions without a grimace but all on the sole condition that everything go on exactly as before."

—FFYCI, Vol. 2, pp. 336-337

Then, in Germany, when you get to the actual organization such as it was, Moscow did manage to get some military experts but, as George points out, there was a real disconnect between these military-technical groups and the rest of the party not to mention a lot of the workers themselves. George described this comedy of errors: you have Brandler basically sitting stone-faced, doing nothing in Chemnitz. Meanwhile, in Hamburg there actually was some fighting and for a while they held some of the police stations but they were not going to hold power in one little port city in Germany.

The strikes in August are really quite crucial because the more I read about this, my feeling is that by the fall it was getting really late in Germany and that they had really missed the boat in August when, I think, they could have taken power had they had the concept of organizing the revolution by using the factory cells as a basis. But that wasn't what the Brandler leadership was thinking about. I think that they carried over from the old SPD a lot of the parliamentarist baggage even though they supposedly had joined the Communist International as a break from that. But the KPD was only founded in January 1919 and four years later they are in the face of a classical revolutionary situation.

# Chronology of Events (1912-1924)

## 1912

*November 24-25*

Emergency congress of Second International meets in Basel, Switzerland; passes manifesto against threat of imperialist war which calls for parliamentary protest and mass demonstrations, but does not state explicitly what to do if war should actually break out.

## 1913

*March*

German government introduces a bill in the Reichstag to replace the indirect taxes with a direct tax on personal property to finance its appropriations, including a large increase in military spending. Tax reform was long sought by the SPD, but voting for it meant supporting military expenditures. SPD fraction was split, but the decision to support the tax carried by 57-27.

## 1914

*July 28*

Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia.

*July 29-30*

International Socialist Bureau meets in emergency session, calls for peace demonstrations, but no specific actions in event the conflict widened.

*August 1-4*

Germany at war with England, France, Russia; German troops invade Belgium.

*August 4*

SPD Reichstag fraction votes unanimously for war credits.

*August 8*

Bolshevik and Menshevik members in Duma issue joint declaration against war and walk out without voting for war credits.

*September*

Britain, France and Russia conclude treaty that none would sue for a separate peace.

*September 6-8*

Lenin theses calling for revolutionary struggle against imperialist war and for a new International are accepted by Bolshevik conference in Bern, Switzerland.

*November 18*

Bolshevik Duma representatives are arrested.

*December 2*

Karl Liebknecht breaks fraction discipline and votes against war credits.

*December*

First of the underground "Spartacus Letters" issued by SPD left-wing.

## 1915

*February*

Liebknecht drafted into German army; Luxemburg imprisoned.

*May*

Italy enters war on side of Entente; Spartacus commends Italian Social Democrats' refusal to support their government. Liebknecht issues slogan "The Main Enemy Is at Home!" and calls for international class struggle against the war.

*September 5-8*

Zimmerwald conference: Lenin submits draft for the Zimmerwald left calling for ruthless struggle against the social chauvinists and for turning the imperialist war into civil war; final manifesto adopts a watered down version, calling for peace without annexations and for proletarian class struggle.

*October 12*

Italian SP adopts Zimmerwald resolution.

## 1916

*January*

Luxemburg released from prison; her "Junius pamphlet" (written in 1915) is published; Spartacist leaders form the "Internationale" Group—beginnings of the break with the SPD "center."

*March*

SPD "Working Group" in Reichstag fraction formed, led by Haase and Ledebour.

*April*

Kienthal conference: adopts pacifist resolution which goes no further than Zimmerwald.

- May 1* Liebknecht arrested at May Day antiwar protest in Berlin.  
*June 27-30* Strikes in Berlin by 55,000 workers protesting Liebknecht's trial and conviction.  
*July 10* Luxemburg re-arrested.

### 1917

- March 8* Strikes in Petrograd, begun by women workers on International Women's Day lead to February Revolution, formation of soviets and abdication of the Tsar.  
*April 3* Lenin returns to Russia from Swiss exile; launches fight to reorient the party.  
*April 6* U.S. formally enters war on side of Entente.  
*April* SPD polarized between the left of the Spartacists, the vacillating "antiwar" centre of Kautsky/Haase which formed the USPD (Independent Social Democrats), and the right-wing leadership of Scheidemann and Ebert.  
*November 7* Bolshevik Revolution; Soviet Government publishes secret treaties, offers immediate peace.

### 1918

- January 19* Dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in Russia.  
*March* Soviet government agrees to onerous Brest-Litovsk peace agreement with Germany, ceding territory for time.  
*March* Trotsky appointed Commissar of War; begins organization of the Red Army; at this point the Bolsheviks only had a few thousand Red Guards and a few Bolshevik-loyal regiments from the old Tsarist army.  
*March-April* Civil War begins in earnest: imperialist forces seize Murmansk, Archangel; other major intervention is occupation of Black Sea ports. During Civil War, Soviet Russia faces White armies, backed by imperialists, on three major fronts: *North*: Yudenich threatens Petrograd; *South*: Denikin, Krasnov in the Ukraine and Caucasus; *East*: Kolchak in the upper Volga region.  
*July-August* German army's last offensive on Western Front fails.  
*August* Crisis on the Volga: on rumors of extradition to Germany, Czech Legion takes up arms, joins with Kolchak forces and seizes first Samara and then Kazan; Bolsheviks use first compulsory conscription of troops; Trotsky rushes to Svyazhsk to rally disorganized Red forces; individual commanders who proved their worth in this campaign include Tukhachevsky, I.N. Smirnov and Raskolnikov.  
*September 10* Red Army re-takes Kazan; by early October Tukhachevsky's troops secure the Upper Volga: victory gives powerful stimulus to growth of Red Army.  
*October-December* Increasing frictions between Trotsky and Stalin's ally Voroshilov regarding conduct of military operations on southern front; Trotsky's demands for centralization of operations and use of military experts from former Tsarist officer corps; Stalin & Co. start whispering campaign to discredit Trotsky; "Left" Communists oppose use of experts.  
*October 29* Mutiny in the German fleet; soviets of workers and soldiers formed.  
*November 9* Abdication of the German Kaiser; Scheidemann proclaims a republic (to great displeasure of Ebert); power passes to SPD-led government which moves to strangle the workers' soviets.  
*November 11* Armistice, effectively German surrender, formally ends WWI.  
*December 30* Opening of founding conference of the KPD.

## 1919

- January* In response to provocations by Ebert-Scheidemann government, USPD and KPD call for mass demonstrations which receive support from Revolutionary Shop Stewards. Largely spontaneous uprising by Berlin workers is suppressed; Liebknecht and Luxemburg murdered.
- March 2-6* **Founding congress of the Third International**; due to civil war and imperialist blockade delegates from many countries unable to attend. German delegate Eberlein comes with instructions to oppose formation of Third International, but is persuaded to abstain.
- March 18-23* Eighth Congress of Bolshevik Party; with Lenin's support, Trotsky's military policies are approved and Left Communists' objections defeated; Stalin and Zinoviev continue their opposition within the party hierarchy.
- March 21* Béla Kun and Hungarian CP merge with Hungarian Social Democrats to proclaim Hungarian Soviet Republic.
- April 7* Proclamation of Soviet Republic in Bavaria.
- April-May* Mutiny in the French fleet in the Black Sea; mutineers demand end to French intervention against Soviets; mutiny is suppressed, but France is forced to withdraw its troops.
- May 1* Freikorps troops enter Munich; beginning of white terror against Bavarian soviets.
- June 28* Germany signs Versailles peace treaty; Germany to pay massive reparations.
- July* Victories against Kolchak and Yudenich bolster position of Stalin's allies (Trotsky had opposed pursuit of Kolchak fearing over-extension of Red Army); reorganization of Revolutionary War Council by CC leads to removal of Trotsky's allies and their replacement by Stalin's candidates; in protest Trotsky resigns from PB and War Council; Lenin proposes rejection of Trotsky's resignations and PB adopts resolution of confidence in Trotsky; Lenin gives Trotsky the "blank" endorsement of any order.
- August 1* Collapse of Hungarian Soviet Republic.
- October* Yudenich, backed by British tanks, threatens seizure of Petrograd; Lenin even suggests abandoning it to concentrate on defense of Moscow; both Trotsky and Stalin opposed; Trotsky goes to Petrograd to organize its defense, which is successful.
- November 7* Second anniversary of Bolshevik Revolution; Trotsky reports to CEC of the Soviets on the victory over Yudenich; this is Trotsky's 40th birthday.
- December* USPD congress at Leipzig votes to leave Second International, but not to join Third; calls for conference including CI and other revolutionary socialist groups.
- December* Seventh Congress of Soviets in Moscow: Trotsky draws balance sheet of civil war; although fighting continued for another year, the tide of battle had turned in favor of Red Army.

## 1920

- March 13-16* Kapp Putsch: reactionary military officers' attempt to seize power from (SPD) German government is thwarted by massive opposition by German workers. Despite many betrayals, the German proletariat is still loyal to SPD. For first time since 1919 KPD becomes legal party.
- April* Poland invades the Ukraine, seizes Kiev; beginning of Russo-Polish war.
- April-May* Lenin writes "*Left-Wing*" *Communism—An Infantile Disorder*.
- June 12* Soviet forces recapture Kiev and Pilsudski's troops retreat in panic.
- June 21* ECCI invites reps from USPD to attend upcoming CI congress.
- July-August* **Second Congress of the Comintern.**
- July* Debate in PB over continuation of Red Army offensive to Warsaw; Trotsky was for

- armistice, fearing that Red Army advance would only stimulate Polish nationalist fears; Lenin pressed for attack to spark revolution in Poland and secure common border with Germany.
- Autumn* Strikes and plant occupations paralyze Italy; Social-Democrats betray Italian proletariat and make deal with Italian government.
- August* Defeat of Red Army at gates of Warsaw (“miracle on the Vistula”); this was partly due to Stalin’s insistence on using the Red Army’s southern forces to capture Lvov while Tukhachevsky’s northern column went to Warsaw. This left a dangerous gap and the General Staff urged the southern forces to close it, but this was not done. Pilsudski (with the aid of French officers and munitions) exploited the gap, and by 17 August the Red Army was in retreat.
- August* White Guard forces under Wrangel break out of Crimea and invade Caucasus.
- September* Lenin gives speech assessing the Russo-Polish war and the defeat of the Red Army at the gates of Warsaw. This speech was never included in the *Collected Works* and only came to light when the CI archives were opened following the counterrevolution in the USSR.
- October 12-16* Halle Congress of the USPD. Four-day debate on whether or not to affiliate with the CI; Zinoviev gives four-hour speech. In end, delegates vote 256-156 to go with the CI. In the aftermath, the KPD becomes a small mass party—from an initial size of 50,000 it accrues about 300,000 from the left USPD.
- October 12* Soviet government signs armistice with Poland; the PB was split on whether to accept peace or resume offensive operations; Trotsky argued for peace and threatened to go to the party ranks if the PB voted against him; Lenin wavered but finally came down on Trotsky’s side.
- End October* Red Army launches offensive against Wrangel and drives his army back into the Crimea.
- November* Red forces cross the isthmus and drive Wrangel out of the Crimea; this marks the end of the Civil War.
- December 4-7* Unity congress of the KPD and the USPD left-wing meets in Berlin; formation of the United Communist Party (VKPD).
- December 25* Congress of French SP at Tours; left wing goes with Comintern.

## 1921

- January* Italian SP meets at Leghorn; ECCI sends 2 reps and Paul Levi attends as fraternal from KPD. Split issue is adherence to CI’s “21 Conditions;” Serrati (for the center) holds to “conditional” acceptance; left finally splits to form Italian CP.
- January* Under Levi’s guidance, KPD’s *Rote Fahne* publishes “Open Letter” calling on other working-class parties and trade unions to take up common actions; its failure strengthens hand of ultra-lefts in KPD.
- February 22-27* “Two-and-a-Half” International formed at meeting in Vienna.
- February* Levi criticizes ECCI reps regarding split with the reformists in Italian CP and is censured by KPD leadership; Levi and others (including Clara Zetkin) resign from KPD CC in protest; this allows ultra-lefts (Fischer, Maslow) urged on by Radek and Béla Kun to push “theory of the offensive.”
- March* Kronstadt uprising begins, inspired by White Guard and other anti-Bolshevik elements; deadly threat to Soviet workers state suppressed after bloody fighting.
- March 8-16* Tenth Congress of the RCP(b); announcement of the NEP and the decision to ban factions.
- March 17* “March Action” in Germany; SPD governor of Saxony announces police occupation of province; mine workers in Mansfeld respond to KPD call for strikes and armed

resistance but KPD's call for nationwide general strike fails (both SPD and USPD are opposed); after taking many casualties and thousands of arrests, KPD *Zentrale* finally calls off March Action on the 31st.

*April 3-4*

Levi goes public with his criticisms of the KPD's "March Action" in a pamphlet "Unser Weg."

*April 15*

Levi is expelled from the KPD.

*July-August*

**Third Congress of the Comintern:** struggle against the proponents of the "theory of the offensive"; adoption of the organizational guidelines for Communist parties.

*August 14*

Lenin writes "Letter to the German Communists" for upcoming congress of the VKPD.

*August 22-26*

Second (Jena) Congress of the German Communist Party; accepts Third Congress decisions and criticisms of March Action; party returns to old name of KPD.

*October 20*

London meeting of social democrats discusses possible fusion of "Two-and-a-Half" International with the Second.

## 1922

*March 27-April 2*

Eleventh Congress of the RCP(b); Lenin's opening political report notes the danger of the "bureaucratic machine."

*May 26*

Lenin suffers first stroke; recuperates at Gorki until October 1.

*October 13*

Lenin writes sharply worded letter to Stalin criticizing the CC decision to relax monopoly of foreign trade; proposes that it be taken up at next (December) plenary session of CC.

*October 28*

Italian fascists hold "March on Rome"; Mussolini empowered by king to form cabinet; in November, Italian parliament grants Mussolini unrestricted power.

*November-December*

**Fourth Congress of the Comintern:** Lenin speaks to a CI Congress for the last time on November 13.

*December*

Lenin proposes bloc with Trotsky to fight Stalin at 12th Party Congress.

*December*

Hague Conference: "Two-and-a-Half" International fuses with Second International.

*December 23-29*

Lenin dictates notes, known as his "Testament," calling for removing Stalin as General Secretary.

## 1923

*January 11*

French and Belgian troops occupy the Ruhr following default of German reparation payments under terms of Versailles Treaty.

*January 20*

Chancellor of German government, Wilhelm Cuno, proclaims policy of "passive resistance"—i.e. non-cooperation with occupying authorities.

*January 25*

Lenin's article (written 23 January) on reorganizing the Rabkrin (Workers and Peasants Inspection) is published in *Pravda*.

*February-March*

Freikorps units, financed by army funds and right-wing industrialists, begin organizing and infiltrating the occupied Ruhr.

*March 4*

Lenin's article "Better Fewer, But Better" is published in *Pravda*; this (and the 25 January article) are both thinly veiled attacks against Stalin, who headed the Rabkrin.

*March 5*

Lenin sends Stalin a personal, top-secret letter; should Stalin fail to withdraw his remarks and apologize for his abusive behavior to Krupskaya, Lenin will break all relations.

*March 9*

Lenin suffers another stroke, one which was to remove him from effective political activity for the rest of his life.

*March 15*

Freikorps unit led by Lt. Schlageter destroys a railway bridge; Schlageter is caught,



- tried and eventually executed by the French on May 26; Schlageter becomes a martyr and national hero.
- April* Twelfth Congress of the RCP(b); Trotsky fails to carry out hard fight against Stalin which Lenin had wanted. Stalin, Zinoviev, Bukharin accept Trotsky's economic proposals (which had been endorsed by Lenin), but bureaucracy does nothing to implement them. Extreme disorganization of state industry and "scissors crisis" continues.
- April-August* Runaway inflation in Germany: in May the mark was 48,000 to the dollar; by July it had depreciated to 349,000, and by August it was 4,600,000. Savings, pensions wiped out; persons on fixed incomes pauperized overnight. Germany thrown into greatest political crisis since November 1918.
- June 9* Right-wing coup against peasant-based government of Stambulisky in Bulgaria leads to military dictatorship under Tsankov. Despite control of most of unions, Bulgarian CP (KPB) takes neutral stand, fails to move to defend Stambulisky forces. CI sharply criticizes KPB leadership, which is replaced by Kolarov and Dimitrov.
- June 12-23* ECCI meets in Moscow; discusses German crisis; Radek gives "Schlageter" speech.
- July-August* Strikes sweep Petrograd and Moscow: workers' discontent with exactions of NEP finally breaks out, much to surprise of bureaucracy.
- August* Trotsky returns to Moscow; Brandler summoned for consultations. Trotsky demands that the KPD set a date and begin planning for an insurrection; Stalin sends secret letter to Zinoviev and Bukharin urging "restraint" on the KPD, doubting possibilities for a German revolution.
- September 12* Tsankov arrests KPB functionaries; forces KPB into insurrection; after 10 days fighting, the revolt is crushed and the Bulgarian CP subjected to ruthless terror.
- October 8* Trotsky's first letter to CC and CCC opens fight against bureaucratic strangulation of economy and party.
- October 12* After negotiations, KPD enters government of left-wing SPD'er Zeigner in Saxony, urged on by Zinoviev. This supposedly would allow KPD access to weapons to arm the "proletarian hundreds."
- October 13-20* Military commander of German army in Saxony bans "proletarian hundreds," moves to take over Saxony police (i.e., effectively depose Zeigner government).
- October 21* Brandler calls meeting of Saxon workers' representatives (dominated by SPD), calls for general strike; motion fails and KPD calls off insurrection. Despite some street-fighting in Hamburg, the German October was defeated without a decisive battle.
- October 25-27* Plenum of CC and CCC in Moscow convened by Stalin faction to pound Trotsky and the signers of the "Platform of the 46."
- November 7* Sixth anniversary of Bolshevik Revolution; pages of *Pravda* opened for discussion—leads to massive outpouring of discontent from Party ranks.
- December 5* "New Course" resolution adopted by Russian PB ostensibly to restore some measure of intra-party democracy, but Stalin faction renders it a dead letter.
- December 15* *Pravda* editors replaced by Zinoviev/Stalin supporters; by end of month discussion closed.

## 1924

- January 11* ECCI meets to discuss Germany: Zinoviev whitewashes ECCI (read: Zinoviev and Stalin) role in German defeat; Brandler & Co. scapegoated and removed from KPD leadership.
- January 16* Thirteenth Party Conference opens; Opposition gets only 3 of 128 delegates. This marks the decisive turning point in Soviet Thermidor.
- January 21* Death of Lenin.

# Reading List for Educationalists on the Comintern

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- "Toward the Communist International," *Lenin and the Vanguard Party*, pp. 47-55 (SL/U.S. pamphlet, 1997 edition)
- Luxemburg, "The Reconstruction of the International," *Lenin's Struggle for a Revolutionary International*, pp. 183-193

## II. The Second Congress: Forging a Revolutionary International

- Trotsky, "On the Coming Congress of the Comintern," 22 July 1920, *FFYCI*, Vol. 1, pp. 84-94
- Comintern, "Theses on the Conditions of Admission to the Communist International," 6 August 1920, *Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International* (hereafter *FFC*), pp. 92-97, (Ink Links/Humanities Press 1980)
- Note: Lenin's CW contains 20 theses in Vol. 31, pp. 206-212 (dated 20 July).*
- Lenin, "Theses on the Fundamental Tasks of the Second Congress of the Communist International," 4 July 1920, *CW*, Vol. 31, pp. 184-201
- Lenin, "Speech on the Role of the Communist Party," 23 July 1920, *CW*, Vol. 31, pp. 235-239
- Lenin, "Preliminary Draft Theses on the National and the Colonial Questions," 5 June 1920, *CW*, Vol. 31, pp. 144-151

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