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The Communist Left in Germany
1918-1921

With texts by:
Laufenberg, Wolffheim, Gorter,
Roland-Holst and Pfempfert

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La Gauche Communiste en Allemagne (1918-1921)
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Translator's Note

This revised edition of *The Communist Left in Germany: 1918-1921* retains the first, historical part of the original volume unaltered, with the exception of a few added editorial notes which were suggested by Gilles Dauvé. The second part of the book, which contains texts of the German Left, has been substantially changed in order to provide selections which have not yet, to the best of my knowledge, become available in English translation. Pannekoek's *The Theory of the Collapse of Capitalism*, which is currently available in English translation at the website, marxists.org, has been replaced by several programmatic texts of the German Left and Pfempfert's response to Lenin's *Left Wing Communism...* In addition, Gilles Dauvé authorized the inclusion of an "Epilogue" which he wrote in 2004 and which gives the reader an idea of how his conceptions regarding the subject matter of this book have evolved since it was originally published in 1976.

M. DeSocio
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Introduction

“It is not those who fell wrapped in the unfortunate flag of the defeated Revolution whom we consider to be fraudulent squanderers of the Revolution, but those who afterwards, from their desks of wisdom or from their podiums as mentors of the masses, were unable to derive from that sacrifice anything more than a few phrases of demagogic admiration, accompanied by a defeatist commentary.”

Bordiga: *From the Commune to the IIIrd International*, 1924

I

The fact that the Russian Revolution of 1917 was only one aspect and one of the effects of a much broader movement, whose center was Germany, is presently more readily admitted. This recognition places the Russian experience in context. It is no longer possible to conceive of the events in Europe during that era in Russian “Leninist” terms. One cannot deplore either the *insufficient* or the *excessive* impact of “Leninism” on the western proletariat, whose practice must be understood on its own terms. The Russian influence was real, but it was limited to the accentuation of a complex evolution which it had not created. Conversely, it must be shown to what degree this evolution affected domestic events in Russia. Writing an international history of the revolutionary movement which followed the war of 1914-18 means evaluating the contributions of the various countries and regions, which implies shifting the focus of attention towards the moment when polarization over the miraculous experiences of Russia was at its height. Such a procedure also implies the refusal to anchor a “period” with well-defined characteristics and to explain everything by reference to that “period” itself.

There is no “particular situation” with a unique meaning in the history of society. Given the “period”, or, more precisely, given all the elements which directed the revolutionary drama, the revolution failed and had to fail. It can be lamented, and we lament it, but it is of no use to evoke the Bolshevik-style party or any other *deus ex machina* for explaining the development of an unreal past. It would, however, be just as false, and would also misrepresent the period, to replace the consequences of the abstract absence of the “party” or any other factor with the false plenitude of “it could not have been otherwise”; this would have been tantamount to negating the possibility of revolution. It would be yet more false, obviously, to present everything as a function of a necessary failure. We are determinists, of course, but determinism is not a historical factor which can intervene “a posteriori” in the explanation of events.

Such a procedure would foist a meaning upon even the most radical actions which these actions did not in fact possess, and would interpret the various revolutionary attempts as simple convulsive motions of capital's adaptation, as outcomes of economic crises.

The "lessons" of the German Revolution? A historical analysis of the revolutionary movement would be interested in, among other things, discovering the reasons for the failure of the previous attempts, but not in such a way as to derive from the latter a guarantee for future victory. We do not consider revolutions as simple "experiences". We discover in them, beyond their time, men who live in community with today's subversive tendency. And this discovery is consolidated by discovering that this tendency has always existed and has always occupied the front ranks of the historical stage on various occasions. It is not, then, a matter of learning simple "lessons" or of considering history as a school, but something quite different.

"We know only one science: history", means that the other sciences, based upon "experience", are not sciences at all. The transformation of Marxism carried out by its followers, starting at the end of the 19th century, which made Marxism into a "science", reduced it to one of those pseudo-sciences which are not at all subversive of society, in order to accommodate to the latter and to seek nothing more than the reproduction of particular "reactions"; it was a question, for the orthodox Marxists, of socializing capital or, expressed differently, of subjecting it to real organization and regulation, to prevent some of its annoying effects, thanks to their Marxist "science" of economic reactions; but they did not speak of socialist production, or of socialist economics; they preserved the categories of political economy, such as value and all the rest, but forgot the only true science: human emancipation. The stance of the *proletarian* revolutionaries was identical with the confrontation with real history as it was unfolding. Some, like Gorter, felt quite profoundly that, with the unleashing of the world war, the bourgeoisie had dealt an almost irreparable blow to the proletariat; that the war meant, in the final analysis, the accession of capitalism to world domination (see *Imperialism, the World War and Social Democracy*, 1914); and from that moment (Autumn of 1914) he foresaw that a revolution, breaking out after the war as a result of misery, would face nothing but difficulties. Just like Marx who, viewing the general situation, had "counseled against" the insurrection of the Commune, saying that it was condemned to failure. Certain individuals in our camp thus possessed the elements necessary to predict failure. But this did not prevent Marx, Gorter and Pannekoek (who may very well have shared Gorter's views) from participating in the movement from its very first moments; unlike Luxemburg, they did not apply the brakes (see below, for the increasingly negative role played by Luxemburg from the beginning of the war); they were present wherever the human community was being created, contributing their powers of classification and, while not holding back, not feeling the need to offer themselves as sacrificial victims to the holocaust, either.

If events are conceived in the light of their outcomes, all proletarian movements could be interpreted as phases of the social system's self-adaptation. From this perspective, the proletariat has failed up to this point, because capital was not sufficiently developed and dominated neither the entire world nor life as a whole; today, however, the total rule exercised by capital will lead to a rebellion which will be just as total. This vision of a finally pure communist revolution to be unleashed against a capitalism which is the absolute lord and master of everything skips over the present and past contradictions of the movement of capital and the communist movement. Furthermore, in order to provide this total rebellion of pure negation with a certain coherence, an effort is made to discover some faraway movements (obviously despised and falsified by the official "communist" movement which only knew how to speak of the insufficiency of the productive forces) towards the end of discovering within them the "*ne plus ultra*" of the total revolution, in comparison with which the Commune, the Russian Revolution, the German Revolu-

tion, etc., would be mere child's play. Peasant uprisings are sublimated, while the KAPD is reduced to a transitional step towards the real domination of capital.¹ This dual movement, which on the one hand looks towards the past for truly radical movements, further back into the night of time, and on the other hand seeks to "demystify" more recent movements (this second aspect being a result of the first) only shows that it has "demystified" the most recent of all revolutionary movements: the future revolution, which is to say that it has renounced it.

It is not from the perspective of an unrealized ideal perfection, but, to the contrary, from that of the contradictions within which the revolutionary movement of 1917-21 developed, that this history is intended to be written. The German Revolution interests us precisely because it is the disturbance which, due to its extent and its social-economic background, most closely resembles the situations which we may be called upon to confront. The problems faced by the German revolutionaries remain, without having been solved in practice. Capital has today managed to perfect its new and specific forms of domination, forms which it had begun to experiment with in the First World War.

II

It is symptomatic that the "German Revolution" has long remained in oblivion. The revolutionary movement, both within and outside of Germany, has been incapable of assimilating its past, particularly the great disturbance and rupture which broke out in 1917. Until fifteen years ago, the only serious study in French was that of A. and D. Prudhommeaux, *Spartacus et la Commune de Berlin 1918-19*, published in 1949 in the journal *Spartacus*: this study remained relatively unknown for a dozen years until The Old Mole Bookstore began to carry the *Spartacus* journal. C. Meijer's text, "Le mouvement des conseils en Allemagne", reproduced by *Internationalisme* in 1945 and later distributed by Informations et Correspondances Ouvrières (who republished it as a supplement to No. 101 of *ICO*), had a rather limited distribution. These two collections were the work of old left communists. Taken as a whole, however, the groups which descended from left communism hardly bothered with the clarification of the period spanning 1917 to 1921, preferring instead to elaborate later conceptual developments: reflection upon their *origins* would have been equivalent to self-examination concerning the "ideologization" of their movement. Instead of studying the communist left they preferred to recite the opposition between "council communism" and "party communism".

It is quite surprising that *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, over the course of its 40 issues (1949-65), did not publish even one study, however brief, on this theme.² A whole series of obstacles prevented the comprehension of the phenomenon of the communist left. It is known how Stalinism (and Stalin himself) rejected "Luxemburgism" as an infantile disorder, worthy of sympathy but not very strong compared to its "Bolshevik" brother. Luxemburg, for her part, became for many people the symbol of the German Revolution and the best fruit of the movement in the West. The Luxemburg cult has survived not only because of the social democrats who remember nothing about her except her democratic side (*Spartacus*, *Masses*) but also because of the revolutionaries who were misinformed concerning the gap which existed between Luxemburg

¹ See C. Juhl's preface to *L'Internationale Communiste Ouvrière* by Gorter, in *Invariance*, No. 5, New Series.

² For a critical study of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, particularly in regard to Russia, see P. Guillaume's postscript to P. Chaliou's *Rapports de production en Russie*, reprinted by La Veille Taupe, 1972.

and the communist left. The use of the term “Spartacist” to designate the movement’s most radical current was based on the simplified version of events provided by the bourgeois counter-revolution. The use of this term has mystified the history of its time, much as the use of the words “Marxist” and “anarchist”, employed anachronistically, were used to describe positions which were incompatible with their original meanings. Retrospection falsifies perspective.³ Finally, the Italian communist left, linked to Leninism, by interpreting the German Left as a variety of anarchosyndicalism,⁴ has sowed much confusion, abetted by the remnants of the German Left who were no more capable of understanding their own past.

German historians offer little information about the revolutionary movement after 1918. The works of Badia (*Histoire de l’Allemagne contemporaine* (Ed. Sociales, Vol. 1, on Weimar)) and especially *Le Spartakisme 1914-1919* (L’Arche, 1967), complemented by documents collected in *Les Spartakistes* (Juillard, 1966), are certainly useful. But the timeframe covered by Badia’s works on Spartacism begins in approximately August 1914 and ends immediately after the massacre of January 1919; neither the movement’s genesis before the war, nor its later evolution, is mentioned or explained. Considered only during the period of 1914-1918 and presented as the only radical current, Spartacism is completely falsified in Badia’s books. Badia always minimizes Luxemburg’s international dimension, while putting her on the highest plane in respect to Germany. Rather than a theoretician, he makes her a polemicist. His game has two facets: freezing the German Left under the heroic figure of “Rosa” and not taking her disagreements with Lenin seriously. Frölich’s⁵ and Nettl’s⁶ biographies of Luxemburg, in which one finds numerous important facts, unfortunately corroborate this tendency to privilege Spartacism. The greatest defect in Frölich’s book is his desire to reconcile Luxemburg and Lenin at any cost, and Nettl, despite solid documentation, conceals the second stage of her evolution.

These two works are nonetheless proof of the growing interest in the German events. Flechtheim’s volume on the German Communist Party⁷, despite Weber’s final contribution which comprises a comparative study of the social bases of the SPD and the KPD, is, rather than a history of a social movement, the history of an organization. But even this book gives short shrift to the communist left. Flechtheim falls into one of the two traps which lie in wait for the academic faced with the temptation to write either a *political* history or history *plain and simple*. The former is centered on the institutional expressions of social movements, and results, in the worst cases, in considering everything in the light of the evolution of one or another political group. The latter, with its preoccupation to avoid dogmatism, accumulates facts without any organizing principle. In the case of the proletarian workers movements, on the pretext of avoiding a “totalitarian” conception of history, it privileges a putative spontaneity (preferably not too violent or else only violent in the past) over centralized action and organization. The first procedure frequently proclaims itself to be Marxist and in fact constitutes an institutional theory of class struggle. The second is careful to *take no position* in regard to theoretical communism, it has a pretense to being independent and joyfully proclaims itself outrageously enough to be in favor of the formula whereby Marx declared that he was not a Marxist. It ignores the movement’s center of gravity: the passage to communism, which is, however, essen-

³ See Stafford’s bibliography of the works of P. Brousse in *From Anarchism to Reformism*, Weidenfeld-Nicolson, London, 1971, pp. 14-16.

⁴ Bordiga, *Les fondements du communisme révolutionnaire*, Programme Communiste

⁵ Frölich, *Rosa Luxemburg*, Maspero, 1965.

⁶ Nettl, *Rosa Luxemburg*, London, 1966, 2 Vols.; French translation published in 2 Vols. by Maspero.

⁷ Flechtheim: *Le PC allemande sous la République de Weimar*, Maspero.

tial; the proletariat can only be victorious by making that passage and organizing itself in accordance with that goal.

The Anglo-Saxon historians,⁸ who have often written about Germany, denounce “communist” totalitarianism, but reason like Stalinists, adopting the sub-leninist and bourgeois conception according to which the workers were only stirred up by the actions of “instigators”, that is, by the “party”. They attribute to the Communist International (CI) and its sections the leadership role which the latter believed in and aspired to perform. The social movement, according to these historians, only exists in the form of political structures. Its action is only real when it is contained within these structures: it cannot be known except by means of the dissemination of information from more or less recognized organizations (press, official declarations, congresses, meetings, emissaries, etc.). W. Angress, author of a documentary study of the period between 1921 and 1923⁹, focuses not on spontaneous movements, but “on the movement which is organized from without.” His book assiduously follows the KPD and the CI, and briefly Max Hölz, as they confront the actions of the government. The Ruhr insurrection of 1920 hardly attracts his attention, while he devotes 50 pages to the 1921 “March Action” and its repercussions. For these historians, insisting on the specificity of the CI and Bolshevism was not only an ideological necessity, but a way to frame events in accordance with their material interests as specialists, which consists in presenting the authorities and the corporations which finance their research with a *mystery so impenetrable* that only the experts (that is, themselves) can unravel it. Modern researchers approach the social question in the most sophisticated manner: they must make everything very complicated to justify the continuation of their labors. One group explores what is alien and strange about a different, totalitarian world; the others explore the infinite subtleties inherent in the richness of life and spontaneity “concealed” by a series of “alienations” which they have done nothing to demystify.

Broué’s monumental work, *La révolution en Allemagne 1917-23* (Minuit, 1972) is an excellent example of a *political* history. It is true, of course, that the author, in a recent article¹⁰, denied “having composed a history restricted to the level of the ‘leadership-elite’.” His objective is to study the “German communists in the light of their form of organization, within the framework of their party and their International, a framework which they, within that same movement, tried to construct in order to be victorious.” Note his declaration: “their party” is, of course, the KPD; “their International” is the CI. He has thus written a history of the KPD and the CI, the latter in the context of its relations with Germany. This leads him to a consideration of history based not on the actual events, but on the basis of what did not take place at all. His problem can be summarized as measuring the impact of the absence of the “party”. He bases himself on what did not exist in order to understand what did exist. The idealism of his

⁸ See, for example, the various volumes of *Communism in Europe*, edited by W. Griffith, MIT Press; F. Borkenau, *World Communism*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1962; B. Lazitch, *Lénine et la III^e Internationale*, La Baconnière, Neuchâtel, 1951; as well as the journals *Problèmes du Communisme, Est et Ouest*, and *Le Contrat Social* edited by B. Souvarine. The common basis for the thought of all these authors resides in a cultivated pessimism, which is quite well-expressed by the following formula of Montesquieu, quoted by Plamenatz in *German Marxism and Russian Communism*, Longmans, London, 1945: “One can, moreover, establish, as a general maxim, that every revolution which was predicted in advance never arrived.” For another perspective, see D. Mitchell, 1919: *Red Mirage*, J. Cape, London, 1970. See also R. Coper, *Failure of a Revolution*, Cambridge University Press, 1955.

⁹ *Stillborn Revolution: The Communist Bid for Power in Germany, 1921-23*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1963. See pages 105-66, concerning the March Action.

¹⁰ *Le mouvement social*, July-September 1973, pp. 89 and 95. For a critique of Broué’s book, see *Cahiers de l’ISEA*, December 1972, pp. 2454-56, and D. Authier, *La gauche allemande* (cf. *infra* No. 23).

investigation ultimately contaminates it to such a degree that he dedicates a disproportionate amount of space to facts of quite secondary importance (Radek's influence, for example). Other historians even went so far as to consider the (French) "ultra-left" through the lens of police history¹¹.

Studying the revolutionary events in Germany from the perspective of the absence of a truly Bolshevik party is somewhat like studying the human digestive tract from the perspective of the mouth and discovering that the cause of gastrointestinal illness is the absence of four stomachs in the patient. There was a radical difference between the nature of Russian society and that of German society in 1917 (see Chapter 1), which can be summarized as follows: 90% peasants in Russia, 35% in Germany. In this connection we have elsewhere illustrated (see our preface to the translation of Trotsky's *Rapport de la Délégation Siberienne*, Spartacus, 1970; see also *Nos Tâches Politiques*, also by Trotsky) how the Bolshevik party was a necessary product of the Russian social form and of the ambiguous (proletarian and bourgeois) movement which tried to completely change that form. Indigenous attempts to supersede the Bolshevik organizational concept in a revolutionary direction were as embryonic in Russia as were the indigenous German attempts to install an organizational practice which would have been of the same nature as Bolshevism. Germany possessed the seeds of a distinct revolutionary party in the KPD until the Heidelberg Congress (October 1919), and later in the KAPD and the other leftist organizations until the summer of 1921: one can demonstrate in this case what did not take place (the KAPD did not become *the* party of the German proletariat constituted as a class), but this explains nothing.

Broué's Trotskyist inclinations lead him to ignore "leftist" and "infantile" organizations and to instead treat the diverse vicissitudes of the social democratic left as a communist movement. For our part, it is not a matter of opposing our version to a Trotskyist version, or of correcting one theoretical con game with another. We declare right from the start that we are studying one aspect for us, the most important aspect of the events in question. The reader will understand on his own that he has not read merely the chronicle of the "communist left", but that of the epoch's most profound social movement. Broué has undertaken a partial study with general pretensions: we shall undertake a partial study of general interest. One will, of course, find an infinite quantity of useful information in Broué's book. But its erudition takes the form of mystification. Fixated on the theoretical expressions and established organizations but not on the contradictory social agitation and its more or less articulated manifestations, he devotes himself to the examination of parties and trade unions (especially the KPD), scorning to bother with a multitude of significant developments. So, how can it be doubted, after having perused his impressive bibliography, that he has told the whole truth? The method chosen, however, comes with a lie, by omission. His work on Germany reminds us of his previous book about the Bolshevik Party (published by Minuit), written during the epoch when Stalinist legends were still widely believed. The latter volume apparently provides a vast quantity of data. Yet it fails to attain the stature of less ambitious but more serious texts from a dual perspective: historical and revolutionary. The "results" of Broué's work are situated at the intersection point of the university and contemporary leftism. Broué's book could be of some use. In the end, however, one will learn less from it than one would from the *History of the German Army* by the "reactionary" Benoist-Méchin. Despite his anti-Semitic prejudices and his hatred of the "cruel Bolsheviks", he views his subject from the point of view of class (albeit not our class).¹²

¹¹ A. Kriegel, *Aux origines du communisme français*, Flammarion, 1969, p. 329.

¹² Volumes I and II, Albin Michel, 1964.

From a revolutionary perspective, the volume of selected texts of Pannekoek, ably presented by S. Bricianer, has cleared the way and disseminated knowledge of the German Left beyond a small circle of initiates.¹³ A serious historical work, it is nonetheless primarily a biography of Pannekoek presented through his texts, and devotes few pages to the period 1917-1921, focusing above all on the lessons derived from those years by Pannekoek, especially in *World Revolution and Communist Tactics* (1920). This focus, which is perfectly legitimate in a work of this kind, ultimately fails to portray the reality of that epoch's communist movement in Germany, and is dedicated instead to its later evolution and Pannekoek's retrospective reflections on that period. In this respect, Bricianer's work, while valuable for the reasons summarized above, is not satisfactory. While it is normal for a biography to follow the chronological evolution of its subject's life and works, theoretical analysis demands that one *not respect* the evolution of his positions, which ends in councilism. To conclude with the council (as opposed to the "party") may indeed be faithful to Pannekoek's thought, but it does not respond to revolutionary problems.

This persistent focus on *form* (council, party) facilitates the current efforts on behalf of capital's adaptation, which requires both the authoritarianism and regimentation transmitted by the degraded notion of the party so dear to the CP and numerous leftists, as well as the workers' pseudo-self-management and the illusory freedom which the idea of the "council" denotes for other leftists. The concept of self-management is even more dangerous when it is stripped of its workerism: "if (this conception) is to be true to its *postulates*, it must assert that with the evolution of capitalism which is constantly socializing all human activities those organizations which are responsible for realizing the principle of councilism will have to be located outside of the factories."¹⁴ The demand for workers' management refers to the management of *everyday life*.¹⁵ The real *content* of the communist movement lies elsewhere and is replaced by questions of form.

Previously denounced, the German Left enjoys a relative celebrity today thanks to its most flaccid and well-known aspects. This was only made possible by disconnecting its texts from their historical context. As an illustration of this tendency, we can be grateful for the work of R. Gombin¹⁶, who undertakes the task of fusing a series of different and *contradictory* contributions into a whole which is presented as the very trademark of what is most radical: but this is only possible after having separated these contributions from their respective sources. The essence of modernism consists in mixing the most radical aspects of revolutionary thought into an original synthesis while these aspects are, however, stripped of what makes, or made them, subversive, and taking delight in mere novelty. His secret lies in having associated Pannekoek with H. Lefebvre: this monstrous cocktail could only have been mixed by carefully erasing the *roots* of Pannekoek's ideas. Evoking the mass media in support of this connection would be superficial. Society has always fed on revolutionary thought, which, in turn, has also caused the latter to become insipid. It was not at all strange when the magazine *Minuit* published an extract from Pannekoek's *Workers Councils* in its seventh issue, having selected a section from that work which deals with democracy. But the councilist illusions of certain revolutionaries also facilitate

¹³ *Pannekoek et les conseils ouvriers*, EDI, 1969. English translation: *Pannekoek and the Workers' Councils*, Telos Press, St. Louis, 1978.

¹⁴ *Programme Communiste* (abridged), No. 56, p. 32.

¹⁵ "Pourquoi nous quittons ICO", January-February 1973.

¹⁶ *Les origines du gauchisme*, Seuil, 1972. English translation: *The Origins of Modern Leftism*, Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1975.

this absorption, as is demonstrated by the Preface to *Workers Councils* written by former members of the ICO.¹⁷ An introduction to the texts of P. Mattick situates Sorel among the “ultra-left”, alongside the “socialism of the producers”, “self-management” and “popular self-government”.¹⁸ The German Left defined itself precisely in contradistinction to syndicalism, including the “revolutionary” variety and, having suffered the effects of reactionary violence, did not accept the overabundant and misunderstood myths of the various experiences with soviets, councils or workers’ pseudo-autonomy. In 1919 and 1920, left communists knew quite well that the “party-form” had contributed no more than the “council-form” to the defeat of the revolutionary movement. In any event, the publication of *Workers Councils* signaled the recognition of the German Left, in its councilist form, by the intellectual world. The “official daily newspaper of the powerful” even devoted almost an entire page to a good exposition of Pannekoek’s work.¹⁹ Following in the footsteps of Djilas, Lukàcs and Garaudy, the German Left, in turn, joined the family of Marxist heretics considered to be worthy of notice. An obsession with “recuperation” (a superficial myth) would be absurd. The fashionable interest in the German Left is accompanied by a revolutionary curiosity and a positive concern with information and clarification. The phenomenon of vulgarized distortion is inevitable. It is precisely this real and new interest which obliges us to set the record straight.

The councilists have done little to shed light on the period of 1917-1921. But the German Left was one of Bordiga’s obsessions. It is surprising to consider that it was the journal *Invariance*, descended from the Italian Left, which in 1969 first republished a few essential texts, in particular almost all of Pannekoek’s text, *Révolution mondiale et tactique communiste*.²⁰ A subsequent issue of the same journal is almost entirely devoted to the German Left: it comprises a study, both historical and theoretical, which heralds the further evolution of the journal, which we shall examine in another work currently in progress.²¹ During the same period, a Danish group, also descended from the Italian Left, wrote an original study with a particular focus on the unions. A mere fifty pages long, it is one of the richest texts on this subject.²² Significantly, it is unfortunately little-known. It has been photocopied and distributed on a small scale, and we have made ample use of it despite its Leninist vestiges.

A long article in Number 58 of *Programme Communiste*, organ of the International Communist Party (the “orthodox” descendant of Bordigism), published in April 1973²³, dedicated to

¹⁷ Béliabaste, 1974.

¹⁸ R. Paris, Introduction to P. Mattick, *Intégration capitaliste et rupture ouvrière*, EDI, 1972

¹⁹ *Le Monde*, December 6, 1974.

²⁰ *Invariance*, old series, No. 7, which also contains: *Manifestes des CP et CLP des EU (1919)*, *La victoire du marxisme* (Gorter, 1920), *Pensée et action communistes dans la III^e Internationale* (S. Pankhurst, 1919) with an editorial note by *Il Soviet*, *Le mouvement communiste internationale* and *La situation en Allemagne et le mouvement communiste*, published in 1920 in *Il Soviet*, *Le KAPD au III^e Congrès mondiale* and the report of the KAPD’s Central Committee of July 31, 1921, *Le principe de l’antagonisme entre le gouvernement des Soviets et le prolétariat* (KAI), *Pour la question du parlementarisme* by Lukàcs (1920), the *Thèses sur le parlementarisme* by the Amsterdam Bureau and the *Thèses* of the Congress of the Belgian communists (May 1920).

²¹ *Ibid.*, new series, No. 1, “Le KAPD et le mouvement prolétarien”.

²² *Kommunistik Program*, *La question syndicale et la gauche allemande dans la III^e Internationale*, Bagsvaerd, 1972. See also Note No. 1.

²³ Journal of the International Communist Party (“Bordigist”), No. 58, “La gauche marxiste d’Italie et le mouvement communiste internationale”. The same issue also reproduces a series of articles published in 1920 in *Il Soviet* concerning Germany and the CI. Some chapters of the *History of the Italian Left* (2 Vols., in Italian) have been edited and translated in Nos. 28, 29, 31, 33, 59 and 60 of *PC*.

reassuring the faithful who remained in the ICP after the schism brought about by the sanctions imposed upon the Danes and *Invariance*, who had demanded and practiced “free inquiry” (particularly in regard to its principle opponent, the German Left), highlights the principle points of the German Left’s defeat. However, whereas the Danes consider the German Left as a product of the proletariat, the ICP’s article is primarily a study of the theoretical positions of the various actors, totally separated from their contexts (which confirms an absolute bad faith when it is compared to the pains Bordiga took to exculpate-explain, by means of endless expository forays, the most insignificant and the not-so-insignificant theoretical deviations of Lenin).²⁴ Proletarian action (quite well-perceived elsewhere) is nothing but a backdrop in this article. The Left is judged on the basis of its “principles” and its adversaries are preferred for the rigor of their profession of the Marxist faith.

A collection edited by one of the authors of the present text, *La Gauche allemande, Textes*, reveals a German Left which is much more strict, dictatorial and “party-centered” than today’s councilists, as well as the image the latter entertain of their progenitor. This collection’s post-script focuses on the involution of *council communism to councilism*.²⁵ We should also mention a good collection of biographies, recently published in French and brought together in one volume by the councilists.²⁶ But this list is already out of date.

Everything we have said up to this point sheds light on our method. This work on the German Left is obviously an intellectual work and its authors are in this case intellectuals but, just like other studies of this subject, even the most academic, this study is not the fruit of pure intellect, of the closed logic of “research”; the German Left’s anti-intellectualist critiques were perfectly justified when they attacked the domination of the intelligentsia, when they targeted the pretension of a certain kind of intellectual of being superior to the rest of mortal mankind, and especially the working class “rank and file”, when such intellectuals fought for their alleged right to lead the movement. Our work has no pretension to autonomy²⁷, which for us is not a goal in and of itself; it has no meaning except as part of a movement which goes far beyond it. The renascent radical movement must appropriate its own history. Nor do we frame what we see in the forms in which spoiled intellectuals take pleasure:

²⁴ *Structure économique et sociale de la Russie d’aujourd’hui*, L’Oubli, 1975.

²⁵ *Invariance*, supplement to No. 2 (n.d.), with a postscript by D. Authier, where one can read: the 1920 Program and the *Appeal to the German Proletariat* of the KAPD; the KAPD’s interventions in the 3rd Congress of the CI; the Program of the AAUD and extracts from its *Guidelines*; the AAUD-E’s *Guidelines*; Rühle’s *The Revolution is Not a Party Matter*; and an extract from the *Guidelines* of the KAI. See Part Two of this book, below, for English translations of these AAUD, AAUD-E and KAI texts. English translations of the interventions of the KAPD delegation in the 3rd Congress of the CI may be viewed at *Wage Slave X’s Revolutionary Anti-Capitalist Homepage* website. An English translation of the Program of the KAPD is available at the website of the International Communist Current (www.internationalism.org). Rühle’s famous text has been posted in English translation on several websites and is readily available.

²⁶ *Conseils ouvriers en Allemagne 1917-21*, Vroutsch, Serie La Marge, No. 9-11, 1973, which contains: *Le mouvement des conseils en Allemagne*, (ICO, No. 101); Anton Pannekoek, by Mattick (*Lénine philosophe*, Spartacus, 1970); Karl Korsch, by Mattick (*Cahiers de l’ISEA*, No. 140); Otto Rühle, by Mattick (*Cahiers du communisme des conseils*, No. 2); as well as *Landauer et Mühsam, essais de biographies, Notes sur la République des conseils de Bavière, Les conseils ouvriers en Alsace*. In English, see: “Anton Pannekoek (1873-1960)”, by Paul Mattick (in Pannekoek’s *Lenin as Philosopher*, Merlin Press, London, 1975); “Karl Korsch: His Contribution to Revolutionary Marxism” and “Otto Rühle and the German Labour Movement”, by Paul Mattick (in Mattick’s *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*, M. E. Sharpe, Inc., White Plains, 1978).

²⁷ Marx: *Oeuvres*, Gallimard, Vol. II, 1968, p. 81.

“Our purpose is not literary or aesthetic production. Comrades and readers do not have to waste their time evaluating a passage, a page or a text which we publish, but they should always take into account the relation between the different parts of the labors undertaken by our small movement...”

(Bordiga, *El Programa Comunista*, 1953)

In the following text, the reader will not read the history of the German Revolution, or even a reference work on the German Left. Our procedure consists in an attempt to extract the leading thread and the essential mechanisms from our field of study. We have not hesitated to go over facts already studied by others, often in detail, or to rapidly pass over some realities which have since become more accessible in more recent works. These works are “points of reference” for following the history of the left. Another kind of approach, which is also useful, would consist in giving more depth to the immediate reality of these movements by conducting a study of their everyday activities, based, for example, on their press and available archival documentation.

It is not enough to rehabilitate a hidden past. A subversive movement has existed, and still exists, whose action and expression have been “hidden” by official “discourse” (state, trade union, bureaucracy, politicians, academics, judiciary, schools, etc.). But the simple unveiling of its expression is not in itself revolutionary. Its mere expression, that is, the only thing that remains of it, is not revolutionary unless it is put to a new use: not necessarily in the form of “action” in the strict sense of the word, but simply as a theory which once again embraces events within its framework. It is of little account that a “liberation” movement existed long ago: capital placidly accepts the reestablishment of the truth concerning Luddism or the German Left as long as this changes nothing. The world begins to tremble when the revolutionary facts of the past resurface in the practice of a renascent subversive movement. Only the dead bury the dead. Fashion and pedagogy (often united), on the other hand, take advantage of ideas when they are dead, or in the form in which they are no longer alive (councilism, for the German Left). Ideas die, too. A theory is dead when the movement which gave it life has disappeared, but it can be reborn when a movement arises which is its authentic continuation; then, however, it appears in the unpleasant form of a movement of “left fascists”, “hooligans”, “a society of thieves”, and other barbarians, like those who were called “Spartacists” in the epoch which concerns us in this text. *Socialism or Barbarism*, ignored when it was subversive, is becoming fashionable, now that its old theoreticians (Chaulieu, Lefort and Lyotard) have submitted to the rules of the game of modernism.

Any expression which is not an action, in the sense that it does not contribute to the clarification of current revolutionary problems, situates itself *within* capital. It shows that its author has no real need to change his situation. The record of the past plays the same ideological role for him, one of substitution and illusory excess, which politics plays for others. This past could be a future: one could take pleasure in the description of what is to come. What contributes to the revolution is neither the evocation of the past, nor of the world of the future, but the present effort to connect reality to both. It is not our intention to give lessons to historians. They can only be what they are. But one can and one must say what they are, and distinguish between thought which is merely critical and thought which is revolutionary. It is subversive to show how slavery constituted a form of progress for both the slaves and for humanity as a whole; it is conservative to restrict oneself to denouncing it. The same thing is also true within a mode of production, especially when one takes into account the shrewdness and adaptive capabilities of capital. Who defends Thiers against the Commune these days? Who reduces the War of 1914 to the activities of the Pan-Germanists? In relation, however, to anything that still has a direct role to play in the preservation of the social order, the issues remain obscure; the war of

1939-45, for example, which proves that it is the most important and the most anti-revolutionary war, whose consequences are still with us today and which must by all means be preserved. This is particularly true of anything which refers to “fascism”, where clarification is still a threat to the established order, and where mystification rules.²⁸ There is an abundance of intellectual methods to *avoid* such subjects: quantitative and statistical history fit perfectly with a “liberated” history operating at the level of everyday life, or with a history of opinions. One need only consult the catalogue of history journals to see that everything is studied, but almost never what is essential.

To its own misfortune, revolutionary theory plays a double role: revolutionary and... non-revolutionary. By seriously presenting the real problems faced by society, it helps society adapt to these problems. The mass media *accumulate* information with the intention of incessantly reproducing capitalist relations. How could one not take a position in relation to all the critiques, including the most virulent ones, which form part of *capitalist society's auto-critique*, despite the occasional honesty of their authors? Each major capitalist country has its own way of absorbing revolutionary theory. In England and the United States, and in Germany in a slightly different way, *monographs* and the fondness for exact empirical research are dominant: in Germany, there are numerous monographs on the period of 1918-1920, categorized according to region or city. In France, the “theoretical” current frequently predominates, privileging interpretation, in the name of a particular school of thought, over the examination of the facts. Theoretical communism met its global downfall, in every country, each with its own traditions of thought, not because of useless polemics, but due to the very nature of its task. It is obvious that only a rebirth of the movement which is far from being obvious or automatic will limit the inevitable absorption of its theory. Meanwhile, the discovery of new theories, bowdlerized versions of revolutionary themes which had been developed by the German communist left, among others, will not cease. The academic and the political worlds (the worlds of dogmatism: Stalinism, for example) will merge and multiply. The goal of academic reflection is to pose problems in order to discover other problems, just as cars are manufactured so as to be hauled to the junkyard after ten years and to be replaced by others. Its labors are endless, although the State and Capital take from it whatever they find useful. Theoretical communism does not attempt to know or to say everything, but to know enough to show the leading thread of its times and to point out, at any given moment, the outlook for the future. It knows what questions to pose, because it feels a real need to discover them (which is not to say that it always does so or does so immediately). Others have just as pressing a need to constantly beat around the bush. The researcher makes his living by researching; he negates himself as a researcher when he makes a discovery. In this manner one problem must engender another. These people and their companions in their wearisome labors seem to distinguish themselves simply by the different forms given to the same ideas: but a different form of expression in fact contains a different content. They retain only the critical aspect of the revolutionary attitude, forgetting its

²⁸ For the period as a whole, we recommend the bibliographies of *The German Left...* and those of the excellent book by H. Gruber, *International Communism in the Era of Lenin*, Fawcett, Connecticut, 1967, which brings together a well-organized collection of documents. A general exposition can be found in G. Landauer's history of world socialism (in English) and Droz's history (PUF, Vol. II). See also the issue of *Cahiers de l'ISEA* devoted to the councils, in press; O. Ihlau, *Die Roten Kämpfer*, A. Hain, Meisenheim am Glan, 1969; F. Jung (former member of the KAPD), *Der Weg nach Unten*, Neuwied, 1961; C. Klein, *Weimar*, Flammarion, 1968; K. Meyer, *Karl Liebknecht, A Man without a Country*, Public Affairs Press, Washington, D.C., 1957; for a critical bibliography, with particular emphasis on German history after 1918, see G. Castellán, *Revue historique*, April-June 1970. For a brief study from a revolutionary point of view, see the *Revue théorique du Courant Communiste Internationale*, No. 2.

prospective aspects. Instead of indicating the practice which corresponds with the theory, they conclude with the need of always inventing something new. The revolution demolishes idols, but never in the manner of these false iconoclasts.

Chapter 1

Germany in 1914

Capitalism and the Proletariat

In 1914, Germany was well on the way to becoming the world's leading economic power. It was particularly characterized by its new capitalist development, equipped with the most modern plant and infrastructure. Its labor productivity, achieved by means of the application of the most modern technologies to the production process, was higher than that of the other capitalist countries: the intensity and skill of its labor required less labor time to manufacture the same product.

The ratio of constant to variable capital was higher in Germany than in the other capitalist countries. The commercial prices of German products were lower than the average prices on the world market: Germany extracted and appropriated part of the surplus value produced by other fractions of world capital, or, expressed more precisely, of the world proletariat. This appropriation of surplus value not produced in Germany gave German capitalism a greater capacity for accumulation, modernization and new productivity gains. It also allowed a significant rise in wages benefiting not just a minority, but all the workers in Germany. One can only speak of a "labor aristocracy" in the case of professionals and highly-skilled workers (see below for discussion of this notion). This situation enjoyed by German capitalism formed the basis for the reformist politics of the German proletariat up to 1914, as well as that of the reformist socialist party, and of the German trade unions which were among the largest in the world; the following table provides comparative rates of unionization in the respective labor forces of three large capitalist countries:¹

	Germany	Britain	United States
Year	%	%	%
1910	8	14	6
1920	42	43	12
1930	24	22	7

Only the survival of these organizations, which had become autonomous in relation to the proletariat, gave any real force to the persistence of what has been called the "reformist spirit" which still held sway over the majority of the German proletariat after 1918. Between 1871 and 1913, real per capita income doubled in Germany and Great Britain, and tripled in the United States. There seemed to be no net progress, however, during the decade leading up to 1914 in Germany, England or France: instead, economic progress for the German workers was measured by the reduction of working time.² Wage differentials between skilled and unskilled workers rose between 1871 and 1913, falling only after 1914. These differentials fell from 31% to 18% in the railroads, and from 25% to 10% in construction (in Berlin, Hamburg and Stettin) between 1914 and 1918. At the same time, real wages decreased by 35% between 1914 and

¹ Bry: *Wages in Germany 1871-1945*, Princeton University Press, 1960, p. 268.

² *Ibid.*, Chapter 6, pp. 266-322.

1918: in 1921, they were still 10% below their 1914 level.³ It is likely that the pre-1914 division⁴ between skilled workers (organized in trade unions) and unskilled workers (usually unorganized) gave way after the war to a division between employed and unemployed workers, even though the possession of a job did not necessarily correspond with reformism, nor did unemployment necessarily correspond with revolutionary inclinations. The “unions” (AAU), born after 1919, consisted of employed workers, as was clearly demonstrated by the fact that they were composed of revolutionary *factory* organizations.

It was the relatively most modern characteristics of German capitalism which provided the conditions most conducive to the success of the proletarian revolution, and which made Germany the bastion of the world revolution. Not only was its organic composition of capital (proportion of constant to variable capital) higher than that of any other country, but the same was true of the relation between fixed and circulating capital.^{5,6} The enormous importance, both in relative and absolute terms, of “dead” labor accumulated by past generations, which confers upon the current generation a greater net labor productivity, is a precondition which enormously facilitates the transition to communism, in which all needs must be satisfied and in which the labor time necessary for the preservation of life must, consequently, be considerably reduced. Communism is not, however, generalized automation, but an equilibrium between the “naturalization of man” and the “humanization of nature”, and it is foreseeable that the inauguration of a human life will not only reduce the need for objects, but will also set human activity free, and leave behind the memory of the parsimony of “so many hours” spent under the wage regime.⁷ The coexistence of the reformist practice of the German working class along with certain material preconditions for communism would be manifested in such demands as the six or even the five hour day.

Another consequence of Germany’s high level of productivity was the fact that large factories clearly comprised the most representative sector of German capitalism. Automated machinery does not require professional workers who understand their jobs; the *OS* (unskilled workers) predominated in this sector: the 20,000 workers of the Leuna chemical works were typical representatives of this phenomenon (see Chapter 15). These *OS* were located on the fringes of the traditional trade union domain, which exclusively preserved its trade-defined structure from the 19th century. Organization by trade was a principle which ruled both reformist as well as revolutionary trade unionism. The *OS* were not part of the old trade-oriented world of the skilled workers. The concrete aspect of their labor, which is the concrete realization of the abstract and indifferent character of commodity-producing labor as such (see *Capital*, Vol. I, Chapter I), stimulates no interest in them at all. Wage labor, in which man exchanges his labor power as if it were something distinct from himself, preserves the individual as a man crushed and dissolved by the means of production in the form of capital. One of the new concrete qualities of labor in the large factories was its *collective* character: the product was not the result of the efforts of anyone in particular, but of the common efforts of all who work in the factories. Any one per-

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

⁴ Marks: *Journal of Modern History*, September 1939, “The Sources of Reformism in the Social-Democratic Party of Germany, 1890-1914”.

⁵ Reference is made to *Capital*, which we cannot summarize here.

⁶ Fixed capital: capital which does not circulate in the sense of the “circulation” of capital. A fleet is fixed capital. See Vol. II.

⁷ Marx: *Fondements de la critique de l'économie politique*, Anthropos, 1968, Vol. II, p. 215. Dauvé: *Communisme et “question russe”*, SET-Tête de Feuilles, 1972, pp. 162-71; and *Le mouvement communiste*, Champ Libre, 1972.

son's labor cannot become pleasant nor can it be considered as a useful personal contribution unless it is experienced as a moment of a whole to which one feels connected. Wage labor, however, wherein man, in order to live, sells his labor power, preserves the individual as such and prevents the formation of a community which can only be the result of a system of communist production. Wage labor does, of course, have a collective dimension, but it pertains to capital: the only really existing community is that of the reproduction of capital.

Prior to the war, this mass of unskilled workers did not form part of the German trade unions, which had between two and three million members. There were two parallel trade union organizations. The socialist *Zentrale*, by far the larger of the two, brought together various "free trade unions" in a federation known in 1918-1919 as the ADGB (General Federation of German Trade Unions). The other federation, the anarchosyndicalist or revolutionary syndicalist *Zentrale*, the FVDG (Federation of Free German Trade Unions), became the FAUD at the end of 1919 with the entry of numerous recently-created factory organizations (see Chapter 9). Before 1914, the sector which provided the basis for both *Zentrales* was composed of workers in the skilled trades: the FVDG was largely based among the construction workers.

The *OS*, on the other hand, together with the "revolutionary shop stewards" who were still members of the trade unions (see Chapter 4), created the "factory organizations" during the war, and later formed the autonomous "left" radical organizations of the proletariat: the AAUs (General Workers Unions). The trade unions could no longer ignore this majority of the proletariat, even though only the most radical minority of the *OS* joined the AAU. The skilled workers, previously reticent about admitting unskilled workers into the trade unions, welcomed them after 1919. The trade unions, which in fact adopted an organizational structure based on factory and industry, soon had nine million members. This development was also encouraged by pressure from capitalists who refused to enter into contracts with workers who were not members of the trade unions (see the KAPD *Program*).

The enormous growth of the trade unions proves that, despite the strength of its radical currents, the German proletariat was still, taken as a whole, reformist. One cannot speak of a labor aristocracy except in the case of a few sectors (generally the skilled, and some others as a result of their particular situations) which defended certain privileges against the other more numerous sectors (today such a division exists on an international scale). But even the most privileged sectors of the proletariat can become seeds of revolution if capital is compelled to submit their privileges to examination; just as, conversely, the other non-privileged sectors are not permanently compelled to be revolutionary, and it cannot be said that when they act in a reformist manner they do so because they are manipulated by corrupt or bribed elements. One cannot be manipulated for decades unless one is effectively manipulable. In his pamphlet on imperialism, Gorter treated all proletarians, without distinction, as "lackeys". These sectors benefited from the super-profits obtained by capital thanks to its favorable or dominant position in the world market. One cannot speak of a "minority" within the German proletariat except to designate the minority of *revolutionaries* confronting the workers as a whole.

Understood as a minority which lives at the expense of the workers movement ("bureaucrats" of the party, the trade unions, the cooperatives, etc.), the labor aristocracy is a definite sociological reality. But its activities do not explain everything.⁸ Although materially favored, certain sectors can behave in the most radical fashion, since economic determination is not only a question of wages. During the war, a large number of metal workers were supporters of peace. One cannot refer to the "economy", or the "spirit", but only to the totality of real relations. As

⁸ For a critique of the thesis of the "labor aristocracy", see T. Cliff: *Les racines économiques du réformisme*, photocopy, Paris, 1969.

long as the war seemed inevitable, the mobilized worker supported it and actively participated in it, since the solidarity of the trenches was the only tangible reality remaining to him. The worker who was still at his workbench, often due to his skilled status, and, consequently, because he belonged to a privileged category, was subjected to more difficult working conditions and rebelled against the war, which for him was not so much an experienced reality as a threat: he might be mobilized.

The organization of workers into *unions* (*unionen*, in German; not to be confused with the “unions” of the English-speaking world, whose counterparts in this text shall be referred to on all occasions as “trade unions” tr. note) or councils, formed especially during the extensive mass strike movement, corresponds to the transition from the “tool-machine phase” to the “specialized machinery phase”⁹: an epoch during which the trade unions passed from reformism (although not yet integrated into the State), to systematic collaboration, and capital passed from surrounding life, to totally penetrating life. At this juncture the proletariat made the workplace the site of its attempt to achieve unity because the workplace was not yet totally conquered by capital.¹⁰ Many workers still worked on tool-machines. They were trained within the old trade union framework, and demonstrated the results of this training in the factories where they worked, where they preserved a relative autonomy and carried out many tasks. This stage of *large-scale mechanized industry* progressively yielded later, with the war and then during the twenties, at an accelerated pace to the stage of the *OS* and of the scientific organization of labor. There is no rupture between these two mutually interconnected periods; the struggles which developed immediately after the war, however, comprised the meeting point of the two phases.¹¹ In the United States and Canada, within a more modern capitalism, the most intense proletarian movement arose among the *OS* (who were often recent immigrants)¹² who tried to unite in the IWW (see Chapter 9). The councils constituted an attempt on the part of the proletarians to form autonomous groups: they were forced to do so; there was no other way to carry out any kind of struggle, even a simple reformist struggle. In their collaboration with the bourgeoisie, the trade unions went so far as to give their approval to the prohibition of strikes, and even prohibited them themselves; the councils were therefore above all compelled to undertake the tasks which the trade unions no longer fulfilled. Their form (organization by factory, uniting organized and unorganized workers) was better-adapted for an effective reformist struggle against modern capitalism. But the control of the entire productive apparatus by workers councils is in no way revolutionary if the workers limit themselves to administering what has fallen into their hands in the same way as before, or even better, with greater efficiency than before. Capitalist society, although managed by the workers themselves, would still be capitalist.

The German State

Germany underwent an abortive bourgeois and national revolution at the beginning of the sixteenth century. The Peasant War, which was also a semi-communist movement, was at the same time the military organization of the aspirations of a stratum of middle peasants who (like the bourgeoisie) wanted to eliminate feudal obstacles to agricultural production and its com-

⁹ Lefranc: *Histoire du travail et des travailleurs*, Flammarion, 1957, pp. 474-76.

¹⁰ *Invariance*, No. 6

¹¹ *Lutte de classes*, September-October 1974, “Les rapports sociaux communistes”.

¹² In his *Imperialism...* Lenin referred to the considerable number of immigrants employed in all the industrial countries of the epoch.

mercialization. This bourgeois revolution was aborted, in part due to fear of the intervention of the popular classes, and its failure strengthened the power of the nobility. The patchwork parcelization of Germany would last for another two centuries.¹³ The same phenomenon was repeated in 1848. The bourgeoisie, fearing among other things the workers uprisings, did not dare to make their revolution. Rather than a result of foreign pressure (particularly that of Russia, which was exaggerated by Marx), this was more due to the weakness of those domestic factors favoring German unification, which condemned Germany to await its national revolution.¹⁴

The German State was an expanded version of the Prussian bureaucracy which was renovated during the Bismarck era, that is, after the wake-up call delivered to all of Germany in 1848. It was “imperial absolutism”: the state’s ministries, whose officials were nominated by and answerable to the emperor, were staffed by cooptation from above. There was, of course, a parliament, but it was deprived of the essential “executive” power and was consequently impotent. German unification was quite recent. Each *Land*¹⁵ had its parliament, the *Landtag* (diet). In the Prussian *Land*, which alone represented one-half of Germany, elections were held according to “estates” analogous to those of the Middle Ages. The population was divided into, and voted as, members of orders or estates (*Stand*) (nobles, landowners, peasants, city-dwellers, etc.). Each estate received an equal number of representatives. In the 1908 Prussian elections, the SPD obtained six seats with 600,000 votes, while the Conservatives obtained 212 seats with 4,000,000 votes. In Hamburg, Germany’s second-largest city and Europe’s busiest port, whose population doubled between 1890 and 1910, a similar electoral system prevailed: after 1890, one-third of its *Reichstag* deputies were socialists, but only twenty out of 160 delegates to Hamburg’s local diet belonged to the SPD.¹⁶ Germany would not know real parliamentarism until the latter had become fully counterrevolutionary: having lost all social significance with bourgeois unification, its sole function then became the counterrevolution.

The recent character of Germany’s national unification would also be demonstrated by the fact that, as a whole, the German labor movement would think and act at the level of the *Land*, even after 1918. The revolution would take power in various *Länder*, but never in the whole Reich. “One of the characteristic aspects of the German workers movement has been its fragmentation into various powerful centers, potent and concentrated, but relatively isolated from each other. This situation, so unlike that of France, for example, is the result of the absence of a single political capital...”¹⁷ At its formation the German State was conceded a major role in intervening in favor of the workers (the Bismarckian social laws), but it was kept at a distance from industry, over which it exercised a weaker control than the State did in the other developed countries. In 1914, it badly organized the transition to the war economy, and barely integrated the occupied regions of Belgium and France. German “State capitalism” was economi-

¹³ Engels: *La guerre des paysans*; N. Cohn: *Les fanatiques de l'apocalypse*, July 1962 (in English: *The Pursuit of the Millenium*, revised and expanded edition, Oxford University Press, New York, 1970); see, also, Debord’s critique of the latter in *La société du spectacle*, Champ Libre, 1971, pp. 93-94 (Thesis 38). In English, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Zone Books, New York, 1995.

¹⁴ For a critique of Marx’s positions in 1848, see Korsch: *Marxisme et contre-révolution*, Seuil, 1975.

¹⁵ The *Länder* are the various states which comprise Germany (Prussia, Bavaria, etc.); the *Reich* is the German nation organized as one State.

¹⁶ R. Comfort: *Revolutionary Hamburg*, Stanford University Press, 1966, Chapter II.

¹⁷ PC, No. 58, p. 120.

cally inefficient during the war years of 1914 to 1918.¹⁸ Trade-union/army collaboration would begin during the war, since these were the two institutions capable of joint action on a national scale to direct available labor power to those sectors where it was most needed. The government of Hamburg therefore passed, during the conflict, from civilian to military hands due to the incompetence of the bourgeoisie: it was in order to mitigate the latter's failings that the army assumed such an important centralizing role.¹⁹

The Inconclusive Bourgeois Revolution

The German bourgeoisie had a seminal weak point whose causes were summarized by Marx.²⁰ The bourgeoisie received the framework for its later development (the Reich) from the hands of the Prussian military-bureaucratic apparatus, upon which it was utterly dependent for its survival. Hence the contradictory coexistence of a capitalism which was highly-developed for its epoch and a bourgeoisie which was economically powerful but acted within the confines of a political form inherited from the end of the Middle Ages: an absolute bureaucratic monarchy, alongside a powerless parliament.

Similarly, the German bourgeoisie would receive democracy not from the hands of its own class but from those of another. It was the proletariat which would carry the democratic revolution of 1918 to victory. Until June 1920, the first governments of the new democratic and parliamentary Germany were dominated by the SPD, the largest workers party in the world, and as such the best-prepared to repress the proletarian revolution. As in Russia, these governments would call themselves the "Council of Peoples Commissars". The socialist leader Ebert would be the first president of the republic. Until 1933, many provincial governments and diets (in the *Länder*), particularly in Prussia, would be dominated by the social democrats. The next form of the political rule of German capitalism would, furthermore, be denominated as national-*socialist*.

The struggle for democracy was one of the principle components of the SPD. The need for a democratic transformation of the German State, and the participation of the proletarians in this struggle (which implies violence) placed the German revolutionary movement after 1918, despite its novel aspects (which comprise the subject matter at the heart of this text) in line with the revolutionary movements of the 20th century. The social revolution was pursued by way of the democratic political revolution.²¹

¹⁸ Sternberg: *Le conflit du siècle*, Seuil, 1958, p. 186.

¹⁹ Comfort, Chapter III.

²⁰ *Textes 1842-47*, Spartacus, 1970.

²¹ See *Le Roi de Prusse et la réforme sociale*, in *Textes 1842-47*, and *Invariance*, No. 10. In English, see "Critical Notes on the Article 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian'", in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, tr. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, Penguin Books, New York, 1992.

Chapter 2

Origins of the German Workers Movement

The Impact of Social Democracy

Germany possessed the world's most important socialist party; no other could compare with it. The SPD (*Sozial-demokratische Partei Deutschlands*) counted a million members and four million voters in 1914. It was also the largest political party in Germany. This was primarily the result of the numerical importance of the German working class; Germany's workers comprised a large proportion of its population, although less than that comprised by Great Britain's workers. Germany was more working class than France (which was still largely rural) and the United States, where the tertiary sector underwent rapid development.¹ The SPD's influence can also be explained by the fact that the proletariat was an interested party in the struggle for democracy, and conceived of the socialist party as a suitable instrument for conducting this struggle. Finally, due to the bourgeoisie's weakness, Germany did not have a strong liberal party such as existed in England, or a radical party as in France. The SPD appeared to non-proletarian democrats as the only party which effectively fought for democracy: one of the best "proofs" of this was Bismarck's prohibition of the party between 1878 and 1890.² The SPD represented this extensive constituency quite well, since its activity to improve the condition of the workers in the dominant society was limited to reformist and parliamentary action. Even before 1914, basically since its birth at the Gotha Congress of 1875³, the SPD, considered in all of its aspects, was not a revolutionary organization. The talk of "treason" in 1914 shows that it was judged exclusively by what it *said*. Pannekoek's analyses, the only radical contributions on this terrain, prove that there was no discontinuity between the periods before and after August 4, 1914.⁴

Pannekoek was Dutch, and his native country's small size helped him to view things from an international perspective. In Germany, on the other hand, the SPD totally dominated the entire political horizon of the various tendencies which claimed to be Marxist, including, among others, the most radical elements around Rosa Luxemburg.⁵ Overawed by the power of the "party", the left which represented approximately 15% of the SPD having originated in a critique of the reformist practice of the *leadership* of the party in all fields, and never abandoning the labor of Sisyphus of trying to unseat that leadership, did not take the decisive step to-

¹ *Traité de sociologie du travail*, Colin, Vol. I, 1961, pp. 220-21.

² Marx and Engels: *Textes sur l'organisation*, Spartacus, 1970, pp. 120 et seq.

³ See the famous (and much misunderstood: see below) *Critique du programme de Gotha* by Marx, as well as the other documents collected in the Ed. Sociales edition of 1971. In English, see "Critique of the Gotha Program", in *Karl Marx: The First International and After. Political Writings: Volume 3*, ed. David Fernbach, Penguin Books, New York, 1992.

⁴ *Théorie marxiste et tactique révolutionnaire* (1913), quoted in *Pannekoek et les conseils ouvriers*, as well as his 1915 text, summarized in Chapter 4 below. For an English translation of the entire text of Pannekoek's *Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics*, see *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism*, ed. D.A. Smart, Pluto Press, London, 1978, pp. 50-73.

⁵ Luxemburg, Mehring, Vandervelde: *Grèves sauvages et spontanéité des masses*, Spartacus, 1970, with an introduction by P. Guillaume.

ward schism. The left in its entirety would wait until it would be excluded from the party, after 1914, to forge its own organizations. In addition, there were also, prior to 1914, “revisionist” (Bernstein) and “orthodox” (Kautsky) tendencies: the latter was apparently the majority faction. But it soon became clear, after August 4, 1914, that the majority was more right-wing than the “revisionists”. Bernstein, moreover, would be excluded as a “leftist” opponent of the leadership.

It is necessary to closely examine the positions and activities of Rosa Luxemburg during the revolutionary period as well as the previous years. Because she was heavily criticized by the Leninists, and because she criticized Lenin and the Bolsheviks both long before as well as during the 1917 revolution, proletarian revolutionaries often tend to make her the spokesperson and to consider her as *the theoretician* (and as a model of practice while she was alive) of the authentically revolutionary current. This opinion was nourished by the left factions themselves, which soon overlooked the fact that they had opposed her at the KPD’s founding congress. The clarification of the history of the communist left in Germany leads to the destruction of the legend to which her death gave birth.

Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin’s organizational fetishism (see *Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy*) was one aspect of her critique of workers organizations. The basis of her critique was still more clearly expounded in *The Mass Strike, Party and Trade Unions*: the organizations, and particularly their leaderships, necessarily followed in the wake of the spontaneous movements of the proletariat, and usually even tried to restrain these movements. This was in absolute conformity with what can normally be verified with respect to the relation between the established organizations of the working class and the movements of the working class (whether or not they lead to revolutions). Luxemburg correctly saw this as inevitable, but did not for that reason cease to view the parties, trade unions, etc., which were formed in the non-revolutionary period and which embraced large sectors of the proletariat, as organizations which are perhaps bad, but ultimately are still class organizations, which the proletariat must rejuvenate during the revolution. This is why she opposed the Dutch Left, which split from the reformist Dutch party (see Chapter 3), as well as the German “left radicals”, instead calling upon the masses to “reconquer” their organization (the SPD). According to her, one must not separate oneself from the masses even when they follow the “worst” workers party.

Her position was based on two theses which had proven to be increasingly false: first, that the “workers” organizations only possess a relative autonomy in respect to the workers movement; and second, “the masses” are, at bottom, revolutionary (or at least never counterrevolutionary).

The German Revolution has clearly proven what various “lefts” had intuited: the workers parties had acquired so much autonomy (in respect to the revolutionary movement, but not to capital) that they were the most skilled architects of the counterrevolution; in this manner, the revolutionary proletariat was defeated by the counterrevolutionary proletariat.

Luxemburg wanted to establish a compromise between these two elements. The Bolsheviks branded her position as centrist at the Zimmerwald Conference on the war and social democracy (see Chapter 4); and her position was in fact basically centrist. It corresponded perfectly with that sector of the workers movement in Germany, organized by the “shop stewards” during the war, which attempted to achieve positive results in the reformist struggle, with “real” material benefits and policies (in opposition to the manifest sabotage of all actions by the trade unions and the social democrats). They wanted to return to social democracy’s origins without advancing towards communism. They did not want revolution.

The Luxemburgian critique of organizational fetishism was carried out in the name of the fetishism of the masses; her critique of “isolation” (in the case of the Dutch Left prior to 1914) was carried out in the name of the fetishism of action. This explains why she remained, until

her death, on the side of the masses in the insurrection of January 1919, whose failure she had nonetheless predicted. Her attitude recalls the fetishism of the people among the great bourgeois revolutionaries, but in the era of the proletariat.

August 1914 was the consequence of a long evolution. The anarchist movement has never ceased to refer to it, and has all too hastily viewed it as the failure of “Marxism”, since there were many “government anarchists” (following Malatesta’s formulation) who defended the sacred union on this or that side. We shall cite only the cases of Kropotkin and J. Guillaume. Anarchism has in particular placed much more emphasis on the organizational roots of the failure of the Second International than on its real causes. Contrary to what Marx and Engels said, the revolutionary movement underwent a “real” split after the Commune.⁶ “Anarchism” and “Marxism” cannot explain either of the two, since the Marxist movement preserved and developed certain aspects which proved useful in 1914 (revolutionary defeatism). This did not prevent both of them, however, from retaining remnants of the communist perspective, but only in the form of parts removed from a totality, which they could not grasp intellectually because the proletariat no longer grasped it practically. The notion of community had become weakened and the “socialists” began to place all their hopes in the State: socialization was thus identified with nationalization or municipal ownership. Certain “anarchists” still persisted in upholding an old tradition involving the search for community, but did not clarify the problem of class, oscillating between reformism and savage revolts. In their activity they, too, made the revolution a question of *organization*, of the proper formula which would allow emancipation. Some Marxists also preserved the perspective of community, although in a contradictory way. In his description of the future society, Bebel⁷ heralded the disappearance of value, but not of the social regulation of the production of goods through *necessary labor time*, which is the very origin of value.⁸ Kautsky clearly foresaw the end of the law of value... but preserved wages and prices. The transformation was presented as a series of governmental measures instituted by the “Socialist State”: it is organized capitalism.⁹ In 1916, Bukharin would assert that it was not a question of developing the forces of production, which were already quite sufficient for the passage to socialism, but of destroying capital, which places obstacles in the way of that transformation. Such ideas were rare during that era, even after 1914. Pannekoek was one of the few who were aware of the *partial* character of both the socialist and anarchist movements. In 1909 he wrote: “the one-sided revolutionary wing of the workers movement thus acquires an anti-political character. In France and Italy ministerialism and the formation of electoral blocs have expanded the audience of revolutionary syndicalism and have led the trade unions to declare themselves enemies of the party.”¹⁰

It would be useless to denounce a “collapse”, as Lenin did, who confused the issue with his talk of “opportunism”. As Engels defined it, the notion of opportunism (rehabilitated by Lenin)

⁶ *Les prétendues scissions dans l'Internationale*, in *Textes sur l'organisation*. In English, see “The Alleged Splits in the International”, in *Karl Marx: The First International and After. Political Writings: Volume 3*, ed. David Fernbach, Penguin Books, New York, 1992.

⁷ *Woman under Socialism*: this text inspired some passages in Bordiga’s works of the 1950s (see *Construction et révolution*). English translation: *Woman Under Socialism*, tr. Daniel De Leon, Schocken Books, New York, 1971.

⁸ P. Louis: *150 ans de pensée socialiste*, new series, Rivière, 1953, p. 72.

⁹ *La révolution sociale*, Rivière, 1912, pp. 157 and 160. In English: *The Social Revolution*, tr. A.M. and May Wood Simons, Charles H. Kerr & Co., Chicago, 1902.

¹⁰ *Pannekoek et les conseils ouvriers*, p. 77. In English: *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils*, Telos Press, St. Louis, 1978.

turned reality on its head. Engels equated opportunism with an emphasis on day-to-day activity and bread-and-butter issues, and not with the real social fact of social democracy organizing labor in opposition to *and* in partnership with capital. This fits in with his superficial analysis of the workers movement of his era, which would later be employed by Lenin and the CI in their analyses of the socialist movement.

In reality, if one wants to speak of opportunism, one would have to accuse the whole proletariat (and it is evidently a matter for accusation, since opportunism is a moral notion) of being opportunist throughout the entire epoch. The workers fought for immediate advantages because the flourishing condition of capitalism allowed them to do so. This reformist foundation was transformed, in certain situations, into its opposite: revolutionary action, whether because the proletariat's situation became unendurable, or because society's rulers themselves descended into crisis, or, as in the 19th century, due to the impetus of bourgeois revolutions; there is no hard and fast line between revolution and reformism; there is an irremediable opposition between the petrified forms of reformism (which are often even unsuitable for an "honest reformism") and revolutionary forms of organization; there is a bloody struggle between the proletariat which remains reformist and the proletariat which becomes revolutionary, but to oppose the proletariat (which "is revolutionary or does not exist") on one side, to the working class, "mere variable capital", on the other, pertains to the realm of metaphysics.

In their early days, social democracy and the German trade unions comprised the organization of this spontaneous reformist struggle of the German proletariat, which demonstrated its lack of subversive spirit by the very fact of separating its political and economic struggles in distinct organizations. Soon, however, a line was drawn between the workers organizations and the workers movement *per se*: this became clear when the workers movement developed various forms of action which opposed the traditional organizations during the wildcat strikes of the first years of the 20th century; this development would become yet more pronounced with the creation of the "shop stewards" networks during the war. Henceforth, the traditional workers organizations, the SPD and the trade unions, had their own logic and their own function in the existing society: this is what must be understood (as the Dutch did so well, splitting from the SDAP before 1910); the grave reproach of "opportunism" is nothing but an empty phrase: its employment reveals the bad conscience of the organization that feeds on the energy of the proletariat, which is what social democracy had become.

It is, then, impossible for revolutionaries to be in workers organizations (like Engels) or to try to deal with them (like Lenin), so as to guide their transformation (Engels) or to unmask them (Lenin). These organizations cannot be transformed because they have their own nature, nor can they be unmasked, because, while they may be susceptible to the reproach of being somewhat lax in the reformist struggle, they cannot be held accountable for their lack of revolutionary spirit, since the workers are reformist anyway. In which case, the only way to conquer what one may call the workers movement organizations which have become autonomous of the workers is, wherever possible, to decisively attack it, even if this attack is carried out by a minority.

All talk of "opportunism" assumed that the social democratic party was really founded upon principles which it betrayed in its political activities. In reality, these principles had never been more than a smokescreen. Twenty years of denunciations of the always-renewed opportunism of a party which was not actually what it had initially proposed itself to be at its first congresses and which had revealed a nature which had nothing to do with the organization of revolutionary proletarians, were of no significance at all. The party had become an established body within the society which it had theoretically claimed had to be completely transformed. It preferred the status quo, its preservation, against the revolution (or even against the simple

autonomous actions of the workers in their attempts to obtain reforms) which could, in case it failed, threaten the integrity of the organization and the extremely privileged social situation of its functionaries. It is in relation to this real function and these real principles behind its activity that the acts of social democracy must be judged in advance.

Finally, one cannot accuse a party of being opportunist unless one assumes that it is actually a revolutionary party which has ceased to be revolutionary as a result of its resort to certain easy measures to attain its goal, measures which in fact will by no means allow the goal to be reached. Such a reproach can only be valid for a short time. The party either rapidly moves towards a form of activity which is in conformity with its goal and its principles (thus showing that it had only undergone a momentary and non-essential deviation, connected, for example, to its temporary domination by leaders who are effectively strangers to the revolutionary movement) this case is very rare; it has probably never happened and only presents the obverse of a false symmetry or else its first deviations are confirmed by others, which verifies that the party was in no way revolutionary, that its nature and its goal are power for itself, for its leaders, and that in any event, what is most important for it is its own preservation and consequently that of the existing order. In this case the reproach of opportunism must be abandoned, since it still implies a certain community with those against whom it is directed. This is why Gorter's resort to this term in applying it to the Dutch Communist Party in 1919 is fully justified. The party had been undergoing a critical period of development for several years, and Gorter thought that it still had a healthy nucleus; as he said: "We hope that these leaders might adopt a better tactic." In regard to social democracy this judgment of a politics which was even more rightist was disseminated for decades. Social democracy had assumed the role of the long-term defense of the interests of capital. One of the merits of the German Left would be that of showing that the Second International had fulfilled its role, that it had not "failed", and in this respect the German Left was more advanced than the Italian Left. Without going so far, numerous Anglo-Saxon historians emphasize the continuity of social democracy, whereas leftist historians highlight the "rupture" of 1914. In West Germany, the "democratic" tradition of the German workers movement is the favorite theme, while in East Germany, historians focus on the "revolutionary" tradition of the SPD prior to 1914.

The Era of 1848

The Brockhaus Encyclopedia of 1846 notes that the term *proletariat* "has recently been applied to the lowest social layers with the least property."¹¹ Hegel had already used it in 1821 to designate those who were not capable of supporting themselves and who had fallen into dependence upon others. The most active categories of the working class during this period were the master craftsmen, skilled workers and apprentices (who together comprised 10% of the population), although the decline in craft-based trades brought with it a reduction in the number of master craftsmen. Skilled workers still comprised a minority in the factories. The formation of the working class is a process of social disintegration. Torn from an ancient mode of existence, the worker clung to that existence and found there part of the energy needed to rebel against his new conditions.¹² The image of the golden, pre-"bureaucratic" age of the workers movement, where the worker launched wildcat strikes free from any noxious constraints, is as unreal as that of a brutalized and inert proletariat. Modern proletarian movements were born during this

¹¹ R. Reichard: *Crippled from Birth: German Social Democracy 1844-70*, Iowa State University Press, 1969, p. 12.

¹² Thompson: *The Formation of the English Working Class*

transitional period, and modern theoretical communism is their most inclusive and universal expression. Social democracy, and particularly the German Social Democracy, would be born of the failure and demise of this early movement, from which it would derive its theory as an ideology without making it the theory of its effective *practice*.¹³ The proletariat is not and never was pure negativity. Otherwise, one could never understand how, even in that epoch, conservative forces could prevent its rebellion and integrate it, nor could one form a comprehensive vision of the whole era which could explain why there was no revolution in 1918-1921.

German workers, at that time a small minority of the population, found it very difficult to link their actions to those of the agricultural population, who were divided into two large distinct sectors in the middle of the 19th century: the farmers of the north and the southwest, where land ownership was relatively dispersed, and the farm laborers of the east (1.5 million, of whom one-third were Poles), where serfdom was abolished, but who were still dependents of the landowners. At the end of the 18th century, Silesia was shaken by peasant agitation against the landowners' efforts to increase their statutory *corvée*.¹⁴

The prohibition of workers associations between 1731 and 1840 only partially destroyed the old solidarity of the medieval guilds. For the workers, German backwardness was not just a negative factor; it also allowed for the survival of collective forms of action. Mutual aid funds for the unemployed and invalids among the skilled workers were becoming more tolerated: among, for example, the printers concentrated in Leipzig who were threatened by technological progress. Strikes and boycotts were generally used in reaction to deteriorating conditions, and more rarely to obtain improvements. Despite the arrests of many strikers as a result of the prompt joint action of the factory owners and the authorities, the last years of the 18th century witnessed a large number of strikes between 1791 and 1795 which were linked to the French Revolution. Twenty thousand workers carried out a one-week general strike in Hamburg in 1791, which ended only with the intervention of the army. In Breslau, in 1793, the firing of a Hungarian worker led to a strike and more than 200 arrests. The city, which at that time counted 50,000 inhabitants, was the scene of daily demonstrations in which thousands of workers participated. The disturbances spread to the countryside; troops killed 37 people. The strike was brought to a conclusion on the basis of a compromise: the worker was re-hired.¹⁵ These movements never attained the extent of the Luddite agitation in England, however.

At the beginning of the 19th century, a Rhinelander, L. Gall, attributed the source of wealth to labor: "everything which ennobles and perpetuates life exists as a result of *labor*, but it is nonetheless precisely the *class of laborers* which suffers from the scarcity of what it has itself created."¹⁶ The Silesian riots of June 1844, which were discussed by the whole revolutionary movement of the epoch, occasioned the celebrated debate between A. Ruge and Marx.¹⁷ Silesian industry had benefited from the Continental blockade, but the weavers were being decimated by the development of productivity. After the mistreatment of a weaver, some of the houses of the merchants were destroyed and the riot was brought to an end by means of a compromise imposed upon the weavers by military intervention, which caused several fatalities. The region's

¹³ Korsch: *La crise du marxisme* (1931), in *Anti-Kautsky*, Champ Libre, 1973. In English, see: *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, ed. Douglas Kellner, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1977, pp. 171-176.

¹⁴ Engels: *La question paysanne en France et en Allemagne*, PC, No. 65.

¹⁵ Reichard, pp. 220-221.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁷ Grandjonc: *Marx et les communistes allemands à Paris, 1844*, Maspero, 1974, pp. 40 et seq., concerning the Silesian weavers.

workers suffered from a rise in the price of necessities between 1846 and 1847, which led to the deaths of up to 20% of the population in certain localities. This riot was the high point of a number of still-unknown actions. Clubs and mutual aid and educational associations were created, often following the model of groups which already existed in other countries as a result of the efforts of emigrant artisans, who participated in the social and political life of their new homes. The most well-known such group was the German Peoples Society of Paris (1832), which became the League of the Exiles, then the League of the Just, from which the Communist League later split.¹⁸

Marx and Engels frequently insisted on the fact that theory (the “German ideology”, but also revolutionary theory) had developed so easily in Germany because that country offered few avenues for action (liberal or proletarian). It could be suggested that the hunger for workers education, which characterized England and other European countries, was all the greater in Germany due to the limited possibilities for immediate action.¹⁹ The Communist League was as much an organization for education and recreation as it was an organization for politics and theory, and created public workers associations for elementary education, publishing, holding debates and cultural gatherings. If “militantism” is currently criticized for being an activity remote from life²⁰, the movement of the mid-19th century had a tendency to manifest an all-embracing social activity.²¹ Finally, the German revolutionary movement (like those of Russia and the Netherlands prior to 1914) had an open and international character due to its internal weakness and its need for inspiration from foreign experiences, both to imitate and to criticize. From its inception in 1840-1847, the communist current in Germany had a European dimension.

The liberal bourgeoisie often supported the workers associations, about which the Jewish typographer S. Born said: “We want a club so we can be men.” It was not rare for the municipality to pay the clubs’ lecturers. When these associations too plainly declared themselves against the established order, the bourgeoisie withdrew their assistance; sometimes they were prohibited. This development coincided, around 1844-1845, with growing interest in the “social question”, as is verified by numerous texts from that time. Engels recalled that interest in communism was as common among the bourgeoisie as it was among the proletarians, and related that numerous members of the liberal professions and even of the bourgeoisie attended lectures on communism. Understanding that the creation of wealth through labor engendered the creation of misery among the workers, the bourgeoisie tried to prevent the resolution of this contradiction from assuming an explosive form, and studied the subversive movement and its theoretical expressions in order to take action in regard to social conditions. *The Essence of Money* by M. Hess criticized the existence of labor power as a *commodity*, which had been accepted by Kant and Hegel: “If men could not be sold, they would not be worth even one penny, since they have no value unless they sell themselves or put themselves out to hire.”²² The critique of the world of commodities would be pursued by Marx. It is possible that no more than five or ten thousand people effectively participated in these “debates” and this “organiza-

¹⁸ *La Ligue des Communistes*, Aubier, 1972.

¹⁹ Marx: *Herr Vogt*, Costes, Vol. I, 1927, pp. 103 et seq

²⁰ *Le militantisme, stade suprême de l’aliénation*, OJTR, Paris, 1972.

²¹ Cf. the *Correspondence de Marx et Engels*, (Ed. Sociales), and their biographies written by A. Cornu (PUF, 4 Vols.); and *Oeuvres*, II, pp. 98-99.

²² Quoted by E. de Fontenay: *Les figures juives de Marx*, Galilée, 1973.

tion”, but their role would be important in the following years. In 1848-1849, *The New Rhineland Gazette* had a print run of 6,000, a considerable number for that era.

However, even though the barricades of March 1848 forced the Prussian army to evacuate Berlin, the April events demonstrated the impotence of the workers movement in taking the initiative in a revolution which would continue to be bourgeois, and timidly bourgeois. To different degrees, the European bourgeoisie preferred during the 19th century not to immediately secure total political power, which it did not assume until 1918 in Germany. In April 1848, the two active organizations were Born’s Central Workers Committee and the Committee for Popular Elections, a much broader grouping. In the light of later events the failure of 1848 would be interpreted as follows:

“This is how the only occasion offered by the history of the working class of the 19th century for an action in common between skilled artisans and a much greater number of more radical and more dispossessed men, with the goal of jointly confronting the authority of the state, was not taken advantage of.”²³

This historian even went so far as to compare the arrest of Schlöffel (a radical student associated with unskilled workers) to the assassination of Luxemburg and Liebknecht in January 1919. Born’s group, representing the “highest layer of the working class”, was the precursor of the SPD: the defeat of the more proletarianized elements, in the sense in which Marx employed the term²⁴, coincided with the beginnings of the organization of the more privileged and consequently more moderate elements, who appealed especially to the State, thus presaging Lassalle (see below). It is clear that the journals published later, in 1849, which were associated with Born, publicized the theme of production associations supported by public funds.

After the defeat of April 1848, this movement was incapable of promoting the “dual” revolution (bourgeois and proletarian) advocated by the communists.²⁵ The armed confrontations in which the workers formed a large part of the democratic camp had little chance of victory after the bourgeoisie of western Germany yielded to the reaction. This same reaction, however, would reassume the reins of the economic program of the bourgeois revolution and would carry out capitalist development to the great benefit of the bourgeoisie of the Rhineland and Saxony.

In Dresden, in May 1849, the democrats raised barricades and tried to blow up the buildings on either side of them so as not to be caught in a pincers movement – Cavaignac’s tactic in Paris in June of 1848. But the demolition teams failed. Lacking food and water, and not receiving the reinforcements which they had expected, the rebels also squandered their chance to seize the city’s artillery and armory. As had been shown to be the case in Breslau in 1793, and was further confirmed in Paris in June of 1848, urban insurrections were condemned to impotence if they left the use of artillery in the hands of the enemy. The Prussian cannons reduced the barricades and the rebels, after three or four days of resistance, abandoned the city. Despite the aid they received from the peasants during their retreat, they were unable to resume the struggle.²⁶ The army of Baden, formed by 25,000 men (both regulars and guerrillas) from all over Germany, but primarily from the south and southwest, was organized in June under the com-

²³ Reichard: p. 65.

²⁴ Cf. Blanqui’s response to his judges in 1832, in which he claims the name of “proletarian” (Bruhat, *Histoire du mouvement ouvrier français*, Ed. Sociales, Vol. I, 1952, p. 240).

²⁵ For the lack of another term we use this formulation, but without granting it all the implications which it possesses in Bordiga (Cf., for example, *Les révolutions multiples*).

²⁶ Reichard: p. 94.

mand of a Polish officer. In its ranks were soldiers from Baden, workers from Württemberg and guerrillas. Against the Prussians, who had four or five times more soldiers, it was not unified enough, and was surrounded in the fortress of Rastatt and capitulated in July. The scope of this civil war has probably been exaggerated: throughout all the skirmishes of 1848-1849, the Prussian army suffered fewer than 500 casualties.²⁷⁻²⁸

The effects of this defeat on the German and European communist movements have been underestimated. The “lessons” of the counterrevolution were taken into account by the moderates as well as by the revolutionaries. While the years 1840-1850 coincided with a critique of private property, the defeat of 1848-1849 accentuated the tendency to seek improvements within capitalism. The old traditions inherited from the guilds had transmitted the experience of collective struggle to modern proletarians: the succeeding phase would see the initiation of efforts to achieve a community of wage labor within existing society with its own defense mechanisms and values recognized by the State.

In 1848-1850, the Brotherhood (*Verbrüderung*) led by Born counted almost 40,000 members and dedicated its efforts to promoting a collectivist system. As Born stated in a letter to Marx in 1848, it was necessary to avoid “futile insurrections”; the majority of workers must be won over and the class must be unified *within* capital.²⁹ This reformism was obviously condemned to failure. It was unrealistic to want to organize a reformism parallel to capitalism in rival units of production (cooperatives). This perspective was the craftsman’s dream of adapting to technological progress without destroying capital, thereby preventing artisans from becoming either proletarians or small capitalist businessmen. The SPD, with the assistance of the trade unions, would on the other hand construct a *modern* reformism, consonant with industrial development, not outside of but within large industry. Lassalle appeared to be the point of intersection between the two phases, combining labor organization and cooperation.

In effect, the reaction which followed 1848-1849 was political: on the economic plane, it could only survive by adopting the program of its adversary (the bourgeoisie). In order to consolidate its hegemony, the supposedly feudal Prussian State had to prepare the ground for a capitalist development which was the only way to firmly establish German power and to reinforce its own political preeminence. But the ambiguity of German unification would endure even after 1871, disappearing only in 1918. Economic expansion did not, properly speaking, make the artisans dissolve into the ranks of the proletariat: artisans were often absorbed into factories where they preserved their status as foremen of the labor process which, in its organization and specialization, had not yet been totally transformed. The role of skilled workers, as well as that of their training (political and professional) was progressively marginalized due to migration within Germany or immigration overseas. The wages of workers in the rural areas rose. Certain kinds of poverty tended to disappear with the absorption of the unemployed and poor artisans by industry. The economic crisis of 1857, the first disturbance to simultaneously shake England, the United States, France and Germany, did not profoundly affect the workers’ standard of living. The Bismarckian approach, a synthesis of authority and conciliation to subordinate the workers to capitalism, was already in effect. Strikes of short duration compared to those in England were often broken by the old artisan class.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 95-97.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

“Marxism” and Lassallism

For anyone who invokes “Marxism”, especially in Germany, Lassalle has been a model of detestable “reformism” for more than a century. It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the history of the Marxist tradition has always presented the Lassallian movement as the evil opposed to the good incarnated by Marx’s supporters in Germany. Undoubtedly imperfect, but ultimately revolutionaries, it was men like Liebknecht and A. Bebel who would constitute the real socialist movement, as opposed to the traitor Lassalle who secretly negotiated with Bismarck. There is, in fact, a great deal of continuity between Lassallism and the SPD, although the most foreign aspects of the Lassallian movement would be abandoned. Lassalle himself is a complex personality. When he died in 1864 as a result of a duel, Heine wrote that he was a mixture of great personal qualities and the genius of self-destruction.³⁰ Transcending the archaic reformism of the artisanal sector, Lassalle simultaneously rejected class struggle and Manchester liberalism. His *System of Acquired Rights* develops the theme of the passage from private property to public property. He announces the advent of the workers as a (non-subversive) social-professional grouping within capitalism, who pressure capitalism (with the help of the State) to obtain a stable and recognized status. In an 1862 speech the year Bismarck was appointed Chancellor Lassalle posed the question: who should run society? Constitutions, he explains, are not so much immutable documents as the provisional crystallizations of power relations between rival social groups. Aware of the *political* reality of the capitalist world, where the atomization of individuals leads to their regrouping into blocs which demand shares of power, he seeks to directly organize this claimed share of power in collaboration with Bismarck.³¹ Although his secret correspondence was not revealed until after his death, the other socialists never ceased to denounce Lassalle’s collusion with the State. Lassalle describes his organization to Bismarck as “my empire”: “The working classes are instinctively predisposed in favor of dictatorship, if one knows how to fully convince them that this dictatorship is to be exercised in their interest.”³² Lassalle’s adversaries in the workers movement fought in the name of workers autonomy against submission to the State. But can one speak of workers autonomy under capitalism, which, more than any other social system tends to produce the conditions of life in their entirety? Paradoxically, the demand for workers independence in opposition to the factory owners drove the ADAV (General Association of German Workers) towards the State. The demand for independence in opposition to capital would push the SPD towards what appeared to be the means to limit capital’s field of action, that is, to exercise influence over it: once again, the State is at hand. Everything which intends to live on the margins of capital is finally condemned to seek the protection of that which appears to be above capital, but which is nothing but its concentrated power.³³

Lassalle made an incomplete attempt, sealed by an explicit pact (see his letters), to accomplish what social democracy would later realize by concluding an implicit agreement with capital. Lassalle was a precursor; for the workers, against the bourgeoisie, and with the assistance of the State. In this sense, he was also a prefiguration of 1918-1919 and national socialism. Lassal-

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 171-172.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

³² Hunt: *German Social Democracy 1918-33*, Yale University Press, 1964, p. 4.

³³ For the SPD as a “counter-society”, cf. Hunt, p. 53, and Reichard, p. 285, note 7 of Chapter II. See also: Vernon L. Lidtke, *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985.

lism could not succeed because it remained tied to the utopia of the cooperatives which were to have constituted a counterweight – but always with the help of the State – to the industrial power of capital, which was impossible. The SPD would strip Lassallism of these absurdities in order to preserve its essential nucleus: Lassalle had helped German society to frame the question of what place the workers should assume within it.

Although it was reformist, the ADAV, founded in 1863, faced the hostility of the factory owners and the police in (local) social conflicts, despite the pact sealed by the Lassalle-Bismarck summit. Since he believed in the possibility of establishing production cooperatives, Lassalle could all the more easily “discover” the theory of the iron law of wages, which holds that wages must always decline to a minimum due to the play of economic mechanisms, no matter what the organized workers do. This theory allowed him to justify his indifference, not to say hostility, to the trade unions. That such a doctrine suited his politics is the least that one could say. His successor as leader of the ADAV, Schweitzer, followed the same path, but was compelled to recant after 1868 under pressure from ADAV members and the reform movements. He then organized a conference said to represent 140,000 workers, but this number rapidly declined and was reduced to 10,000 in 1870.³⁴

Alongside the party linked to Marx and Engels, the Social Democratic Workers Party (SDAP), which was founded in 1869, there was the offshoot of an organization created in 1863, the League of German Workers Clubs (VDA), which from its inception had opposed Lassallism in regard to the question of German unification.³⁵ The ADAV supported unification under Prussian leadership, and could be said to have sold its support to the most powerful German state in exchange for a special law concerning labor and some advantages within the unified Germany of the future. The SDAP, however, proclaimed its support for a democratic unification without Prussian hegemony. The social composition of the ADAV was, at least initially, more working class than that of the SDAP, which happily directed its message towards the anti-Prussian democrats as well as militant workers. The declarations of Bebel and Liebknecht seem to grant a place of honor to the resistance against Prussian dominance, even more than to the problems of socialism. It cannot be said that the SDAP represented the class struggle and Marxism against the class collaboration of the ADAV. The SDAP was quite ambiguous, so much so that, until about 1880, support for the socialist and workers movement was provided above all by artisans threatened by industrialization. The VDA was “a rather weak federation of local clubs”, while the ADAV was, from its very inception, highly centralized. Two political organizations were linked to the VDA: the German Party (1865), a very weak *democratic* group, and the Saxon Peoples Party (1866), primarily composed of workers. This dualism would persist in the SPD. Marx was much more aware of the Lassallian danger than of the distance separating the SDAP from communism. He was convinced that the SDAP would evolve in a revolutionary direction; as for the ADAV, its large membership led him to provisionally take it into consideration before attacking it in earnest. On December 22, 1864, he wrote that the ADAV’s membership in the IWA “was only necessary as a beginning, in order to fight against our enemies here. Later, it will be necessary to completely destroy this organization, since the foundations upon which it is based are false”.³⁶ After the failure of the new newspaper, the *Sozial-Demokrat*, in 1864-1865, the rupture between the IWA and the ADAV was consummated: the IWA would

³⁴ Reichard, pp. 218-19.

³⁵ R. Morgan: *The German Social Democrats and the First International 1864-72*, Cambridge University Press, 1965, pp. 2 et seq

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

thenceforth accept individual memberships only. Marx's influence in Germany declined to one of its lowest points ever. Liebknecht, who lived for twelve years in London, and had been a member of the ADAV since 1863, would later break with the Lassallians. In 1900, he would justify his activity within the ADAV in the following manner: "there was a movement and an organization within it, albeit embryonic ones."³⁷ After 1866 and Prussia's victory over Austria, it was clear that unification would be achieved under Prussian leadership; especially since Germany's southern states feared France. Bismarck and the liberals reached an understanding and he granted fewer concessions to the ADAV, which then moved towards the left. The SDAP was slowly gaining prestige and benefiting from its association with Marx and the IWA. Published in 1867, Volume I of *Capital* was much less influential than is generally believed. Its rare readers (Bebel waited two years to read it and Liebknecht had read fewer than 15 pages after having received it) accepted it as an exaltation of the working class against capital, reading into it the "certainty of victory", according to Liebknecht's 1868 formula. The socialist newspapers which took note of its publication generally only quoted its Introduction, without understanding its analyses³⁸. What were discovered in *Capital* were not capital's laws of motion, its flexibility, or the characteristics of communism, but the "scientific" proofs of capital's exploitation of the workers. Only half of its message was absorbed, as if the project of theoretical communism was limited to denunciation, and was not the unveiling of the communist program. The visionary aspect of revolutionary theory was beginning to be forgotten, and was relegated to the supposedly inferior and infantile level of "utopian socialism".

Similarly, when the SDAP convened its 1869 Congress in Eisenach, claiming to embrace 14,000 workers, its program, when subjected to careful examination, was by no means "Marxist".³⁹ The Lassallian vestiges with which it was still impregnated ("Free Peoples State", "the entire product of labor", "public credit for production cooperatives") were the same ones which Marx would criticize six years later when the Party would fuse with the Lassallians at Gotha. It is impossible to oppose "Lassallism" to "Marxism", even while recognizing that the latter had provisionally capitulated to the former in 1875. Its alleged affiliation later betrayed by the SPD never existed. The Eisenach Program is, furthermore, fully within the democratic tradition: demands for "political freedom" and a "democratic state". The influence of the Peoples Party was such that one of its leaders, Sonnemann, a left liberal, persuaded Bebel to adopt the name "Socialist Democratic Party", thus leaving the word "worker" out of the party's title. When Bebel proposed that the word "worker" be included in the name of the party he was defeated by the former followers of Lassalle.⁴⁰ In this sense, the Lassallians were the purest representatives of a specifically, yet limited (see below) working class reformism, in contrast to the "Marxists" who obtained all their inspiration and their power from the democratic movement and from the fear of the liberal bourgeoisie in the non-Prussian states of being dominated by Prussia. The SPD would later combine Statism and democracy, but this dualism would again be manifested in the conflict between an extreme right in favor of State power and a liberal right (Bernstein).

Parliamentary activity soon occupied a preponderant place within the new party. Liebknecht, of course, vehemently declared in 1870: "The Reichstag does not make history and is content with performing a comedy; its members say and do what the director tells them. Should we, therefore, make the Reichstag the center of our activities... ? If revolutionaries were

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132-33.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 172-173.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

not so inept and if the government did not control the elections, it would be possible.”⁴¹ But he did not reject the principle of parliamentarism and only regretted that it played its democratic role so poorly.

The SDAP was a section of the IWA, but, as Engels wrote to Cuno on May 7-8, 1872, “the attitude of the German workers movement in relation to the International has never been very clear. Their relationship has always been purely Platonic...” Between July of 1870 and May of 1871, a minority within the Party (Bebel, Liebknecht) maintained relatively internationalist positions. But one must take the role played by the national question into consideration as a factor of confusion, even in the reflections of Marx and Engels. It is possible that the national question often served as a surrogate for deeper reflection (and sometimes for action). Exaggerating the role played by Russia in the failure of the movements of 1848-1849 allowed them to avoid posing serious questions concerning the effective capabilities of the proletarians and revolutionaries of their time. Similarly, they counted on German unification to help develop the socialist movement⁴². Conversely, they expected French action to undermine political structures: this was true of Liebknecht in regard to the Saxon monarchy.⁴³

On July 21, 1870, Liebknecht and Bebel refused to vote for the war budget, which had been accepted by the Lassallians and Fritzsche, an ex-Lassallian who became a member and then a parliamentary deputy of the SDAP. But their internationalism was unstable. Liebknecht, at the head of the “Brunswick Committee”, which was composed primarily of ex-Lassallians, declared on July 26: “I must not blame you too much for your patriotic fervor. But you, too, for your part, should make some concessions. Even if you do not agree with the position Bebel and I took in the Reichstag, our disagreement must be overcome at all costs or, in any event, we must prevent it from coming to the attention of the public.”⁴⁴ Their internationalist position obviously implied that they should be clear and stand firm against those who upheld the opposing position. The Party’s unity would not be restored again until after the defeat of the French: a French victory could then no longer be feared, and the entire “Marxist” workers movement could once again join in a demand for a peace without annexations (which would also be one of the centrist positions of 1914-1918, garnering the support of the majority at Zimmerwald in 1915, and would be attacked by the Zimmerwald Left: see Chapter 4).

Bebel and Liebknecht did not have an international point of view, and in this respect they were like everyone else. Their attitude, even when it coincided with Marx’s viewpoint, derived not from international but from national considerations. For them, it was a matter of making alliances with certain parties and social groups in Germany, but different ones from which the Lassallians expected concessions since the latter relied above all on the State. Their dissident attitude towards the war was an extension of their policy of supporting the liberal bourgeoisie and their hostility towards Prussia. Evoking the Commune before the Reichstag in April of 1871, Bebel invited the supporters of the Commune to “act with the greatest moderation”.⁴⁵

The SPD would speak of a victory over Lassallism: but which elements of Marxism emerged victorious? Above all, the idea of the ultimate victory of socialism, and of the need for an independent political workers organization. But Lassalle was not opposed to these things. Believing in a final victory is not in itself revolutionary: if the tasks of the communist revolution

⁴¹ A. Berlau: *The German Social Democratic Party 1914-21*, New York, 1949, p. 32.

⁴² *Cahiers de l'ISEA*, Vol. III, No. 7, July 1969.

⁴³ Morgan: p. 208.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

are not clarified, the “transition” to socialism could appear to be a *gradual* evolution. Lassallism was integrated into the workers movement. In their pure form, the specific contributions of Bebel, Liebknecht and Lassalle each represented a stereotyped tendency from the beginnings of the movement, and fuse when capital distracts the working class. Many signs testify to the persistence of Lassallism until the beginning of the 20th century. One can even speak of an official Lassalle cult. Liebknecht, in publishing an article by Engels in 1868, deleted the passages critical of Lassalle. In his famous pamphlet *Our Goals* (1870), Bebel makes few allusions to the IWA, but often quotes Lassalle and employs his arguments. Marx often complained that the Lassallians simultaneously plagiarized and distorted his theories. Marx’s thought was never understood for what it really was. It was always disseminated through a filter, that of Lassalle, in an epoch when Marx’s writings were not widely circulated, and later through the official Social Democratic screen. Militants’ correspondence testifies, at least until the end of the century, to a lack of awareness of the *Communist Manifesto*. In 1872, the cover of a Party publication reproduced two photographs, of Marx and Lassalle, flanking that of Liebknecht. *The History of Social Democracy*, a semi-official work written by Mehring, a theoretician of the left, is nonetheless as favorable to Lassalle as to Marx.⁴⁶ The attack against Lassalle during the 1870s derived primarily from the (self-avowed) anti-Marxist Dühring. Lassalle’s real popularity would persist (even outside the Party) until the War: other idols would then replace him. It is pure illusion to believe that the polemics of the epoch revolved around Marx and were settled in his favor. The progressive penetration of theoretical communism is a legend. Upon Liebknecht’s death (1900), it was Bebel who would lead the Party until 1913. His polemics were of little importance: above all, he wanted to preserve the organization, that is, the one which would prepare the future (ultimately a capitalist future) of Social Democracy.⁴⁷ Theory became simply an allusive reference, useful or annoying, depending on the circumstances. The Marx-Engels correspondence, published in 1913, was carefully abridged by V. Adler, Bernstein and Bebel, with particular attention to those passages dealing with Lassalle and Liebknecht, whom Marx abused on several occasions.⁴⁸ The movement needed heroes. Mehring denounced this maneuver, and published some of the expurgated passages before the book’s release, although he claimed in 1915 that the book had presented the essentials of Marx and Engels’ correspondence. Riazanov would later guarantee this falsification, but would then regret having done so.

The SDAP combined with the ADAV in 1875 at the Gotha Congress to form the Socialist Workers Party, making many concessions to Lassallism, which were severely criticized by Marx. The legend would have it that this deviation was to be corrected by the creation, in 1890, of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), whose Marxist Erfurt Program, written by Kautsky, would be the proof of revolutionary victory. Of course, Marx expressed vigorous reservations concerning the name itself: “What a name: *Sozialdemokrat*. Why not frankly call it *the Proletarian?*”, Engels wrote to Marx on November 16, 1864. Marx responded on November 18: “*Sozialdemokrat*. A bad name. But it is important not to quickly use up all the best names in possible failures.”⁴⁹ It would be more correct to translate this term by *social democrat*. It effectively designated a movement which accepted and reinforced the democratic scenario (that is, a

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 234, et seq.

⁴⁷ Cole: *The Second International 1889-1914*, Vol. I, MacMillan, London, 1963, pp. 297-322.

⁴⁸ Especially the portions concerning Hegel: E. Weil, *Hegel et l'Etat*, Vrin, 1950. The Costes edition of the Marx-Engels correspondence is based on the German edition.

⁴⁹ *Correspondance Marx-Engels*, Costes, Vol. VIII, 1934, pp. 106 and 107-108.

political form,⁵⁰ one State form opposed to others, such as, for example, dictatorship), in order to imbue it with a social content by introducing improvements in working class living conditions. As for the terminology expressing essential questions, the choice of the term *Sozialdemokrat* made no difference at all, for either the SPD or the most advanced fraction of the bourgeoisie, who also proposed solving “the social question” within the “democratic framework”. Following the SPD’s trajectory from 1890 to 1933, one notes that the SPD always reproached the liberal bourgeoisie for not respecting its own principles, for not going far enough in support of democracy, in a word, for not involving the workers in existing society. Words are not autonomous, and bear the meaning given them by whoever uses them. Those who formed the Communist League wanted to use this term to insist upon the nature of the movement of which they were a part: a movement for the collective use and enjoyment of wealth. Babeuf spoke of “the common happiness”. Social democracy designates no more than a reorganization, a realignment of private property within society, a socialization of the wealth hitherto distributed between the State and Business by means of an equitable distribution of power in favor of all social groups: adding equality to freedom, real rights to formal liberties, a social content to political democracy, a step forward in the destiny of the workers towards universal suffrage: this is the real program of the SPD. The general political goals defined at Erfurt differed little from those at Gotha. The evolution of the German workers movement up to 1918 consists of the difficult rupture of an unnatural (from the revolutionary point of view) but historically inevitable alliance between reformism and the communist movement. But the road taken in common is more than just a simple journey. It profoundly affected the revolutionaries and created an anti-revolutionary organization anchored in reality and supported by the majority of the workers. The opposition movements which arose were ambiguous and did not question, unlike what took place in other countries and even in Germany before the war, the function of Social Democracy itself. The German Left was relatively late in forming, considering the importance of this country (see Chapter 1): once constituted, it would not, as elsewhere, go very far.

After Erfurt, the “*Jungen*” (Youth) group hit the nail on the head with their critiques of the Party’s reformist character and its acceptance of official institutions (parliament). Their critiques were too much like those of the anarchists for Engels to refrain from being one of their most vehement opponents. He nonetheless took little notice of the kernel of truth which they contained. In reality, “anarchism”, just like “Marxism”, did not exist as an organized and unified current. A prisoner of its time, it embraced a series of reactions to the capitalist stagnation of the Second International. Anarchism is one of the great architects of the construction of the modern trade union movement after the end of the 1800s: the trade unionism which anarchism inspired would prove to be as non-revolutionary as that of the “Marxists” (see Chapter 9). Only a minority with a Marxist background (including the German Left) would prove to be capable of trying to derive a perspective for the future after 1914.

Engels harbored vast illusions when he wrote to Lafargue on June 11, 1869: “Now that we have won, we have proved to the world that almost all European socialists are Marxists.”⁵¹ The following year, the English, Belgian and German socialists were tempted to attend the congress of the Possibilists (with P. Brousse, supporters of achieving what is possible within capitalism). Engels went so far as to recommend unity at any price, convinced that such a development

⁵⁰ Engels: *Progès de la réforme sociale sur le continent* (1843), in *Écrits militaires*, l’Herne, 1970.

⁵¹ *Correspondance Engels-P. et L. Lafargue*, Ed. Sociales, Vol. II (1887-1890), 1957. On this issue, cf. the collection of texts of Marx and Engels, UGE (10/18).

would by itself eliminate opportunism (see his letter of August 9, 1890).⁵² This is why he scorned the “*Jungen*”.⁵³ For Marx and Engels, parties like the SPD, despite their deficiencies, represented the “real” workers movement, as opposed to the anarchist groups whom they compared to religious sects. This is why they both accepted parliamentary action without exposing its effects.

Engels mistakenly assimilated universal suffrage with the “index which allows one to measure the maturity of the working class. It can only be that, and will never be anything but that in today’s State”.⁵⁴ The representative system is much more than that and as capital blocks any other kind of community not derived from the capital relation it becomes correspondingly more important. Elections and political life become one of the privileged sites in which one rediscovers a sense of community. Parliamentarism is not merely a “barometer of class struggle”: it does not limit itself to measuring, it deforms what it measures, and itself intervenes with all of its weight in the “class struggle” in order to bring the latter to an end. It is not enough to say that parliamentarism was not revolutionary *after* 1914⁵⁵: one must also see its nefarious role even before 1914, and admit that Marx, Engels and after them almost the entire left wing of the Second International did not take this into account.

Engels’ tactic also rests upon the idea that universal suffrage would not be easily granted in Prussia, where the workers movement was barely tolerated.⁵⁶ Thus, one could do revolutionary work even on the parliamentary terrain, since Prussia was opposed to democracy. This view underestimated the ability of capitalist society to become democratic, and to keep the workers on this terrain to the detriment of the proletarian social movement. The policy of the Prussian State in regards to the workers movement was not distinguished by a confused rejection of toleration, but by *integration*, which had begun with Lassalle.

Reformism and the Radical Response prior to 1914

It would be an excessive distortion of the facts to consider the SPD’s evolution until the end of the 19th century from the perspective of the “revisionist” dispute which began around 1890 involving Bernstein, the only honest reformist, or Vollmar, the Bavarian socialist. The latter, a militant in a largely agricultural, only slightly industrialized region, advocated doctrinal softening and flexibility in electoral tactics in order not to alienate the peasants and middle classes. This was not the more important sort of revisionism from the capitalist point of view. In reality, the most dangerous reformism (for the revolution) came from the workers (trade union) leaders in the large industrial regions. These leaders applied the second (reformist) part of the Erfurt Program, abandoning the measures enumerated in the first part which can be summarized as follows: capitalist socialization of wealth and production. This Program did not say that the privileged agent of this evolution would be the State, but neither was anything clearly stated on this topic, so the road was still open. Lassallian Statism again comes to the fore, not to develop cooperatives, but to assure society’s democratization. Since the years when Bismarck prohibited the socialist party, from 1880-1890, a system of social services was established which would link

⁵² *Correspondance Engels-Marx et divers*, edited by Sorge, Costes, Vol. II, 1950, pp. 210-211.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

⁵⁴ *L’origine de la famille...*, Ed. Sociales, 1954, pp. 158-59. In English: *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Foreign Languages Press, Peking, 1978.

⁵⁵ As the Italian Left does, for example, in its *1945 Theses*, published in *Invariance*, No. 9.

⁵⁶ *Écrits militaires*, p. 483.

the workers to the State. Weimar would later systematically develop a mixed economy (associating State and private capital) advocated by the ADGB and the SPD, the logical outcome of the socialization defined—or, which is the same thing, badly defined—at Erfurt.

At first, from about 1869 to 1890, the trade unions were a means of recruitment for the Party, which was illegal from 1872 to 1890. After 1890, the political and trade union organizations enjoyed a situation of independent coexistence. In 1906, the trade unions imposed their right to veto any important decision of the SPD.⁵⁷ But their mutual evolution did not proceed without problems. Radical elements often dominated local trade union coordinating bodies and local sections. The latter, comparable to the departmental unions of the French CGT, frequently opposed the emergence of a layer of permanent salaried officials, which took place wherever trade unions existed. The radicals denounced tendencies towards conciliation, and opposed collective bargaining. In 1896, a local section of the Leipzig printers union was excluded from its chapter for having signed a collective labor contract. The dispute was brought before the trade union congress, which pronounced in favor of collective bargaining agreements, and excluded the Leipzig central from the national trade union. At the same time, centralization—an indispensable means of struggle in negotiations over labor power—deprived the local centrals of their means of action and pressure, especially financial ones. Trade union structure lagged behind industrial development. In Hamburg, while industrial trade unions embraced more than 40% of the ADGB's members, only 9 out of 52 local union leaders came from these unions, which had almost no managerial positions.⁵⁸ The ADGB hesitated to form industrial federations, preferring instead to group trade unions together locally or regionally by trade.

The growth of the trade unions, which combined, in 1892, in the General Trade Union Commission, and later in the ADGB in 1900, was accompanied by a growing rivalry with the SPD. Like the Bavarians, the trade unions found the revolutionary *ideology* of the Party to be an obstacle to their growth. The Party, on the other hand, needed this ideology to win over those elements which more or less aspired to social change, as well as to preserve its left wing. The trade unions supported the “revisionists” (who loudly proclaimed what the Party was actually doing), and the “orthodox” leaders forged a revolutionary image at little expense, appearing to be defenders of the revolutionary tradition. There was a struggle between these two organizations, whose interests were not convergent: this disagreement would reappear in the Weimar republic and last until just after the Nazi seizure of power.⁵⁹ The interest of the trade unions was to *accept* any political regime which would guarantee their role as mediators. The Party's interest was to *modify* the political system by promoting a type of State in which it could have a place. These two perspectives and the respective interests of the two bureaucratic layers which defended them frequently converged, but not always. The theory of the “two pillars” (trade union and Party) which constituted the workers movement only served to conceal a struggle for influence.

The bureaucratization of the Party was also accompanied by a certain amount of resistance and only really got underway after 1900.⁶⁰ The most numerous permanent officials were not in the Party, but in its satellite organizations: in 1914, there were 4,100 permanent officials in the SPD and the ADGB, but in 1912 there were 7,100 in workers cooperatives. The organization had to be organized: to sustain workers activities, certain commercial enterprises were necessary.

⁵⁷ Hunt: p. 150.

⁵⁸ Comfort: Chapter V.

⁵⁹ Hunt: pp. 187-190.

⁶⁰ Marks.

Auer had said, in 1890: “the Party cannot live on dues; we need to make profits from our Press.”⁶¹ A Saxon delegate to the 1894 Congress denounced the capitalist nature of the Party: “There are enterprises which employ between 50 and 100 workers. When these workers wanted to take the First of May off from work, the social democratic management, among whom were various orators who spoke at the rallies on the First of May, docked their pay.”⁶² The Party had to be profitable.

One of the reasons adduced by the German Left in favor of a purely working class organization was the enormous weight acquired within the SPD by certain rural groups or small cities which played a role in the Party which was totally disproportionate to their real importance.⁶³ The middle classes of medium-sized and even some small cities were over-represented within the Party’s organizational apparatus and its leadership. In 1912, at the Party’s Congress in the State of Württemberg, 17,000 socialist residents of the city were represented by 90 delegates; 5,000 socialists who lived outside the city sent 224 delegates. The German Left would also incorporate a reaction – a healthy one but one which often missed the point – against the sociological weight of non-proletarian social layers. The fear of the peasants, expressed theoretically by Gorter in numerous works, also expressed the desire of the revolutionary movement in the large urban centers to not be drowned out by concessions made by the socialists to those who lived in an environment which was less polarized around opposed interests. Nonetheless, numbers do not constitute a criterion for radical expression and autonomy: in the large organizations, in which the many degrees of officialdom between the rank and file and the leadership are most varied, the influence of the militants on the leaders was more limited.⁶⁴

“National Socialism” was progressively confirmed as the dominant characteristic of the SPD. Concerning Russia, Marx’s legacy was distorted, having been reduced to a mixture of pacifist internationalism and Russophobia, together with the concept of popular militias. This characteristic would come to be found in the weakness of Karl Liebknecht’s (W. Liebknecht’s son) anti-militarist activity before and during the war. Father and son were both victims of militarism, the former sometimes yielding to it, the latter believing that one could be victorious by *concentrating* on it. It was incorrect to maintain that militarism was “the principle support of capitalism”.⁶⁵ Radical anti-militarism is revolutionary but it does not positively frame the question. It understood that the army was among the principle enemies of the revolution, without seeing the social tasks of the revolution which are also indispensable means of struggle against the army. These overlooked connections would be put to the test in January 1919 (see Chapter 7).

The socialist leaders severely condemned the anti-militarism of some SPD members, thereby revealing their patriotism. W. Liebknecht, in a debate with D. Nieuwenhuis in Zurich in 1893 (see Chapter 3), denied that one could “fight against the Moloch of militarism by convincing isolated individuals, provoking puerile uprisings in the barracks... which is false, but tirelessly advocated. We must establish our doctrine in the army. When the masses become

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 349.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 351-352.

⁶³ C. Schorske: *German Social Democracy, 1905-17*, Harvard University Press, 1955, pp. 130-131. Compare with France: Dommanget, *L’introduction du Marxisme en France*, Recontre, Lausanne, 1969.

⁶⁴ Schorske: p. 144.

⁶⁵ Dauvé: *Pour une critique de l’ideologie anti-militariste*, Ed. de l’Oubli, Paris, 1975.

socialists, then the time of militarism will have come to an end (prolonged applause).⁶⁶ To the false “anarchist” radicalism then advocated by G. Hervé, he opposed a gradualism which retained nothing of “Marxism” but what he found useful, along with, among other things, a partial critique of anarchism. An in-depth critique would have presupposed the *self*-critique of “Marxism” and the recognition of its *crisis*. At the 1906 Mannheim Congress, Bebel addressed the issue of Belgian anti-militarism: “An insignificant country, whose army cannot compare with Prussian military organization. The same thing is happening in France. Anti-militarism is spreading there, after only two years (Karl Liebknecht interrupts him: they have done quite well!)... No! That is overly-biased and exaggerated! (Vigorous applause).” Bebel went on to describe the anticipated “fever which would seize control of the masses” in case of war, excluding any possibility of revolutionary action in such circumstances. In 1907, he defended the popular militia as the best means to defend the country, citing, in defense of his position, the opinions of certain generals. Militias are excellent for the youth; they evoke the Japanese schools for martial arts, in which “young people contend with so much ardor and courage... that all of Europe should adopt this athletic training regime for the defenders of empire.”⁶⁷ The SPD thus proposed total mobilization and enlistment of youth: “fascism” would realize these goals. Noske declared that the social democrats would defend Germany “with as much determination as any of the gentlemen occupying benches on the right of the Assembly,” as long as reforms are conceded to them.⁶⁸ The pact is clear.

The socialist youth movement was one of the focal points of opposition. It was not a creation of the Party. Groups of young people formed around 1904-1906, sometimes with the assistance of Party members. Berlin apprentices organized against their masters and thus constituted the nucleus, and the movement later spread to other northern cities. Persecuted by the police, they had 4,000 members in 1907. The social democratic youth in Northern Germany, organized in the Union of Free Youth Organizations, were undoubtedly the first groups to experience clandestinity in the 20th century, at a time when the whole socialist movement was tolerated and even admired by capital. The social democratic youth experienced something of the spirit of the socialist movement which had been persecuted until approximately 1890, and this experience would prove useful. In the south the opposition groups were more working class, more democratic, and less radical, but still anti-militarist, having been influenced by, among other groups, the Young Belgian Guards, which arose after 1905. C. Zetkin, a teacher, elaborated a concept of education which was a synthesis of Marxism and the new educational methods. Responding to pressure from the trade unions, the SPD began to take control of the youth groups between 1906 and 1908.

From their inception, it was perceived that the great mass movements of 1905 in Poland and Russia presented a new means of action, a new method of agitation, and a new form for an old content. It was still a question, even for the left, of exerting pressure on the State but not of destroying it (see Chapter 3). The majority supported the parliamentary weapon; the minority preferred the extra-parliamentary weapon. “Mass action” and “mass strike” do not correspond to the revolutionary syndicalist thesis of the expropriatory “general strike” which was conceived in the first place as a rehearsal for the revolution and later as the form of the revolution itself, with the trade unions taking over production. Mass action is not essentially revolutionary. It

⁶⁶ W. Walling: *The Socialists and the War*, New York, Holt, 1915, p. 46. Engels committed the same error in regard to the “fragmentation of militarism from within” by virtue of the presence of a large number of socialists in the army.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

could be a means of reformist pressure in a country where parliamentary pressure is not possible because parliamentary democracy does not yet exist. The “general strike” is a kind of economically organized mass action without a political party. For Luxemburg, the “mass strike” is mass action outside of traditional (economic and political) organizations, which compels the latter to take action. For the center (Kautsky), mass action is a self-generated adaptation of the movement at the peak of its struggles, and not a means of radical action. The mass strike had already been utilized in Belgium and Austria to obtain universal suffrage, just as mass demonstrations would later be used, in Germany in 1918, to obtain parliamentary democracy. The Luxemburgist left would privilege the dynamic relation of masses-party (the one influencing the other) and the working class-State relation (in which the working class is the sum of the relation, mass + party), above the destruction of the State, without providing a clear definition of the Party.

After the Hamburg Congress (1908), the Left supported the youth movement and in turn received important assistance from the youth movement. The position of the youth in the Party became a touchstone of the conflict between revisionists and radicals. In almost every place where a youth group existed, the Party section took its side against the central Party apparatus. As in the question of war, everything ended in compromise. The authority over the youth groups conceded to the local sections allowed the youth groups to pursue their radicalism wherever the sections favored them, even when the Party machine led by Ebert undertook to control them. After 1911 the movement ebbed due to the actions of the State, only to be reborn later during the war.

Behind the surface appearance of adhering to principles, the right rather than the leadership of the Party controlled the Party. The SPD added some pseudo-radical declarations of principle to the programs of action proposed or imposed by the trade unions. The “Party” structure was not the sole cause of the SPD’s degeneration, which was promoted by the trade unions. The center backed the right and made use of the left for doctrinal support (without any impact on the policies it pursued), even referring to the left in its anti-revisionist struggle. The existence of revolutionary tendencies within an utterly reformist organization is not in itself a positive sign. These tendencies served to provide the organization with a dynamic and credibility for radical working class groups and in those situations where revolutionary *ideology* was necessary. As long as they did not break with the organization, and as long as they did not understand that they did not have to conquer or submit to the organization, but to destroy it, these revolutionary tendencies strengthened the organization. Korsch would later write that Luxemburg (and, elsewhere in the Second International, Lenin) only attacked the *theory* but not the practice of social democracy, thus strengthening it contrary to her own intentions.⁶⁹

In 1908 the Party’s school, created in 1905 to train functionaries for the SPD and the ADGB, became the target of revisionist attacks (by Eisner, among others), but continued to be dominated by the Left (Luxemburg, Mehring). Its function was ambiguous. On the one hand, it preserved a tradition of revolutionary theory and thus prepared for the future. On the other hand, it preserved the idea of a party which was still concerned with revolutionary theory. As for the trade unions, they settled the matter by sending no more students to the Party’s school.

In a letter to Kautsky dated November 8, 1884, Engels linked the radical German workers movement to the youth and to the backwardness of German capitalism: “It is curious, that what is of most help to our cause is Germany’s industrial backwardness. In England and France, the transition to industrialization is almost over. The living conditions of the proletariat have already been stabilized.”

⁶⁹ *International Council Correspondence*, in *La contre-révolution bureaucratique*, UGE, 1973, pp. 243-45.

This situation was reversed by the rise of German capitalism: “the golden chain to which the capitalist has bound wage labor and which it never ceases to forge, has now grown long enough to allow for a relaxation of some of its tension.”⁷⁰

The theme of the integration of the workers movement into established society was debated for the first time during this epoch: after 1918, people would speak of “bourgeoisification” and “ossification”. Max Weber attributed this trend to “the growing number of people who have an interest in this kind of social promotion and its material advantages.” “One could ask who has more to lose by it: bourgeois society or social democracy? In my opinion, I believe that social democracy has more to lose, and more particularly those among its adherents who are the bearers of revolutionary ideology.” He viewed social democracy as “a State within a State”.⁷¹ In 1918, M. Weber would render homage to the qualities of order and discipline which the German people, drilled by social democracy, could exhibit, as his own experience with a local workers and soldiers council demonstrated. R. Michels, who abandoned social democracy for revolutionary syndicalism, denounced the SPD’s bureaucratization:⁷² for some workers the labor bureaucracy constituted the social promotion which the church at one time offered certain peasants. Weber lamented that the bourgeoisie preserved the revolutionary forces within the workers movement due to its refusal to concede full freedom of activity (particularly by way of universal suffrage) to social democracy: one would then see, he said, how it is not social democracy which will conquer the State, but that it will be the State which will conquer social democracy.

The bureaucratic centralization of the SPD gave rise at times to a vigorous reaction, above all in the urban centers where tendencies developed in opposition to the leadership. In opposition to reformism it was anti-Statist; in opposition to the suffocation of internal democracy it wanted a completely democratic party structure. Kautsky condemned “the rebel’s impatience” which, according to him, inspired the excessive radicalism of 1907.⁷³ The left gradually exposed the center, attacking its opportunism, for example, at the Chemnitz Congress of 1912. But the Party’s evolution was quite coherent. It was the Left which could be accused of opportunism for struggling each day against reformism without attacking it in its continuity and its profound logic. One of the reasons why the Left failed to clarify this point was an insufficient understanding of the crisis-revolution relation. Convinced that a war was imminent, it expected the war would bring about a mass uprising. At the end of the war, the Left would expect, this time as a result of the political and social crisis engendered by the war, a revolution which it would still improvidently conceive of as an automatic development. Luxemburg had often set out her concept of organization as an irresistible flood: in a letter dated February 17, 1904 to H. Roland-Holst she stated that opportunism thrives in “stagnant waters” and dies “all by itself” in a current.⁷⁴ The idea of the crisis of capitalism facilitated the avoidance of a serious investigation of questions concerning the critical situation of the working class in modern capitalism, particularly in relation to the function of the organized workers movement. Instead of relying on the shock of a serious disturbance (war, crisis), it was necessary to begin by breaking with their own organization. Levi was right, in 1930, when he said that after 1903 there was no radical presence, outside of “a tiny sect”, which could maintain theoretical coherence and assist in the re-

⁷⁰ Marx: *Oeuvres*, Gallimard, Vol. I, 1963, pp. 127-128.

⁷¹ E. Waldmann: *The Spartacist Uprising of 1919*, Marquette University Press, 1958, p. 108, note no. 81.

⁷² In his book, *Political Parties*. See his earlier article quoted by Schorske, Chapter V.

⁷³ Schorske: p. 185.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

construction of a communist organization.⁷⁵ Judging that the imperialist phase ruled out the satisfaction of reforms which had previously been possible, the Left also tended to ignore the considerable role played by reforms conceded to one part of the working class.

In 1913, a strike of shipyard workers in Hamburg, which was not supported by the trade unions, was met by a lockout and ended in defeat; more than 1,000 workers were dismissed. The rank and file was very much opposed to its leaders. The metal workers trade union petitioned for decision-making autonomy and control of the union funds by the regional offices.⁷⁶ Once again, the same demand for democratic organizations crops up, which would facilitate the rapid growth of revolutionary syndicalism as well as the USPD after 1918 (see Chapters IV and IX). The theoretical and organizational weakness of the Left favored the focusing of discontent on partial goals capable of being integrated by the renovated classical workers movement. On the eve of 1914, Party and trade union leaders were aware of the malaise which threatened their organizations. They knew that there was a rejection of the traditional structures and a tendency towards spontaneous and local actions. The rank and file distrusted both the central apparatus as well as large movements coordinated from above, whose meaning they did not understand. Their retreat to localism was a half-answer to the problem, and this tendency, which was further stimulated by the war and the post-1918 struggles, was to have the gravest consequences.

The trade unions occasionally had to yield in order to maintain their rule over their organizations. This was an era of trade union splits and a kind of nostalgic longing for the epoch when the movement had not yet been centralized. In the textile, metal working and painting trades, local trade unions arose which deliberately emphasized workers *autonomy*.⁷⁷ The “shop stewards” who made their appearance during the war, were a new form of this workers autonomy (see Chapter 4). The SPD excluded those of its members who participated in these trade unions. The “*Jungen*”, whom the Party had striven to keep apolitical by means of recreational activities, also clashed with their Party guardians. A kind of nostalgia was born among the leading circles of the Party. The Party found itself between two phases, after the construction and before the management of the State. The Jena Congress (1913) prefigured the “Community of Labor” created in 1916 by the centrist opposition in the Party’s leadership (see Chapter 4).

The image of the workers movement on the eve of the war was a study in contrasts. In Hamburg, Bebel’s home city, the model of socialist organization in Germany, the trade unions of skilled workers were predominant, although the local organizations exercised considerable influence, and a minority launched “unofficial” strikes. The trade union opposition was especially active among longshoremen and in the transport industry. Everyone who could not find work elsewhere came to the port for jobs.⁷⁸ Even before 1914 a minority knew quite well that they could expect nothing from the trade union offices. Their reaction would prove to be one of the hallmarks of the post-1918 movement, prolonging the already long-standing antagonism between the socialist left and the trade unions. In Saxony (an industrial region as important as the Ruhr or Upper Silesia), the army intervened in a 1910 strike in the Mansfield mining region. The Halle district was dominated by the SPD left since 1913: it was to be excluded in 1916.⁷⁹ If the SPD and the ADGB represented powerful conservative forces, it is nonetheless possible that they underestimated the fissures which appeared in their organizations prior to

⁷⁵ Quoted in the R. Luxemburg issue of *Partisans*, December-January 1968-1969, p. 8.

⁷⁶ Schorske: pp. 260-261.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

⁷⁸ Comfort: Chapter V.

⁷⁹ Angress: pp. 105, *et seq.*

1914 and which issued, unfortunately, not in a revolutionary movement fully capable of overthrowing the classical organs of the workers movement, but in some very small and disorganized intermediate groups.

Chapter 3

The German Left before 1914

The Dutch Left

Not surprisingly, the theoretical (and, to some degree, the organizational) sources of the German Left originated not outside of the classical workers movement, or in its heartland, but in its periphery. They are of German-Dutch origin. Northern Germany and the southern part of the Netherlands have comprised an economically integrated region since the 16th century. During the millenarian movements of the 16th century, subversive ideas and individuals spread from the south of Holland to the cities and states of Northwest Germany (Münster). Lenin was able to conceive a revolutionary strategy because his external position allowed him to take what was best from the European socialist movement without being completely swept away by it. But his Russian limitations led him into the same cul de sac as social democracy, all the more insofar as his revolutionary positions were contradictory: although a revolutionary, he shared the Kautskyist theory of class consciousness. The German-Dutch Left extracted the best from the German workers movement, and remained at that level. Unlike Lenin, it was at the center of the European communist movement. Unlike Luxemburg, however, it was not so immersed within social democracy as to be paralyzed by it.

In the Netherlands, the Social Democratic League (SDB), led by D. Nieuwenhuis, among others, gave way, in 1894, to the SDAP, after a struggle between Marxists and anarchists. Refusing to take either side, Nieuwenhuis, at the turn of the century, would warn of degeneration in his work, *Socialism in Danger*.¹ The SDAP followed the same trajectory as the large parties in the Second International. At the end of the century, it was divided between revisionists and the orthodox (the latter being represented by the parliamentarian Troelstra, known as the “Dutch Kautsky”). Gorter and Henriette Roland-Holst, both poets, entered the party in 1897 and became the spokespersons for a new left wing tendency which attacked Troelstra’s supposedly radical center. They were joined by Pannekoek, who entered the Party in 1903, as well as by other future members of the Dutch CP including Van Ravensteyn and Wijnkoop.

Their organ was the journal *De Nieuwe Tijd*, to which *De Tribune* was added later (see below). This current attempted to go beyond traditional debates. In relation to the colonial question, for example, it did not restrict itself to endorsing the contemporary theory which held that capitalism was an “inevitable stage for the colonies in their march towards socialism... if socialism were to triumph in the old world, it would be possible to avoid the miseries of capitalism on the other continents by sharing capitalism’s technological advantages with them. Gorter and Pijnappel agreed with Mendels, and said that his analysis agreed with Marx’s writings.”² Their analysis, in effect, returned to the view entertained by Marx, especially in regard to Russia.³ Gorter broached the theme of the proletariat’s isolation, which he would again address in his *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*: “Attacking the Party’s illusions concerning the petite bourgeoisie and the peasants, Gorter stated in passing that a large part of this petite bourgeoisie had an

¹ *Le socialisme en danger*, published by Payot in 1975, with an introduction and notes by J. Y. Bériou.

² *La II^e Internationale et l’Orient*, a collection edited by G. Haupt and M. Rébérioux, Cujas, 1967, p. 236.

³ *Invariance*, No. 4.

interest in the products of the colonies... annually making hundreds of millions from the Indies..." The International's Stuttgart Congress (1907), interpreted by Lenin as a healthy reaction against the Right, "opened the eyes of the Dutch Left."⁴ This development was not uniform, however: Roland-Holst, despite understanding the connection between German imperialism and the positions supported by the German socialists, concluded that the Congress had ended to the revolutionaries' advantage.

In its essentials, the German-Dutch Left (including Radek) held a position close to that of its Polish and Russian adversaries on the question of the right of nations or of "peoples" to self-determination. For Wiedijk: "the colonial question is essentially situated, not in the colonies themselves, but in the colonizing countries, where the most important interests are at stake... Colonial reform cannot come before class struggle."⁵ Lenin was quite isolated on this issue. The other Bolsheviks did not accept the defense of the absolute right to self-determination before the revolution. Always on the lookout for anything which could undermine the power of the leading capitalist countries and lend support to the proletarian struggle, Lenin tried to find substitutes for proletarian action. He saw the centrifugal role which nationalist forces could play to weaken the Russian State, for instance. But this kind of realism overlooked capital's ability to contain the proletariat within national borders. His theses on the national question derived from his position on democracy. In the internal Bolshevik polemic on this theme in 1915-1916, he denounced "the scornful attitude of imperialist economism in respect to democracy", which will be indispensable in "educating" the proletarians.

"The Marxist solution to the democracy question consists in the *utilization*, on the part of the proletariat conducting its class struggle, of all democratic *institutions* and aspirations against the bourgeoisie... As for the Marxists, they know that democracy does not eliminate class oppression, but only makes the class struggle clearer, more extensive, more open; it is what we need... The more democratic the regime, the more obvious, for the workers, is the origin of the evil which is capitalism..."⁶

The creation of a democratic national state thus constitutes progress, since such a state would then become a framework within which the proletariat could organize and educate itself. The proletariat needs democratic *States* because it needs democracy. For Pannekoek, however, the national solution is utopian under the regime of capital, because every nation is at war with the others and oppresses its own minorities. In 1912, his critique of the projects for cultural autonomy in the Austro-Hungarian Empire was also an indirect critique of Lenin: "*It is not our advocacy of national autonomy, whose realization does not depend on us, but only the strengthening of class consciousness which will really smash the terrible power of nationalism to pieces.* It would be false to want to concentrate all our efforts on a 'positive national policy' and to stake everything on... the realization of our program for national self-determination as a precondition for class struggle."⁷

⁴ *La II^e Internationale et l'Orient*, p. 239.

⁵ A summary of his position by F. Tichelman, *Ibid.*, pp. 243-46.

⁶ *Oeuvres*, Vol. 23, Ed. Sociales, 1959, pages 20, 23, 24, 57, 67-68, and 79-80.

⁷ *Lutte de classes et nation*, reproduced in the collection *Les marxistes et la question nationale (1848-1914)*, Maspero, 1974, p. 305.

In the same year J. Strasser, an Austrian left-socialist,⁸ published a similar text, in which he simultaneously attacked the federalism of Austrian social democracy (which sought the means to preserve the unity of the empire in concessions to the other nationalities), the nationalism of Czech social democracy and the supporters of pan-German unification. The socialist party, Strasser wrote, must be centralized, and all national solutions are illusory: “it is not true that nations can in any circumstance live side by side without becoming rivals. In bourgeois society, each nation accuses the others of expansionist tendencies, and even aggression, whenever they get in each others’ way. Every national struggle makes a mockery of revisionist internationalism. What, then, will the proletariat do when the struggle between nationalities breaks out?”⁹

During the war, Pannekoek did not participate in the debate on the national question. Lenin stated with satisfaction that while Gorter was against the principle of self-determination, he nonetheless allowed for it in the case of colonialism; for the Dutch East Indies, for example.¹⁰ Like the German Left he was not directly confronted by the reality of the national question, unlike the Russians, the Poles and the Austrians, nor was it a crucial theme in his experience or activity. Each time he systematically investigated the question, however, he did so in the sense of this observation of Bukharin’s: if the “right of nations” is not an empty, meaningless term, it must include the compulsory defense of the national State, and end in the demand for patriotism or, which is the same thing, in the absurd position of the revolutionaries’ denial of internationalism.¹¹ The only meaning which the slogan of self-determination can have is opposed to the revolution. Bukharin was more aware than Lenin of the integral connection which existed between organized capitalism and *any* State, large or small.¹²

Within the SDAP, the conflicts between the left and the center became increasingly acute. In 1901 they revolved around the agrarian question: the left refused to oppose the expropriation of small farmers for the purpose of the development of modern capitalist agriculture. It was not the Party’s job to incite the small-scale peasants to unite in defense of the small family farm, but to fight for socialism. This debate would be taken up again in the *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*. On the education question (1902), the Left rejected any concessions to religious schools, which were desired by the Party’s leadership for reasons having to do with electoral deals. In 1903 the Left turned against the trade unions which sabotaged a railroad strike. Finally, in 1905, in the debate over the parliamentary question, it violently denounced the alliance with the radical bourgeois parties in the run-off elections, which granted a majority to the radicals against the Right. As these trade union and parliamentary trends were to continue to unfold (the same kind of alliance was made in the German elections of 1912), the Left would become abstentionist and critical of the trade unions.

In 1907 the Left established its own newspaper: *De Tribune* (whence the name “Tribunists”), which was particularly vehement in its attacks on the Party’s leadership. An extraordinary Congress of the Party in 1909 demanded that it cease publication. With the exception of a small circle around Roland-Holst, which would not join the others until some time later, the whole left wing left the Party and founded the Social Democratic Party (SDP). It was

⁸ Cf. his biography in the *Dictionnaire biographique du mouvement ouvrier international. L’Autriche*, Ed. Ouvrières, 1971, pp. 301-302. Strasser was a member of the Austrian CP and adopted an “anti-putschist” position close to that of Levi; he would later be excluded for “Trotskyism”.

⁹ *Les marxistes et la question nationale*, p.288.

¹⁰ *Oeuvres*, Vol. 22, Ed. Sociales, 1960, pages 164, 181 and 375.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

¹² *L’économie mondiale et l’impérialisme*, Anthropos, 1967, Chapter XIII.

a “groupuscule”: it had no more than 700 members in contrast to the 25,000 members of the SDAP in 1913. It was not accepted as a member by the International, despite the support of the Bolsheviks, another schismatic party. Its application having been presented to the Bureau of the Socialist International in 1909, the latter was confronted by two motions. The motion of the SDP and the German SPD, which was supported by Lenin, was in favor of the new party’s petition for affiliation: but the opposition motion, presented by the Austrian V. Adler, obtained a majority. Luxemburg condemned the split in the name of Party unity.¹³ The SDP did, however, engage in parliamentary activity. In 1918 it would become the Communist Party of the Netherlands (KPN), with two seats in Parliament. In 1919 Gorter denounced the *opportunism of the Dutch communist party*. His attack included, among other themes, the notion of a “pure” and “clear” “nucleus” which would be further developed in 1920-1921.

For her part, Roland-Holst occupied an intermediate position, somewhat like that of Trotsky in Russia, and, like the latter, would join the Left in 1917. She was, however, on the side of the Bolsheviks with the Zimmerwald Left (see the next chapter). Later, she would take the middle road between the communist left and the Communist International.

The significance of the Dutch Left is above all *theoretical* and *international*. The Dutch would provide a meeting place for the socialist opposition during the war; the Netherlands did not take part in the conflict. It was in Amsterdam that the Western European Bureau of the Third International would be founded (see Chapter 11), and it would be dominated by the Left. The SDP provided the Left’s two leading theoreticians in Northern Europe: Gorter and Pannekoek. Gorter was the theoretician of the SDP, while Wijnkoop and Van Ravensteyn were its political leaders. Gorter was the author of *The Fundamentals of Social Democracy* (1905; reprinted in 1920 under the title, *The Fundamentals of Communism*), *Historical Materialism for Workers* (1909), and *Social Democracy and Revisionism* (1909). As a leader of the KAPD he would direct the latter’s negotiations with the CI. Later, he would found the *Communist Workers International* (the KAI, in German).¹⁴

Bremen

There are now some important historical works dealing with Pannekoek: we shall only focus on what distinguished him, even before the war, from the Luxemburgist Left. Almost from the start of his political activity, in 1904, he worked for the most part in Germany as a teacher of Marxism in the SPD’s Party Schools. With Luxemburg, he criticized the Kautskyist leadership of the Party, and was the spokesperson for a small group centered mainly in Bremen, whose organ was the *Bremer Bürger-Zeitung*.

Pannekoek and Radek attacked Kautsky in the *Bremer Bürger-Zeitung*, particularly in regard to international issues and imperialism, and posed the problem of the possible relation between war and revolution: “The struggle against imperialism does not have the purpose of hindering its development, but of mobilizing the masses against it...”¹⁵ This position, expressed by Pannekoek in 1910, would be taken up by Lenin in 1914. Of Polish origin, Radek was ex-

¹³ Pannekoek and the Workers Councils.

¹⁴ He was the author of *Révolution mondiale* (1918), *L’organisation de la lutte de classe du prolétariat* (1921), *La nécessité de la réunification du KAPD* (1923), a large number of articles in the KAPD and AAUD press, as well as pamphlets from which we provide some extracts below. See Herman Gorter, *The Organisation of the Proletariat’s Class Struggle*, in *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism*, ed. D.A. Smart, Pluto Press, London, 1978, pp. 149-173.

¹⁵ Pannekoek and the Workers Councils.

cluded from Polish Social Democracy in 1912 for embezzlement. He had previously been a supporter of the Warsaw Group which was at that time close to the Bolsheviks and opposed to the (Luxemburgist) Party leadership. He was excluded from the Party the following year, despite Pannekoek's protests. A Russo-Polish court of honor ruled in his favor in 1915.¹⁶ He went to Switzerland during the war. In 1914-15, he was against the principle of self-determination, for Poland as well as in general. His interpretation of the Easter Rebellion in Ireland in 1916 was in opposition to Lenin's.¹⁷

In 1912, Pannekoek was among the first to connect the class struggle in Europe to the independence movement in the colonies: only by joining with the proletariat in the highly-developed countries could the struggles in the backward countries acquire a socialist character.¹⁸ This position was quite unlike both Lenin's view as well as that of the other members of the Dutch left wing, which is outlined below, and which could at times border on *indifference* concerning underdeveloped regions.

The left-wing current which would coalesce in the KPD was born long before 1918-19, and by virtue of its actions had already demarcated itself from the first (Luxemburgist) leadership of the Party.¹⁹ The communist left which appeared after 1917 was not, therefore, without roots in the previous epoch. What is called the "communist left" became the communist left prior to 1914 through contact with other left currents (particularly those of Lenin and Luxemburg), and these currents mutually influenced one another. The revolutionary currents which would confront one another after 1917 had to a great extent already known and opposed one another before 1917, in relation to the national question, among other issues. Pannekoek made extensive contributions to the polemics on this question. By criticizing "infantile leftism", Lenin was continuing a debate which started a dozen years earlier.

Pannekoek distinguished himself from the Luxemburgist Left on two important points. He thought that radical elements should abandon social democracy and regroup outside it. Luxemburg, however, condemned the SDP's schism: one must persevere wherever the masses are found: "one cannot remain outside the organization, one must not lose contact with the masses... The worst workers party is better than no party at all."²⁰ This presaged the rupture between the Spartacus League and the ISD, and later that between the KPD and the KAPD.

An important polemic also set Pannekoek against Luxemburg, concerning the theory of the "final crisis" of capital, as expounded in *The Accumulation of Capital*.²¹ Pannekoek criticized it on two levels. On the "mathematical" level, Luxemburg took as her starting point one of Marx's "errors" in his accumulation schemas in Sections 2 and 3 of Volume II of *Capital*. Defending Marx, Pannekoek showed that it was impossible to prove that capital's movement must

¹⁶ Concerning the relations between German and Polish socialists, see, as well as the work of Nettl, H. Schurer: "Radek and German Revolution", *Survey*, October 1964; and especially the upcoming book by C. Weil, to be published by Champ Libre.

¹⁷ On Ireland, cf. "La contre-révolution irlandaise", *Les Temps Modernes*, June 1972.

¹⁸ Cf. his article "Révolution mondiale" in *Le Socialiste* of January 21, 1912, quoted in *La II^e Internationale et l'Orient*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁹ *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils*.

²⁰ Cf. his letter to Roland-Holst, dated August 1908, quoted by Nettl (English edition, Vol. II, p. 657).

²¹ An essay on this theme can be found in L. Laurat: *L'accumulation du capital*, Rivière, 1930, and in various articles in *Révolution Internationale* (1968-1972). For a critical judgment, cf. *Lutte de classes*, February 1975, "Profit et marché"; and Mattick: *Marx et Keynes*, Gallimard, 1972 (in English, *Marx and Keynes: The Limits of the Mixed Economy*, Porter Sargent Publisher, Boston, 1969). R. Luxemburg responded to her critics in her *Anti-critique* included in later editions of her book.

of necessity come to a halt should it be deprived of possibilities for expansion outside of the “capitalist zone”. Without, however, making the proletarian movement the motive force of history, he criticized the idea that one could speak of the crisis of capital in purely economic terms, as well as the content which Luxemburg conferred upon necessity. According to Luxemburg, the necessity which drives capitalism towards collapse is mechanistic: the proletariat is not included as one of its factors. Her catastrophic vision overlooks this factor although it is an element even at the “purely economic” level. Pannekoek would return to this theme much later, explaining this concept of mechanistic necessity as a resurgence, on the theoretical plane, of a typically social democratic trait which Luxemburg criticized on the political plane: Kautskyist fatalism, the negation of the revolutionary character of the proletariat.²² Nonetheless, after the war, and unlike the case of the first divergence summarized above, the German Left (although opposed to Luxemburg’s tactics), would again take up the Luxemburgist thesis, simplifying it instead of developing it, under the rubric of the “death crisis” of capitalism.²³

Paradoxically, a historian (Schurer) has viewed Pannekoek as one of the precursors and founders of “Leninism”.²⁴ Bricianer was right to reject this hasty assimilation, but did not go far enough in his examination of the genesis of the Left prior to 1914.²⁵ Schurer relies upon real analogies, which do not, however, justify his comparison of Lenin and Pannekoek, even before 1914. It is true that each was opposed to the Luxemburgist theory of imperialism; and that Pannekoek was undoubtedly the first to grant importance to the notion of a “labor aristocracy”, and in particular was the first as well to once again resuscitate Marx’s thesis on the need to destroy the State. But he approached these questions in a way dissimilar to that of Lenin.

Tactical Differences in the Workers Movement (1909) effectively examined the root of the reformist tendency, which Pannekoek attributed to the weight of the middle classes, and of the employees and officials of the workers movement; on the other side, the workers in large industry constituted the revolutionary nucleus. Lenin, however, in *Marxism and Revisionism* (1908), insisted upon the role of the petite bourgeoisie. Even more than “small-scale production”, which Lenin would never cease to discuss (even in *Infantile Disorder*), Pannekoek showed that it is the very mode of existence of the workers in a non-revolutionary period which defines the nature of the “labor aristocracy”. Merely by virtue of their numbers, the workers must join together into a bloc (in fact, into numerous *rival* blocs) which requires representatives to deal with capitalists and the State, from whom concessions must be wrested. The workers bureaucracy was more than a kind of activity or a leader-masses relationship; it was above all sociologically a relation in which a privileged, entrenched minority was formed. In the higher ranks, the leaders even hoped to enter the bourgeoisie, even if this hope was based on nothing but the inevitable financial and commercial activities of the workers movement, through the funds which it absorbed: social welfare, sick benefits, cultural centers, publishing, etc. In the lower ranks, the cadres possessed socio-cultural means for the advancement of their offspring. It is in this sense that one can speak of a social layer which *reproduces itself* as privileged, and not simply of categories which enjoy more advantages than others.

²² In this context we can only provide a basic outline of the *positions* taken in relation to this problem: for more extensive *elaborations* which treat the issue in depth, cf. Pannekoek’s essay “The Theory of the Collapse of Capitalism”, translated by Adam Buick, published in *Capital and Class*, Spring 1977, and currently available online at the marxists.org website.

²³ On the problem of a mechanistic interpretation of the crisis, cf. C. Brendel, *Pannekoek, Theoretikus van het Socialisme*, Nimegen, 1970, Chapter XII.

²⁴ “A. Pannekoek and the Origins of Leninism”, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, June, 1963.

²⁵ *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils*.

The notion of a “labor aristocracy” was frequently employed in England during the 1880s to designate a quite numerous minority of “artisans (skilled workers and craftsmen) and above all those who were members of the trade unions and other labor organizations”.²⁶ The privileged social layer(s) varied from country to country depending on the background of the working class and its organizations, and in 1890 Engels invoked the “aristocratic minority” of unionized workers.²⁷ In the United States, this issue was inseparable from that of racial and ethnic minorities: in England Marx also emphasized the antagonism between the English and the Irish.²⁸ What was new about Engels’ 1892 Preface to *The Condition of the Working Class in England* was his connecting this phenomenon to British industrial monopoly: a thesis appropriated by Lenin. In that same year, Wilhelm Liebknecht declared at the Socialist Congress: “The majority of you are certainly, for the most part, aristocrats of labor, insofar as income is concerned.”²⁹ The German Left went beyond a sociological view in understanding that a certain kind of workers struggle, in a calm period, gives rise to structures which immediately turn against the revolution. Lenin, on the other hand, saw in this phenomenon nothing but the corruption of one part of the workers who held the leadership of the movement: he might have asked himself how this minority could have led the movement against the wishes of the majority. In regard to which Lenin logically deduced that one must re-conquer these organizations, while the Left perceived them as the products of a non-revolutionary phase and, consequently, as structures which must be destroyed. Luxemburg, although she emphasized the trade unions’ regressive role, did not address this problem (see *Reform and Revolution*). But her opposition to the trade unions had its origin in her distrust of purely economic action, since she saw this as jeopardizing socialist *education*. The respect (in her case one cannot speak of fetishism³⁰) which Luxemburg had for the existing workers organizations, and which was well-evidenced by her refusal to create new schismatic organizations, was an aspect of her fetishism of education which she shared with the immense majority of the revolutionaries of her time.

Between 1910 and 1912, Pannekoek made a theoretical “breakthrough” by evoking the proletariat’s need to create new organs of power, which meant that the proletariat could not use parliament as a political form. Pannekoek defined the proletariat’s need to exercise *Machtmittel*, instruments of force or of power, which Bricianer translated as “elements of force”.³¹ Such an idea illustrates the complexity of Pannekoek’s thought and the twists and turns of subversive theory. Much later, Bordiga would define the communist movement as a question of “force” rather than one of “form”.³² Lenin rendered homage to Pannekoek in 1917, in *State and Revolution*, but also accused him of not having drawn all the conclusions which follow from this idea. The critique was probably justified, but Lenin continued to nourish illusions about the pre-1914 socialist movement. Pannekoek, furthermore, implicitly criticized Kautsky’s (and also Lenin’s) view of class consciousness. His great merit was having discerned communism in the

²⁶ E. Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries. Contemporary Essays*, Weidenfeld-Nicolson, 1973, p. 121.

²⁷ Marx and Engels: *Le Syndicalisme*, Maspero, Vol. I, 1972, p. 195.

²⁸ Cf. the texts collected in J.-P. Carasso: *La rumeur irlandaise*, Champ Libre, 1969.

²⁹ Marks: p. 354.

³⁰ Cf. *Questions d’organisation de la sociale-démocratie russe*, Spartacus, 1946. English translation: “Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy”, in *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*, ed. Dick Howard, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1971, pp. 283-308.

³¹ *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils*.

³² *Eléments d’orientation* (1946), reproduced in *Invariance*, No. 7 and as a pamphlet, Ed. Programme Communiste, 1972.

nature of the class, and not just as a *program*. But rather than in its deepest being he discerned it in its organization. His preoccupation with “spontaneity” was not focused on the self-destruction of the proletariat as such: that is, as commodified human activity reappropriating the means of life and with these its humanity. He discerned the rise of the proletariat in its forms rather than its content, because its content was hardly discernable in that era.

In September, 1918, Radek recognized Pannekoek’s contribution, saying that the existing political forms, even the most democratic, must not be used, although he did not say what new institutions would replace them. But these two questions—the State and the labor aristocracy—highlighted the differences between Lenin and Pannekoek. Lenin was animated by the will to seize power, which involved advocating the destruction of the old State (and not its conquest as he had long thought, thus imitating almost all the world’s social democrats). But he did not understand the “how”, he did not see what was potentially contradictory in the proletariat’s being which would rise to the fore in a revolutionary period: this explains his exaggeration of the “Party”.³³ Quite unlike his usual views on the matter, the short shrift given to the idea of the Party in *State and Revolution* is neither a trick to flatter the workers nor something positive about which one should be pleased. *State and Revolution* simply testifies to one facet of Lenin’s contradiction, sometimes inclining towards an exaggeration of the role of the Party (*What is to be Done?*), and at other times allowing for democratic self-management (*State and Revolution*, which does not prevent this book from being an excellent revolutionary text). The way he dealt with the example of the Commune is significant; he once again took up Marx’s position, which is, however, susceptible to criticism, in *The Civil War in France*.³⁴ Pannekoek, however, did not explicitly refer to 1871, concerning which he had a more lucid and quite well-justified judgment.³⁵ It is also true that his ideas about the labor aristocracy had influenced Lenin and Zinoviev,³⁶ but Pannekoek viewed the issue from a different angle. Later experience would show that Lenin and Pannekoek would deduce the opposite conclusions from their analyses of the labor aristocracy. What is essential is not denouncing a privileged minority, but understanding the (inevitable) expansion of reformist activity among all the workers organized in trade unions, parties, etc., and seeing that the revolution must be made outside of these institutions. Between 1910 and 1912, Pannekoek began to be aware of this, denying that the trade unions and parties could be used as structures of proletarian power: the proletariat must therefore create new organs for this purpose. He would later understand that the revolution must be made not *outside* of the classical organizations, but *against* them. Lenin, on the other hand, fought and would continue to fight for the impossible conquest of these organizations, upon certain class bases, and through the creation of “new” trade-union-type organizations, which involved the same kind of activity conducted by the old reformist trade unions, which is to say reformist activity.

Lenin did not understand the proletarian experience of his time in its most profound aspects. He was only able to theorize a few of its most essential orientations: his best efforts (his defeatist position in 1914) were *negative*. From the moment that the proletariat of the advanced capitalist countries engaged in revolutionary action, Lenin was superseded. Then, at that precise moment, although he was not situated at the most advanced stage attained by the movement,

³³ Authier: *Les débuts du mouvement ouvrier russe*, in Trotsky: *Rapport de la délégation sibérienne*, Spartacus, 1970, and the postscripts by P. Guillaume and G. Dauvé in Kautsky’s *Les trois sources du marxisme*, Spartacus, 1969.

³⁴ It is true that this view can be contrasted with other texts of a private and confidential character: cf. *La Commune de 1871*, UGE, 1971. In 1905, Lenin warned against imitating the Commune: “it was a movement which our movement must not copy” (quoted by Haupt in *Le mouvement social*, April-June 1972, p. 213).

³⁵ Pannekoek and the Workers Councils.

³⁶ Zinoviev: *The War and the Crisis of Socialism*, written in 1915-16, published in 1917 (influenced by Michels).

he imposed his will. Lenin's success at the head of the Russian Party and the CI is the theoretical and organizational expression of the historical compromise: the proletariat *attacked* society without *destroying it*. This is why Lenin became the highest expression of a *combative* but not a *communist* movement. The experiences acquired during this assault would survive, but they would be deformed and truncated by capital: this is Leninism, a tendency which was nonetheless revolutionary in its origins, despite its weak points. The communist left, however, the expression of the most radical but also one of the least popular aspects of the movement, would be crushed.

Chapter 4

War and Radicalization

1914 and Democracy

On August 4, 1914, the socialist parliamentary delegation, including the left, voted in favor of the war budget. Only one socialist deputy, F. Kunert, abstained, but did not give his gesture any political significance. The parliamentary delegation obeyed the decision of the SPD Central Committee. The socialist trade unions did the same, and announced their opposition to all strikes and their support for participation in the war effort. All strikes were declared illegal. The anarchosindicalist trade unions rejected the sacred union (*Burgfrieden*, or “civic truce”) and were immediately outlawed and subjected to mass arrests.

The 1907 Stuttgart Congress of the Socialist International had ended in a compromise which raised the hopes of the Left. The Lenin-Martov-Luxemburg amendment, which proclaimed that, in case of war, the “economic and political crisis created by the war should be used... to precipitate the destruction of capitalist rule,” had no practical force since the International was quite careful not to authorize the means to implement such a policy.¹ It was a respectable institution, recognized by the international bourgeoisie, which even as late as 1913 had expectations of being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize: had the war not taken place, it would quite likely have been awarded the prize in 1914.

Some groups and individuals then proclaimed the “collapse” of the Second International: the Bolsheviks, Bordiga and the left wing of the Italian Socialist Party, Pannekoek and Gorter, the Serbian Socialist Party, etc. The French, German and English parties accepted the war. The other two important parties (their importance was not merely numerical), the Russian and the Italian parties, had quite distinct positions. The two factions of the Russian Party, which in reality constituted two distinct parties, did not abandon the struggle against their own government. Italy did not enter the war at first: while an important minority took a revolutionary position on the war which was similar to that of the Zimmerwald Left, the majority of the PSI adopted a completely pacifist position, and was quite content not to have to take up a position between the two lines of fire. When Italy did enter the war, the PSI decided to “neither support nor sabotage” the sacred union. The Zimmerwald Left spoke of a “social pacifism” equivalent to “social patriotism” in other circumstances.

The different positions adopted by the Socialist Parties cannot be understood if one inters oneself in the logic of the parties themselves. The parties represented the general tendency of the proletariat in each country: almost total support on the part of the French and English proletariat for the war, a more subdued adherence on the part of the German proletariat, which would be transformed into rebellion against the war, and Russian proletarian defeatism. France was a democracy and its proletariat had not yet recovered from the defeat of the Commune: it was reformist (sometimes violently so) and was not oriented towards the State (whether democratic or not). In Germany, not only was the workers movement more powerful before 1914, but it still had the goal of realizing democracy in its country, something which, in those circumstances, was a goal which had to be approached on the level of the State. In Russia, not only was

¹ Haupt: *Le congrès manqué*, Maspero, 1965, pp. 25-27.

it a question, as in Germany, of changing the form of the State, but also of replacing it with a new one and changing society itself, of carrying out the bourgeois revolution in its entirety, since the Russian bourgeoisie was incapable of doing so.

In France, the SFIO and the trade unions marshaled the proletariat under the banner of defense of their democratic conquests against Prussian absolutism, overlooking the fact that in doing so it had to ally itself with a distinctly more reactionary absolutism: czarism. In Germany, the SPD's rallying call was the defense of European civilization against Asian barbarism. In Russia, no slogan of this kind was possible. The proletariat once again took up the defeatist attitude it had displayed in the Russo-Japanese War: the military collapse of czarism in a foreign conflict would once again be the signal for a revolution at home, as in 1905. The Russian proletariat underwent a process of radicalization. After 1915, mutinies spread throughout the army. Lenin and the Bolsheviks became the leaders of the Zimmerwald Left.

The positions of the various proletariats and workers parties revolved around the defense or conquest of democracy. On a world scale there was just one proletariat. Generally, it sought improvements within the framework of the existing mode of production. The reformism of the West and the democratic revolutionism of the East were two aspects of the same reality. One could say that the proletariat participated in these two aspects. Even in Russia, the proletariat had to assure the conditions for the extension of the capitalist mode of production by destroying all the vestiges of previous modes of production. It carried out the tasks of the bourgeois revolution. In Russia as in all the western countries, the proletariat stood alone, because the communist revolution never took place: the proletariat itself was universally enlisted in the effort to reform capital's economic and political rule. In Germany, where the proletariat was potentially powerful on a social scale (and not on the political level, as in Russia), the most radical tendencies of the era arose, oriented towards communism. In Russia, the isolated proletariat would exhaust itself and be submerged in capitalist tasks. In Germany, however, after the democratic "revolution" of November 1918, all that was left to achieve was the proletarian revolution.

Developments within the SPD

As of August 2, 1914, the trade unions banned all strikes. When General Ludendorff grumbled about all this trade union support, an Undersecretary of State responded in the following manner: "There is no doubt that we cannot win the war without the good will of the industrial workers. No one, of course, has so much influence over these workers as the trade union leaders. Without these leaders, and *a fortiori* against them, we can do nothing. Their influence rests upon the actions which they have successfully led for decades with the intention of improving the workers' situation... it is inconceivable how we could resist if this had not been the case..."² The CI would never go so far in its analyses.

On August 4, the left wing of the SPD parliamentary delegation, K. Liebknecht and Otto Rühle, yielded to Party discipline (Luxemburg was not a deputy). Taken as a whole, however, the social democratic edifice, including the trade unions, was already beginning to crumble. The rate and methods by which the various tendencies would regroup in different organizations can be examined on three levels: parliament, party and the workers movement, with each influencing the others, especially from the bottom up, as the development of the workers movement was the foundation of the development of the left radical and centrist groups.

² Badia: *Histoire de l'Allemagne contemporaine*, Ed. Sociales, Vol. I, p. 62.

It was on the parliamentary level that the splits appeared and crystallized most quickly. The parliamentary apparatus, and, consequently, the reactionary tendency, possessed a monopoly of information due to the very nature of such an organization. Liebknecht had to go to Holland and to the various German States in order to be rapidly convinced that the opposition was not restricted to Berlin, where a small group had formed around Luxemburg, Mehring, etc., and where important working class sectors of the Party supported the opposition. On December 2, he was the first deputy to vote against the new war credits. Haase, leader of the centrist opposition to the war and future leader of the USPD, justified the vote for war credits in the name of the Party due to the need for national defense. On February 7, 1915, Liebknecht was mobilized, along with other known opponents of the war.

The tide of events would push Rühle, and then some twenty other deputies, towards the opposition. In February of 1915, Luxemburg was imprisoned for the first time during the war, and would not be released until February 1916. While in prison she wrote *The Crisis of Social Democracy*, also known as the *Junius Pamphlet* after her pseudonym (see below). An international women's peace conference convened in Berne in March 1915. The Germans were represented by Zetkin. The Russians would, for the first time, hear the voice of the international left, but the majority of the latter was still pacifist. This conference was preceded by a demonstration of a thousand women in front of the Reichstag: it was the first demonstration of the political opposition since the beginning of the war. During this same period, the oppositionist Stuttgart Party section stopped paying its dues to the Party leadership, which amounted to a split. On March 20, Rühle followed Liebknecht and refused to vote for the national budget, which the SPD approved for the first time in its history. Thirty deputies did not attend the parliamentary session so as not to participate in the vote. A series of women's demonstrations led to the arrest of Zetkin. An international conference of socialist youth adopted a position against the war. The news from Zimmerwald, the passage of numerous Party sections to the opposition, the founding of the ISD and the first hunger riots led 18 centrist deputies into open opposition in December.

In early 1916, all these oppositionists were excluded from the parliamentary delegation. The centrists formed the social democratic Community of Labor (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft*), the nucleus of the future USPD. It was opposed to the SPD leadership's war policy but refused to break with the Party until it was excluded in early 1917.

After the February Revolution in Russia, the German parliament voted for a resolution in favor of peace, in July 1917, in order to undercut the impact of the mass movement against the war. The State, under pressure from its parliament and especially the SPD (who thought they could save the economy from a revolution) also attempted to reform itself in the direction of a parliamentary democracy: the last government before November 1918 would be declared to be responsible before the chamber and would include SPD ministers.

The de-aggregation of the Party's left was paralleled by a reaction on the part of the leadership. For the first time, the old radical current of social democracy was dispersed into numerous groups (prior to 1914, Luxemburg and Kautsky were both known as "radicals"). Later, a process of regroupment culminated in the founding of the USPD, the Spartacus League and the ISD.

The first opposition groups formed primarily in Hamburg, around Wolffheim and Laufenberg, and in Bremen, where the group included the majority of the socialist organization and could express its views in the *Bremer Bürger-Zeitung*, which from the very start of the war took a firm stand: "everything which we have said until now would amount to nothing but

empty words unless we uphold our positions *during* and *after* the war.”³ Groups also formed in Dresden, Gotha, Brunswick, Weimar, Nürnberg, Leipzig, Halle and various neighborhoods in Berlin. The Berlin *Vorwärts* was in the hands of the opposition and Rühle issued calls for a split.

The loyal branches of the Party diminished in number: after Stuttgart, Duisberg (summer 1916) and Bremen (December 1916) ceased to pay the Party leadership their statutory 20% dues quota. Numerous groups and individuals chose to leave the Party: of its 1,000,000 members in 1914, only 200,000 remained in the SPD at the time of its September 1917 Congress.

The leadership’s policy was to fire the editors of its papers who did not support its directives, and to replace them with more docile editorial teams. In Berlin the affair took on the appearance of a police operation, and was known by the name of the “Vorwärts Robbery”: hence the occupation of the premises of the newspaper during the revolution, the rank and file wanting to recover “its” organ of expression.

The ISD

The ISD was formed in September 1915. It was the smallest of the radical currents, but it was the precursor of the postwar German Left. Its theoretical spokesperson before the war was Pannekoek. After August 4, 1914, only a few oppositionist groups decided to definitively break with the SPD and with everything the latter represented and entailed. The two most important groups were the Berlin group around the journal *Lichstrahlen* (Rays of Light), and the Bremen and Brunswick groups around Radek, which then comprised the German ultra-left.

Upon definitively breaking with the SPD, these groups explained the supposed betrayal of 1914 as being due to the social democratic form of organization itself. They wanted a new form of organization in which complete democracy would prevail: the delegates must be revocable at any moment, under the constant vigilance of the rank and file, etc. In this manner the formation of a layer of bureaucrats living on the members’ dues, the “bonzes” who become conservatives (in politics as well) in order to preserve their positions, would be prevented. One of the principle refrains of the German Revolution began to be heard: denunciation of the leaders, praise for the masses.

Lichstrahlen was founded in 1913 by Julian Borchardt. The very title of the magazine clearly indicated its enlightenment goal: to clarify the consciousness of the masses so they could take measures to free themselves from the influence of leaders.⁴ (Knowledge of the currents involved in the origins of the German Left is important in order to form an accurate idea of the latter.) Pannekoek, who was in close contact with the Bremen group, carried out a much more profound analysis of the causes of the apparent betrayal of 1914: the socialist parties corresponded to the pre-imperialist period of capitalism, a period characterized by the growth of the capitalist social form, in which the workers struggles could achieve real reforms. The socialist parties were structured on the basis of this situation. The body of the Party is the high authority, at the political level, for conducting the negotiations which lead to obtaining improvements in the material conditions of the proletariat. The Party had become well-adapted to this function, wherein revolutionary action (in which the masses directly intervene without any need for someone to act in their place, that is, in which they are no longer masses but a *class*, and poten-

³ Walling, p. 268. Cf. Humbert Droz, *L'origine de la IC*, La Baconnière, 1968; and Gankin and Fisher, *The Bolsheviks and the World War*, Stanford University Press and Oxford University Press, 1940.

⁴ H. M. Bock: *Syndikalismus und Linkskommunismus*, Marburger Abhandlungen für Politischen Wissenschaft, Vol. 13, 1969, p. 72.

tially humanity) appears to the social democratic organization as a dangerous perspective, in general but above all in regard to its own preservation.⁵

Besides the fact that it did not join the ISD, the Hamburg group was most notable for its connection to the revolutionary movement in the USA: the IWW (*Industrial Workers of the World*). Wolffheim had been a militant in the IWW in California for several years. The views expressed by Wolffheim and Laufenberg in *Democracy and Organization* were similar to the ideology of the IWW (see Chapter 9).⁶ Their ideas also presaged German *unionism* (the AAU and AAU-E). Workers should not, they said, organize and struggle while grouped by trades and skills (as in the trade unions) because the structure of capitalism had changed since the formation of the first trade unions. Trades had long since ceased to be the basic economic units and consequently were no longer the locus of the class struggle of the proletariat. This unit was now the factory and, at a higher level, the industry. Against the monopolization and trustification of capitalism in its many forms, the workers could not prosecute an effective struggle unless they monopolized and trustified themselves at their workplaces, factory by factory, and then by industry: “To the monopolized form of industry corresponds, on the workers’ side, the pure industrial union on the basis of the factory organization.”⁷ This would, in addition, permit the still “unorganized” workers to join the struggle.

In September of 1915, various groups and individuals (among others, the Russian Bolsheviks and Mensheviks) held a conference in Zimmerwald attended by all the currents of international social democracy which were opposed to the Second International’s policy since the onset of the war, in order to build a new worldwide revolutionary organization. The internationalists, few in number, could be counted on the fingers of two hands.

From Germany, the following were represented at Zimmerwald: the *International* group (the future Spartacus League: see below); the Bremen and Brunswick groups (represented by Radek); the Berlin group (Borchardt); as well as the centrists Ledebour and Hoffmann who took as their basis the proclamation of Kautsky, Haase and Bernstein demanding a peace treaty, without attacking the leadership of the SPD.

On the fundamental question of what attitude to adopt concerning social democracy, a split developed between the left and the center. The Mensheviks (Martov) and the future Spartacists joined the centrists. They rejected an immediate split and spoke of re-conquering social democracy. The left (the Bolsheviks, Roland-Holst⁸ representing the Dutch SDP Left, and the delegates from Bremen, Brunswick and Berlin) voted for a resolution which stated, among other things:⁹

“Social-patriotism and social-imperialism, defended in Germany by both the majority which is openly patriotic of the old social democrats, as well as by the so-called centrists grouped around Kautsky... is an even more dangerous enemy of the proletariat than the bourgeois advocacy of imperialism, because social-imperialism, outrageously claiming to be the standard-bearer of socialism, can lead unenlightened workers into error” (*un-aufgeklärte*, always *Aufklärung*, the clarification of consciousness).

The resolution saw only a spiritual problem of consciousness where it was above all a matter of the relation of forces. But even at the level of the relation of forces its analyses seemed to

⁵ “L’imperialisme et les tâches du prolétariat”, *Vorbote*, No. 1, 1916.

⁶ Guerin: *Le mouvement ouvrier aux USA*, Maspero, 1968.

⁷ Bock: p. 79.

⁸ Roland-Holst: she left the small “Internationalist Group” to join the SDP in 1916.

⁹ Bock: p. 69.

be correct because, after the war, social democracy was the only effective counterrevolutionary force. Gorter's *Imperialism, the World War and Social Democracy* (1915) developed the major theses of the Zimmerwald Left: transforming the war into a civil war and creating a new international. It also contains an implicit critique of the thesis concerning the labor bureaucracy: it was the whole proletariat (and not just its highest layers) which had been "corrupted", that is, it had seen its material situation improve through its struggles, thanks to the rise in the rate of profit in the preceding period.

Gorter and Pannekoek, who could not attend the Zimmerwald Conference, supported the left. Pannekoek and Roland-Holst sent money (the SDP did not want to become involved in this kind of activity). They were entrusted with editing and publishing a German-language international organ, *Vorbote* (the Precursor), whose other collaborators were Lenin, Radek, Zinoviev and Gorter. Only two issues appeared as a result of disputes within the small group, due in part to the Bolsheviks' sensitivities. One such dispute, for example, involved Roland-Holst and Trotsky.¹⁰

This collaboration within the framework of the Zimmerwald Left is one of the elements which help to explain the German Left's misunderstandings concerning the Bolshevik seizure of power and the Third International at the time of its founding. When Lenin and the leadership of the Third International began to attack the "leftists", the latter would long believe that this was a result of a lack of information.

The Bolsheviks, and the German, Dutch, Bulgarian and Italian Lefts, were unique in their espousal during the war of the revolutionary position against social democracy and their advocacy of the realistic and revolutionary watchword: no to peace, transform the war between nations into a civil war to seize power.

It was upon this set of positions that the Bremen, Brunswick and Berlin Lefts founded the *Internationale Sozialisten Deutschlands* (ISD): the International Socialists of Germany. Their organ was *Lichstrahlen* and later, after that journal was shut down in April 1916, the Bremen *Arbeiterpolitik* (Workers Politics), published after the SPD took over the *Bremer Bürger-Zeitung* in June 1916.¹¹ In December of 1916 they ceased to pay their dues to the SPD leadership and were joined by the radicals of Brunswick and Hamburg, although the latter did not immediately enter the ISD. Numerous individual members and entire sections of the Spartacus League were in agreement with the ISD's views concerning the need to create a left radical organization totally independent of social democracy: the Dresden sections (Rühle), for example, and those of Frankfurt and Duisburg. One can thus understand why, while it was less important during the war than Spartacus, the ISD or at least its theses enjoyed the support of the majority at the founding Congress of the German CP (see Chapter 6).

The two touchstones of the left at the founding Congress of the German CP would, in effect, be electoral abstentionism and sabotage of the trade unions. These two positions were arrived at by the ISD in the course of its theoretical development, greatly influenced by the workers movement during the war. It was in *Arbeiterpolitik* that, for the first time, the watchword of the German Revolution appeared: *Heraus den Gewerkschaften!* (Out of the Trade Unions!), at first to be subjected to criticism, and later to be adopted. Much the same thing took place regarding the concept of the *unitary organization* which was expressed for the first time in

¹⁰ F. Kool: *Die Linke gegen die Parteiherrschaft*, Walter-Verlag, Olten et Freiburg im Breisgau, Switzerland, 1970, pp. 90-91. Lenin considered Roland-Holst and Trotsky to be Zimmerwald "centrists": cf. *Oeuvres*, Vol. 21, Ed. Sociales, 1969, pp. 323 and 465.

¹¹ According to Waldman, most members of the *Lichstrahlen* would later join the *Linksradiakalen* of northern Germany: pp. 45-46.

1917 in the same journal. This idea would be re-appropriated and further elaborated by Wolffheim and Laufenberg, providing the first theoretical foundations of the AAU. But the German Left went beyond the IWW: instead of basing itself on economic organizations which rejected politics, it wanted to positively overcome the rupture between political and economic organizations. Finally, the critique of social democracy and its methods led the ISD to the rejection of parliamentarism as a tactic which fatally led to the domination of the parliamentary delegation over the rest of the Party which would thus become the instrument for purely electoral ends. The later theoretical elaborations of this current are clearly of great interest today: *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, by Pannekoek, as well as three texts by Rühle: *The Revolution is Not a Party Matter!*, *Fundamental Questions of Organization*, and *From the Bourgeois to the Proletarian Revolution*.

The USPD

As the Left maintained, the USPD was a “party of leaders”, created by “leaders” to lead the “masses”. At the beginning of 1917, after a national conference of oppositionists, which was attended by the social democratic Community of Labor, the Spartacus League and *Lichstrahlen* (these groups contributing 111, 34 and 7 delegates, respectively) and which voted to remain in the SPD, the Community of Labor and the Spartacists were excluded from the SPD. In April, the centrists created the USPD, the Independent Social Democratic Party, which the Spartacus League joined as an autonomous group. It was an important party which would receive 2.5 million votes in the 1919 elections. Drawn from the SPD Left, which comprised many of its sections, it had its own trade union organization in the “revolutionary shop stewards” (see below), an oppositionist trade union organization born during the war.

The Independents denounced the existing German State as “the State of the Middle Classes” and wanted a State of the working class.¹² This position differs from both Bernstein’s stance at the turn of the century which was in favor of an SPD-Liberal alliance, as well as from that of the defenders of imperialism, who were supporters of a working class-big capital alliance against the liberal bourgeoisie and the middle classes, a program which would be more or less realized by the Nazis. The USPD extended traditional liberalism by mixing it with a laborism of workers ideology. The numerous workers who supported it were against the revolution as well as the authoritarianism and bureaucratism of the SPD and the ADGB. Historically, this Party expressed the ambiguous character of a (numerous) fraction of workers whose confusion would be augmented by defeat.

In conformity with its dualism, it was the Party where all compromises found a place. Whenever its left wing launched or reactivated an action, it began negotiating from the very moment that the action appeared to become dangerous to the established order. It had a left wing which took to the streets (the Spartacists, at the beginning, and leaders like Ledebour who had connections with the shop stewards), and a right wing which undertook parliamentary maneuvers. After the sailors had established contact with the USPD during the summer of 1917 (see the next Chapter), it abandoned them the moment they were repressed and denied any responsibility for their actions. A leader of the USPD declared: “We have tried to channel the justified indignation of the masses into legal political action.”¹³ These “pure” social democrats

¹² L. O’Boyle: *American Historical Review*, July, 1951, “The German Independent Socialists during the First World War.”

¹³ Badia: p. 81.

wanted social democracy without its natural consequence: social democracy's counterrevolutionary future. Their critique, like Luxemburg's, was directed at the "official authorities", the "current leaders" of the SPD, but never at the SPD as such.

The USPD was the German expression of the international phenomenon Lenin designated as "centrism": the center of the Italian SP under Serrati, the Independent Labour Party in England, the majority of the SFIO in France. Yet this center would be the object of the CI's efforts to swell the ranks of the CPs. For the revolutionaries, centrism was defined and fought on the basis of its dynamic: blocking the evolution of reformist positions towards radical action. The USPD would play this role to perfection.

The Spartacist League

The Spartacist League included both the future rightist leaders of the KPD (Luxemburg, Leo Jogisches, Levi, Pieck--the future president of the GDR--Zetkin), as well as future KAPists (Rühle, Bergmann, Meyer). Others, like Liebknecht, occupied an intermediate position in the revolution.

The Spartacist League suffered from a problem which would be reproduced on a larger scale during the KPD's first few months: a left majority and a right-wing leadership, with the left not daring to make a clean break to join the ISD. In 1915, the Spartacist League was known as the International group, which was the name of the single issue of a journal which it published. In 1916 it became the Spartacist Group or League: starting in January 1916, Luxemburg published a series of political letters under the signature of "Spartacus", and the "Spartacus" journal appeared in September. Its two theoreticians were Liebknecht and Luxemburg. For his valiant and spectacular opposition to the war, Liebknecht was the most popular of the "social democratic leaders" in Germany. He was the first to refuse to vote for war credits. For having shouted "Down with the war! Down with the government!" at the May Day demonstration in 1916, he was arrested and condemned to a sentence of four years in prison, etc. It was in prison where he elaborated his positions, which are summarized below.

If Luxemburg was the author of the formula, "After August 4, 1914, social democracy is nothing but a nauseating corpse," she proved to be quite a necrophiliac. She played a perfectly reactionary role, utilizing all the resources of her dialectic and all her authority to prevent the revolutionaries from cutting the ties which bound them to that "corpse" under the pretext that the masses were found there and that they must not separate themselves from them. Her trenchant formulas and intricate dialectics often concealed a lack of deep analysis:

"However laudable and understandable the impatience and bitterness which today lead the best elements to leave the Party (we should recall that 4/5 of the Party has thus abandoned it), flight is still flight. For us, this means a betrayal of the masses who are struggling and suffocating, caught in the snares of the Scheidemanns and the Legiens (socialist leader and the leader of the ADGB, respectively), who enjoy the favor of the bourgeoisie. One can 'leave' small sects and little cults when they no longer please, in order to found new sects and new cults. To attempt, by means of a simple "departure", to free the proletarian masses from the horribly heavy and disastrous yoke of the bourgeoisie and to thus set a good example for them, is purely imaginary. To entertain the illusion of freeing the masses by tearing up the militants' membership cards is nothing but the inverted expression of the fetishism of the Party membership card

as an illusory power. Both these attitudes are merely different poles of institutional cretinism, an illness inherent to the old social democracy.”¹⁴

The *Spartacus Letter* of March 30, 1916, concerning the founding of the Community of Labor, concluded in this fashion: “The watchword is neither schism, nor unity, nor new party, nor old party, but the *re-conquest of the Party from the bottom up* by means of the rebellion of the masses who must take their organizations and instruments into their own hands, not with a rebellion of words, but of deeds.”

This tactic was similar to the centrist position of the Spartacists at Zimmerwald: refusing to publicly denounce the Kautskyist center and to accept Lenin’s and Gorter’s, *et al.*, slogans against the war, Luxemburg and Liebknecht underwent the following evolution. At first, they propagandized in favor of a “just” peace without annexations, defined as a “socialist peace”. At the meeting of the SPD shop stewards held in Charlottenburg on December 30, 1914, Liebknecht proposed a vote on a “Resolution on the nature of the war and the tasks of the working class” in which he said: “The goal of the socialists is to obtain through struggle a peace without annexations, without humiliating any country, and to do everything possible to reinforce the movement for such a socialist peace in all countries concerned.” Later, the conclusion of the *Junius Pamphlet* (“Theses on the Tasks of International Social Democracy”) launched the slogan “War against War”, which was susceptible of many different interpretations. Luxemburg would long remain bound to the socialist conception of the war. Jaurés’s phrase is well-known: “Capitalism brings war the way clouds bring a storm.” The Zimmerwald Left went so far as to add a third term: war leads to revolution. The slogan, “War against War” remains in the social democratic camp.

Liebknecht developed an original position on organization. He had seen that, except for those made by Pannekoek, the “leftist” critiques of the social democratic form of organization were quite superficial and effectively revealed a degree of organizational fetishism. He attempted to oppose to an organizational form which favored the leaders and the counterrevolution, another form which would favor the “self-activity of the masses”. This leftist point of view was expounded by Liebknecht in his prison writings and was shared by the majority of the Spartacist League:

“To eliminate the paid bureaucracy, or to exclude it from all decision-making processes; to limit it to technical labor; to prohibit the re-election of all officials, after a maximum time served... , to reduce the power of high-level positions; *decentralization*; vote by the rank and file on all important questions (veto power)... To teach the masses and individuals intellectual and moral independence, to question authority, to take the initiative and personal responsibility, so that each person would be prepared for and capable of free action: all these things comprise the only sure foundation for the development of a workers movement which would be equal to its historic tasks, in general, and this is also the precondition and essential basis for the extirpation of the bureaucratic danger.”¹⁵

Luxemburg did not want to become involved in this kind of critique. She broke with social democracy, but only reluctantly, and helped retard the construction of a new, entirely autonomous radical organization. Her 1904 polemic with Lenin, however, showed that she was by no means a devotee of organizational fetishism.¹⁶ It is impossible to agree with Laufenberg when, in 1920, he wrote in *Communism versus Spartacism*: “Luxemburg never freed herself from

¹⁴ Quoted by Bock, p. 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁶ “Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy”, *op. cit.*

the social democratic form of *organization*.” Laufenberg’s critique issued from the mystified point of view expressed by Liebknecht above. All the debates within the German Left are generally very confused.

There was, then, an important Left, which was even in the majority within the Spartacist League; but it did not distinguish itself in relation to its centrist leadership, represented by Luxemburg. The Spartacist League itself remained an autonomous group within the USPD, which, for its part, never lost hope of reunification with the SPD.

Labor Agitation and the “Shop Stewards”

All strikes were prohibited by the trade unions as a “betrayal of our brothers at the front”. As a result, everything was very clear from the beginning on the labor front, as far as organizations were concerned: in every strike, a new organization was born in each factory, led by the “revolutionary shop stewards”. These men were generally regularly-elected trade union delegates who did not follow the official line of the ADGB’s Central Committee. The new structures were based on the *factory*, and these factory organizations (*BO*, *Betriebsorganisation*) were organized by *industrial* regions (for example, the workers council of Greater Berlin), in accordance with the technical structure of capital during that era. This form of organization would be adopted and theorized by the German Left (KAPD, AAU), and was also the embryo of the future workers councils. The shop stewards held effective leadership over all strikes, and called them off without any negotiations when they felt that the strike movement was in no position to make the State back down. Starting and stopping strikes almost at will, the shop stewards were the most authentic expression of the labor rank and file at that time: they comprised its executive organ. Constantly spreading, the strikes were supposed to have terminated in the insurrectionary general strike. The shop stewards would elaborate a plan for November 1918 along such lines which, as it turned out, could not be executed: once again, it became obvious that the revolution would begin spontaneously before the D-Day foreseen by all the leaders. Later, when this revolution directly posed problems at the level of the State, once the struggle became directly political, the shop stewards in fact proved incapable of leading it: they generally rallied to the USPD as their political party. Incapable of transcending the limitations of the factory, they left it only in order to fall prey to the limitations of political democracy. Opposed to mass action, which they considered to be “revolutionary gymnastics”, the *Revolutionäre Obleute* (*RO*) proved that the mere fact of their working class and factory background did not confer upon them any more immunity against opportunism and immediatism than was the case with social groups “outside” the factories. The most radical sectors of the proletariat (the “left”) would not clearly emerge until the revolution.

The first disturbances were hunger riots accompanied by looting of stores, in October 1915 in Chemnitz, and later, during May-June 1916, demonstrations were held in numerous cities in solidarity with Liebknecht, who was on trial at the time for his seditious outbursts. In March-April 1917, a new wave of strikes took place. On April 16, what has come to be known as the first workers council in Germany was born in Leipzig; it was called a “committee” and was composed for the most part of members of the USPD, with a democratic pacifist and reformist program. The goals of the workers movement did not surpass this level until November 1918: but its direct methods allowed a glimpse beyond its initial goals.

The movements in the provinces were followed by a large strike in Berlin (250,000 workers) which spread like wildfire to central Germany from April 16 to 23 of 1917. On the 19th, the Knorr-Bremse factory elected a workers council with Spartacist tendencies. This strike was

so significant that the ADGB permanent committee took the decision to compel new elections: the old rightists were replaced by new rightists. It was the first manifestation of the democratic offensive, a procedure which was to be extensively employed during the revolution.

The strikes of January 1918 were an extension of the strikes in Austria. Their international purpose was to exert pressure on the German and Austrian negotiators at Brest-Litovsk. Except for the latter, the movement's goals were identical, but the strike was observed by more than one million workers. At the end of 1918, at the time of the "revolution", the proletariat would again take up the attitude of the strikers of January, and it would be defeated. The expansion of the strike simultaneously made it clear how the various political groups were excluded from the practical initiatives which originated among the rank and file, only later managing to take control of the movement: at the time of the announcement of the events in Austria, the atmosphere in Berlin was dominated by strikes. The USPD was sympathetic and the Spartacists supported the strike, which was ultimately decided upon by the shop stewards. 400,000 workers did not go to work and elected a "Russian-style" council composed of delegates from all the city's factories (analogous to the St. Petersburg Soviet), which had 400 delegates. The delegates in turn elected an Action Committee composed of eleven shop stewards who, despite protests, then co-opted three members of the USPD and three members of the SPD. The USPD representatives were Ledebour, Haase (who had justified the SPD's vote for war credits while Liebknecht argued against it) and Dittmann (who became famous in Kiel when his party abandoned the sailors: see the next Chapter). The SPD representatives were Scheidemann, Braun and Ebert; the latter would later declare, in order to justify his action to his party's extreme right, that he had only joined this Action Committee in order to sabotage the movement.¹⁷

The strike spread in Berlin and in all the large cities (with more than one million workers on strike). The government's reaction was violent: the Berlin factories and the shipyards of Hamburg and Kiel were placed under martial law. The SPD pushed for negotiations, the Spartacists wanted the disturbances to lead to insurrection, but the shop stewards called an end to the movement on February 3.

¹⁷ Badia: pp. 87-88.

Chapter 5

The 1918 “November Revolution”

Prior to November 9

The revolution began among the sailors of the German fleet at Kiel, the major Baltic port. They had mutinied during the summer of 1917 and were crushed: some were imprisoned, others executed. Like the workers, they organized their revolt through revolutionary shop stewards. They had established contact with the USPD Local (Dittmann), which then disavowed them during the repression of their summer 1917 revolt. They had also been in contact with the workers at the Kiel shipyard and the arsenal. At the end of October 1918, the High Command of the German Navy decided upon one last battle. The sailors refused to set sail and seized the ships, and later took over the city. A workers and sailors council was formed which took control of the city on November 4.

Their attitude and program were quite pacifist: peace, democracy and recognition of the workers. This was the program of all the councils which were born in that first phase. They took the form of the Russian workers and soldiers soviets. They were based on cities, neighborhoods or the various military units. Their form was unlike that of the enterprise or factory councils.

The Kiel council, with an SPD majority, elected Noske as its president, the same person who would later be called the “bloodhound” of the revolution; dispatched to the scene by the SPD leadership, he also took control of the local city government. This fact alone summarizes the whole period: the rebellion chose as its representative the man who had come to squelch it, and he would promptly organize its armed repression.

This tactic of the SPD proved to be more suitable under the circumstances than the one advocated by the government minister from the Catholic *Zentrum* Party, Erzberger, who proposed that Kiel should be militarily assaulted, but could find no one to carry out such a plan. This same Erzberger, who had presented the motion in favor of peace adopted by the Reichstag in July of 1917, would later be assassinated by the extreme right in 1920, at a time when the revolutionaries had other things to attend to than killing ministers: the good democratic souls of the “workers parties” would, of course, utilize the occasion to criticize the sectarianism of the “leftists” who refused to participate in the insipid campaigns in defense of legality, which is an internal affair of the bourgeoisie.

The revolution rapidly spread throughout the whole country, taking Hamburg and Lübeck on November 5. A general strike broke out in Hamburg after the Kiel revolt.¹ Huge crowds seized warships, the port, the trade union headquarters, the central rail station, and the barracks of the city’s regiment (after a gunfight that led to some casualties), and then armed themselves, without taking any further steps. The senate (the local city administration) and the council mutually recognized one another and functioned (or, more accurately, failed to function) alongside each other: it was by no means a situation of *dual power*. Instead of dealing with real problems (food, production in the interests of the population and the revolution, armaments, links with the outside), the council organized elections... for the workers and soldiers

¹ Comfort: Chapter III.

councils, which would cost them three days to prepare. After having seized power, the council immediately relinquished it, seeking legitimacy instead. The president of the council was H. Laufenberg. The council proclaimed “the indissoluble unity of the Russia of the Soviets and the government of the Hamburg councils.” According to Laufenberg, it was the movement in Hamburg which transformed the Kiel revolt into a pan-German phenomenon, which spread to Bremen (where the ISD exercised a great deal of influence), Stuttgart (the first party section to split from the SPD), and later, on the seventh, to Munich.² The demonstrators in Munich proclaimed the Bavarian council republic and freed all political prisoners. At that time, when the councils were just being formed, this council republic appeared to be copied from the “council-republic” of Russia. Its president was Kurt Eisner (USPD).

Unlike the precedence of Paris in French revolutionary history, Berlin fell, under pressure from all the rest of Germany, on the ninth: a “division” of revolutionary sailors (the *Volksmarinedivision*) arrived from Kiel and demonstrators occupied all public buildings. Under the direct democratic pressure of the crowds, the republic was proclaimed by the SPD minister, Scheidemann. Ebert reproached him for such an undemocratic act, since a republic can only be proclaimed by a constituent assembly elected by the people. Scheidemann responded that, had he not done so, the demonstrators would have immediately rallied to Liebknecht. An entirely Social Democratic government was created, called the “Council of Peoples Commissars”, composed of three members of the SPD (Ebert, Scheidemann, Landsberg) and three from the USPD (Haase, Dittmann, Barth). Due to his popularity, Liebknecht had been approached, but had refused to participate: at the head of another demonstration, Liebknecht proclaimed the socialist republic.

Approximately 10,000 councils were established, electing leaders who were in their great majority members of the SPD. Both the leaders of the SPD as well as the Army encouraged this process and helped to form councils: “All power to the Councils”. The council was the form chosen to liquidate the subversive movement, from the very moment of its appearance. The “council-form” is no less a failure than the “party-form”. Yet, even today, in imitation of the Leninists, councilists speak of the council as if it *must* always be a *revolutionary* council, while the latter constituted an exception within the German Revolution. The Leninists speak the same way about the “revolutionary party”, as if it were a magical talisman, despite the fact that it has never existed. These disputes concerning party or council are of no account because they have always lacked and will continue to lack any real historical substance.

The November Revolution took place in a totally unexpected manner for all the parties and groups which attempted to assume its leadership, including, among others, those who were closest to the rank and file, the *RO*, whose plan for an insurrection was rendered superfluous by the wave which spread from Kiel. But the social democracy knew perfectly well how to use this current in its favor, and was all the more pleased when it conformed to its desires. When social democracy took the power which the proletariat had granted it, and which the bourgeoisie was prudent enough to surrender to it, the democratic revolution was already over. The emperor had abdicated after nobody spoke of him anymore. The struggle against the social revolution was initiated and led by the “most powerful workers party in the world” and its peoples commissars, in the name of democracy, the councils and socialism. One of the dangers of democracy is that it preys upon the need to transform our surroundings and of acting in common; a need which is frustrated by capital, which organizes everything according to its own logic, and reduces us to an infantile state in which the isolated individual receives the means to live with-

² See *The Revolution in Hamburg*, in Part Two, below.

out producing them. Democracy is an attempt to simultaneously overcome this isolation and this passivity. The contemporaries of the German Revolution had perceived this quite well. In 1921, W. Roemer explained the advantages of the council system in the following terms:³ in other times the worker had no other opportunities for political activity than that which took place through a political party and through voting in elections, while from now on he participates directly thanks to the council.

The strategies and functions of the various organizations

As far as the bourgeoisie was concerned, the State was momentarily neutralized. Nowhere did the bureaucracy offer any resistance to the formation of councils which, although concentrating all power in their hands wherever they were established, left the old State intact, and demanded that the latter “recognize” them. The Army dissolved, although its officers managed its return to Germany in a more or less orderly and disciplined fashion. There was little fraternization with enemy soldiers. The soldiers who were not immediately reincorporated into civilian life formed councils throughout the country at all levels, from the barracks up to the army corps. They were mostly social democrats, but were utterly useless as a force for direct repression: their purpose was more to immobilize the movement, so as to make it expire from inactivity. Some officers attempted to reestablish the status quo in the Army but could only create the *Freikorps*, paramilitary formations led by officers and *government employees*. The bourgeoisie and its parties did not take any overt action and ceded political power. Under pressure, their parties changed their names; all of them introduced the word “peoples” or “popular” into their titles.⁴ Liberalism was weak in Germany: the bourgeoisie was not very unified. In 1918, it was not economically destroyed, but surrendered political power to the workers parties. Once again, under the Nazi regime, the bourgeoisie would not itself exercise political power, and Hitler was able to say: “I do the politics, you do the economy”.⁵ Immediately after the First World War, the bourgeoisie was divided between republicans and monarchists, those who benefited from inflation and those harmed by it, etc...⁶

The SPD which had taken power had undergone a large reduction in its membership, which was in its eyes a sign of proletarian radicalization, although the masses allowed it to remain in power. Once it occupied the highest offices of the State, its membership as well as its audience rapidly expanded: it obtained 35% of the vote in the January 1919 elections. It was the “backbone of the new bourgeois State” (Wolffheim).

Although it had been formed by those who had been excluded from the SPD, the USPD never lost the hope of reunification. Since its leaders were primarily concerned with the exercise of power, they did not consider the possibility of assembling a council as the Spartacist left had desired. Having taken account of the obvious current of radicalization, Spartacus had to show that it had at least become a significant minority within the USPD. We must point out that “public opinion”, the press, etc., had at that time seized upon the term “Spartacist” as being more suitable than “left radicals”, “international socialists”, etc., for causing a sensation, and

³ Summarized by Waldman: p. 107, note 78.

⁴ Compare with the Italian bourgeoisie of the same era: R. Paris, *Histoire du fascisme*, Maspero, Vol. I, 1962; and *Communisme et fascisme*, Ed. Programme Communiste.

⁵ Quoted in A. Grosser, *Hitler, la presse et la naissance d'une dictature*, Colin, 1972, p. 19.

⁶ Reichenbach: “Zur Geschichte der KAPD”, *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*, 1928, Vol. XIII.

that the term was applied to the whole revolutionary movement, within which Spartacus was just one group among others, and which would constitute neither the majority nor the most radical current within the KPD. The term “left radical” was also used in an imprecise manner, designating not only the USPD left (without distinction) but also everything to the left of the USPD.⁷

On October 7, 1918, the Spartacists, as an autonomous group, convoked a national conference, to which they invited the groups of the ISD as observers. This conference launched the slogan, which had already been heard in certain places during 1917-1918, calling for the formation of councils everywhere following the Russian model. It adopted a democratic transitional revolutionary program which was presented as follows: ending the state of emergency, liberation of all political prisoners, expropriation of the banks, heavy industry and the mines, as well as of large and medium-size agricultural properties, and the completion of *German unification*. This last point was in conflict with Wilson’s “right of self-determination”, which was devised to weaken Europe and strengthen the United States, and to give rise to buffer States against the revolution. The conference refused to deal with the trade union question as a “secondary” issue, despite the appearance of numerous autonomous organizations in the factories.

Freed by the government at the end of October, Liebknecht met with the Berlin shop stewards, who elected him to their leadership along with Müller (ISD). Luxemburg, who was also imprisoned during the war, was freed by the revolution on December 9. On that same day, Spartacus published the first issue of its daily newspaper, *Rote Fahne (The Red Flag)*, the future organ of the KPD, the right wing KPD and the VKPD. On the 18th, it became the “Spartacist League”, thereby demonstrating its movement towards autonomy in respect to the USPD.

Like Spartacus, the ISD also grew and multiplied the number of its publications: some of them would become the organs of the left wing which would be excluded from the KPD. On November 23, meeting in Bremen, the ISD would assume the name IKD: *Internationale Kommunisten Deutschlands*. This would be one of the names proposed at the founding congress of the KPD. Laufenberg and Wolffheim’s organization joined the IKD, which also led the Bremen council. In Berlin, a member of the IKD (Müller) was elected leader of the shop stewards. On December 1, the IKD of Saxony, with Rühle, held its founding congress: after a week of experiences it had withdrawn from all the councils dominated by SPD and USPD members. These groups would attend the national conference of the IKD on December 24 (see the next Chapter). After November, the IKD declared its full solidarity with the struggles and the slogans of the Spartacists and, together with the latter, proclaimed the watchword: “All power to the councils”. However, as could be deduced from the press and attitude of the Saxon IKD, the IKD, from its inception, unlike the Spartacists, judged that the workers and soldiers councils, so recently created, the products of a still confused movement, could not be the vehicles for the proletarian revolution. On this point the IKD was not the victim of a fetishism of the organization and the *masses*. It put forth as a specific task the clarification of the relation of forces throughout the country and, taken as a whole, played a much less well-known but more important role than Spartacus.

On a national scale, the revolutionary shop stewards seemed to constitute the trade union left. As such, they corresponded exactly to the USPD (following the old economic-political dichotomy which the revolution would try to overcome). The *RO* was ultimately the trade union organization of the USPD. It fully confirmed this tendency by providing itself with a trade unionist leadership: Ledebour, Däumig (both from the USPD) and Müller (of the Berlin

⁷ Comfort, p. 43.

shop stewards). Even after the revolution, the *RO* would still allow a place for the USPD. In Berlin, however, where the Spartacist tendency of the USPD was strongest, the *RO* elaborated the insurrectionary plan which would be short-circuited by the revolution itself.

On January 1, 1919, the *RO* refused to become the KPD's economic organization, and requested, among other things, that the party abandon the provocative name of "Spartacus".⁸ As an expression of its radical-reformist base, the *RO* would be replaced during the struggles of early 1919 by the factory organizations and action committees, the precursors of the future AAU. After the end of 1918, left wing action committees existed in all of Hamburg's factories.

Meanwhile, the anarchosyndicalists, although outlawed and reduced to inactivity during the war, had preserved their cadres. The Free Federation of German Trade Unions (FVDG) rapidly rebuilt its organization. During December 26-27 it held a conference and, most importantly, decided to invite its members to collaborate with the communist organizations (IKD) and the Spartacists, in support of the councils and the dictatorship of the proletariat.⁹

The "November Revolution" was not even a bourgeois revolution: ultimately, it was the political conclusion, carried out by the proletariat, of a bourgeois revolution which started in the 19th century. This "revolution" was not a revolution: it did not fight the essence of the State, which was only modified in a secondary manner. Eichhorn, a USPD member, who was appointed "chief of police" of Berlin, was by no means the real chief of police. And what kind of police was he supposed to lead? The police of the bourgeois state had not changed. The mere fact that the workers and the revolutionaries had mobilized in its defense was more than symbolic: it reflected the incompetence of the movement. To speak of the "German Revolution", granting this term its most profound meaning, as Luxemburg did in her last article (January 14, 1919), is a dangerous illusion.

⁸ On the relations between the *RO* and the Spartacus League, cf. Prudhommeaux.

⁹ Bock: p. 105, and Document III.

Chapter 6

Before the Confrontation: The Relation of Forces

The Bourgeoisie and the "Workers Party"

The economic crisis at the end of 1918 and the beginning of 1919 was primarily due to economic disorganization caused by the war and the need for peacetime reconversion: at this level alone, it was not a *crisis* in the sense of a cyclical crisis. Its features (a considerable decrease in production, a large trade deficit, a million unemployed at the beginning of 1919 with 250,000 unemployed in Berlin alone a 2/3 decline in the exchange value of the mark) were conjunctural effects of the war and reconversion. Germany would later regain its competitive position. But the prohibition of strikes and the scarcity of the necessities for survival placed the workers in a very difficult position which, in addition to all kinds of sacrifices during the war, generated a permanent readiness for violent action and insurrection in an important fraction of the proletariat which would last until March of 1921, even when reformism had become generally dominant. For this revolutionary movement, the democratic revolution of November was just one moment within the process of social revolution.

The way capitalism managed to survive and to crush subversion was basically new. All the institutions which one would have thought would have served the counterrevolution had collapsed. First of all, the State and the Army; the bourgeoisie remained in the background, its parties having relinquished political power (see the previous Chapter). The bourgeoisie yielded to the socialists, whose leader, Ebert, reassured them: "We are the only ones who can maintain order." Among the pre-revolutionary hierarchies, the SPD and the ADGB were the only institutions which were still effective on a national scale in Germany. They had a great deal of influence over the reformist majority of the workers. In most cases, workers' initiatives designated SPD members as their representatives in negotiations, even in particularly radical regions like the Ruhr and Berlin.

Nowhere did the proletariat undertake decisive measures of the kind advocated by Lenin in his *Message to the Soviet Republic of Bavaria* of April 27, 1919. It is against this backdrop that one must evaluate the extent of the movement and the vicissitudes of the left. Except for Bremen and Dresden (bastions of the left radicals within the future KAPD), the SPD would continue to control the majorities in the councils of almost all the large cities.¹ The proletarians did not create *their own* military organization and only part of the proletariat with the exception of Hamburg, Kiel and Dresden took up arms. In the Alsace the movement was suffocated under the weight of nationalism, due to the struggle for influence between Francophiles and Germanophiles.² In Bremen the council dismissed nationalist professors and reactionary functionaries, and organized a red guard. In Brunswick a red guard was formed and the judiciary was purged. In most cases, this amounted to the destruction of only "half" of the State: but one does not get rid of the State with halfway measures. In Hamburg the Soldiers Council was in the hands of the popular militia (*Volkswehr*) formed in November 1918 from the *Reichswehr* Ninth Army Corps, without anyone knowing just who was in command. Laufenberg proposed, on

¹ *La question syndicale et la gauche allemande...*, p. 6.

² *Conseils ouvriers en Allemagne 1917-21*, pp. 158-166.

November 12, that the traditional political institutions be dissolved.³ But the Council came up against economic and social problems which it could not solve in the bourgeois manner (due to a lack of money), and which it did not try to solve in a communist way. Attempting to discover a third way, it prepared its own downfall. On the 16th, a delegation of capitalists offered financial assistance on the condition that it would have the right to control the use of the funds. The Council then provisionally reinstated the traditional institutions so as not to frighten the American bourgeoisie who were about to grant a loan to Germany. A “Consultative Economic Council” composed of industrialists took charge of financial affairs. On the 18th, with municipal elections having been announced for April 1, 1919, and the political form not having received a revolutionary content, it was logical that it would immediately be jeopardized as such. The councils “committed suicide” after December 1918, upon accepting the convocation of a constituent assembly, and the classic local institutions elected by universal suffrage. The workers ruled entire cities, but accomplished nothing.

In Bavaria, the transformations in the army were purely formal: certain rights were conceded to the soldiers in exchange for their general obedience to their officers.⁴ Even worse, the only effect of this reform was to exacerbate the officers’ hatred for all social change, without having granted, in exchange, the means for the soldiers to organize themselves against the officer corps. J. Knief considered “the practice of many of the soldiers councils to be counterrevolutionary”.⁵ It was within the proletariat itself that the issue would be decided. The majority of the workers, organized in trade unions and led by the SPD, would be the agent for capital’s survival. *Capital only exists because the proletariat creates it, and the proletariat reproduces capital until the general breakdown of the relations integral to capital, together with the experience of numerous failed revolutions, compels the proletariat to struggle and gives it the ability to fight for its survival by rejecting its own condition as proletariat, rather than in order to survive, by way of political reforms and activities, as workers who sell their labor power.*

After taking power, the SPD declared the revolution was over, at least in its phase of violence and mass action. The party of the working class being in power, and the working class thus having taken political power in its hands, the revolutionary transformation of social relations (what was called socialization) was only a question of time: it was a matter of a progressive and peaceful process. The development of capital still had to continue, since only a capital which had arrived at the ultimate stage of its development could be “socialized”. For this reason, order must reign, and the “Spartacists” must be crushed, “Spartacists” being another way of saying “reactionary lumpenproletariat”.

The workers movement came to consider the revolutionary proletarians as marginal in respect to the “working class”. This was also the source of the rise of racism: anti-Semitism wreaked havoc in the workers movement,⁶ especially the variety directed against the eastern Jews who had come from Russia and Poland to find work or to escape from pogroms.

“The Jews of the east are, for the most part, a proletarian group mired in filth, poverty, and the lowest moral level of commerce. Unable to adapt to industry, their physical constitution, furthermore, generally renders them ill-suited for industrial or agricultural labor.”

Considering fact that these lines were extracted from the SPD’s leading journal, *Neue Zeit*, one can imagine what forms anti-Semitism assumed in everyday agitation and propaganda.

³ Comfort, Chapter III; cf. also P. von Oertzen, *Die Betriebsräte in der November Revolution*, Düsseldorf, 1963.

⁴ A. Mitchell: *Revolution in Bavaria 1918-19*, Princeton University Press, 1965, p. 149.

⁵ *La question syndicale...*, p. 58, note no. 6.

⁶ Berlau: pp. 345-346.

Becker, an SPD deputy in the national assembly, declared in that forum, in 1919: “The Warschovskys, the Auerbachs and the Sickmanns of Lodz, the Stachovskys and the Alexandrovitchs of Warsaw are doing business everywhere in Breslau and Berlin. They cross the frontiers with false or expired passports. They lounge about, with their characteristic arrogance, in the first class compartments of our express trains... This gang, it truly does not deserve to continue to live on this earth, we must... eliminate these parasites from our world.”

Having a better appreciation than anyone else for the revolutionary potential of the radical sector, the driving force of the movement which had just been unleashed, the SPD took measures to confront it, while it diverted the “masses” with grand speeches about the advent of socialization. One can see the ideology of socialization in P. Lensch, who moved from the left to the socialist right wing and who announced on the eve of the peace that capital would emerge from the conflict as “a captive of socialism”.⁷ Economic socialization was inevitable: “capitalism must be organized”. Prefiguring the Nazis, which is to say the language of *National Socialism* so dear to the SPD, he presented the alternative between “social” organization” and “plutocratic” organization. The State “has undergone a process of socialization” and social democracy has experienced a process of “nationalization”: “For the first time in history, we are establishing harmony between the State and the people.” Nazism would receive its “totalitarian language” from social democracy.

In an article on *Socialization*,⁸ Pannekoek criticized the term itself, which alone designates nothing but organized capitalism or “State socialism”. But he did not discuss the notion of a community without exchange. Nor would Gorter:⁹

“The proletariat must take State and legislative power into its hands. It must guarantee a minimum of the means of subsistence to all the workers and to all those who must become workers. It must take over the management of all production, of trade and transportation, and of the distribution of production. It must decree compulsory labor for all. It must repudiate the State’s debts; confiscate war profits; it must only tax capital and income and thereby arrive at a confiscation of capital. It must expropriate the Banks and large industry. It must socialize the land.”

The SPD also availed itself of violent measures. After November 10, Ebert was in contact with the Army’s leaders and assured them of his assistance: the distrust, and even more than distrust, on the part of the General Staff with respect to social democracy was a habit which would not disappear simply because the latter held government power. It was at this moment that Ebert uttered his famous phrase: “we are the only party which can maintain order.”¹⁰ On the 11th, Ebert’s government made haste to sign the armistice so as to be able to dedicate itself to a more essential war. Since the Army had to be dismantled according to the terms of the armistice, its leaders undertook the construction of *Freikorps*: even so, the military means at the disposal of the counterrevolution were still scarce, which was a powerful reason for choosing which tactic to follow. The SPD faced a unique situation, unlike, for example, that faced by its Austrian counterparts.¹¹ Founded in 1889 by an accord between radical and moderate socialists,

⁷ *Three Years of World Revolution*, Constable, London, 1918, pp. 202-217.

⁸ *Le Phare*, March 1920.

⁹ *Bulletin communiste*, June 3 1920, “La révolution universelle”, cf. also Rühle, *From the Bourgeois to the Communist Revolution*, Socialist Reproduction, London, 1974, with a good introduction; and L. Valiani, *Histoire du socialisme au XX^e siècle*, Nagel, 1948, pp. 115-116.

¹⁰ Statement attributed to Scheidemann, quoted in Badia.

¹¹ K. Shell: *The Transformation of Austrian Socialism*, State University of New York, 1962.

Austrian social democracy did not have to vote for war credits, since the government had suspended parliament in March of 1914. It did, however, support the State (above all K. Renner and V. Adler, against the opposition of F. Adler). Austrian social democracy did not have as much blood on its hands as its German neighbor, and preserved, for the most part, a leftist ideology and semblance. “Socialization” and democracy had relatively greater importance in Austria than in Germany from the point of view of direct repression.¹²

The Function of Democracy

Democracy served all purposes. Trade union leaders and employers, who had long served on the same commissions, quickly signed the accord known under the name of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft*: literally, the “community of labor”. The businessman, who was aware that the period rendered a great number of measures impractical, surrendered “everything” to preserve what was essential.

For the trade unions and the SPD this reaction was excellent propaganda for guaranteeing a good beginning for socialization and for preventing strikes. Significant reforms, for that era, were adopted, such as the *principle* of the eight hour day. In particular, the trade unions were recognized as valid interlocutors and components within the enterprise. Joint committees were made obligatory, composed of trade union and employer representatives in enterprises with more than 20 employees: this measure would be implemented in January 1920 under the rubric of the “law on enterprise councils”. Instead of going on strike and conducting propaganda campaigns, it was better to discuss matters with the joint committee: this is what the anti-trade union left would call “economic democracy”.

Council democracy revived parliamentary democracy, the trade unions being unable to overcome the simulacrum of parliamentary democracy within their own ranks. In December, the elections for the provincial assemblies were organized: the SPD won a majority, except in Saxony where the USPD emerged victorious. Part of the revolutionary movement’s energy was distracted, and the consciousness which it had built with its own efforts faded. The SPD declared its support for the election of a constituent assembly to determine the form which the future republican and democratic Germany would assume. But the SPD’s power was the product of a movement which had taken the form of councils and not of a parliament. In conformity with the ceaselessly repeated statement that the councils exercised all power and that the peoples commissars were only their delegates, it must have been expected that the pan-German Council Congress would itself decide to convoke, by means of elections in which all classes would participate, a constituent assembly into whose hands it would deliver its power. This is what the Congress which took place in Berlin between December 16 and 20 decided: from then on, the essential outlines of the decisive confrontation were fixed. Immediately afterwards, the attack on the *Volksmarinedivision* took place.

In order to prevent the revolutionary wave from sweeping everything away, the counter-revolution consolidated the only really existing means to stop it: the reformist majority of the working class, which in addition had its own concrete goals--negotiations with the employers, councils, elections. Everything was connected together by democratic ideology, and defended by the *Freikorps*. It was on this last level that the shoe pinched: the military apparatus of the counterrevolution was short on soldiers, while the workers were armed. The first direct attack on the radicals (the *Volksmarinedivision*) would fail (see the next Chapter). This would give way

¹² PC, No. 61, p. 37 et seq., and No. 64, p. 77 et seq.

to the tactic of progressively crushing the partial uprisings in the various regions of Germany, since the counterrevolutionary assault could not be simultaneously concentrated in more than one region at a time. There were two successive counterrevolutionary waves, in January-February and March-April 1919, each of which began in Berlin. This relative weakness of the State also explains why Bavaria could enjoy “self-determination” until May.

This tactic could not have succeeded unless the revolution, despite its scale, was unable to act simultaneously and with one will. Each council power had specific problems of all kinds which it hoped to solve locally. There is no example of a movement which was victorious in one State and devoted itself to agitation in a neighboring State. Among the leftists, it seems that Wolffheim and Laufenberg were the only ones to concern themselves with establishing communication between the rebellious zones in northern and central Germany, and to have assumed the perspective of action on a national scale. Laufenberg’s *Revolution in Hamburg* is quite revealing in its depiction of the important and contradictory features of the German revolution; the democratic revolution was not merely an empty phrase. It was, above all, the reaction which was conscious of Germany as a unified State.

Once it had consolidated the counterweight to halt the revolution, social democracy had to take immediate action in order to prevent the constitution of the proletarians into a class, a process begun at the end of the war, whose first confused manifestation was the generalization of councils-soviets, but which would acquire an increasingly more precise expression in the factory councils and the increasing strength of the Spartacists and the IKD, particularly with the fusion of these two groups into the KPD.

To speak of “strategy”, of “tactics”, of “provocation”, etc., by no means implies that the motive force of this whole revolutionary movement was established by “consciousness”. Under the pressure of the social and political crisis which followed the war, social and political groups were obliged to take action in order to survive; the survival of one could only be achieved to the detriment of the other, and each group adopted, more or less consciously, the tactic which the pre-existing conditions imposed. The SPD was forced to take action against the *Volksmarinedivision*, and after its defeat it was compelled to sacrifice a pawn against the revolution (the expulsion of Eichhorn). In both cases, these moves provoked a reaction in the reactionary camp for whom it became obvious that the proletarians, having reached the limit of their potential, could not bring about the fall of the social democratic State. The reaction could then make its move without fearing any response.¹³

Except for the Ruhr insurrection (1920) and the “March Action” (1921), all the ensuing proletarian assaults would follow a relatively unchanging pattern. Born as defense against an attack by the power of capital, they went on the offensive and took power in a region or a city in Germany. The offensive was exhausted at that level and negotiations then took place, led by the USPD, the right wing tendency in the KPD and, in the beginning, even by the local leaders of the SPD, with the remnants of the local authorities or with the central power. The latter conceded everything, since they were not themselves put into question. Afterwards, the revolutionary wave receded and an implacable repression could begin.

¹³ Concerning “historical coercion” — which is not synonymous with automatism — cf. *La Sainte Famille*, Ed. Sociales, 1969, pp.47-48. In English, *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1980.

The Founding of the KPD

The prelude to the founding of the KPD was the national conference of the IKD held on December 24 in Berlin, attended by delegates from northern Germany, Saxony, Bavaria and the Rhineland.¹⁴ A debate was held to determine whether they should form their own party or unite with Spartacus. The IKD warned the Spartacus League that in any event the Communist Party would be formed in Germany “with or without it”.¹⁵ Radek had just returned to Germany after having played a prominent role in the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs in Moscow, and convinced them to unite with Spartacus: they demanded, however, that the Spartacus League leave the USPD. On the question of parliamentary action, they were divided into two positions, one in favor of it, one against it. It was decided not to make a declaration concerning the issue until each delegate had consulted his constituents: when the meeting resumed on the 30th, only one delegate still defended participation in parliament.

After having desired to remain in the USPD, the Spartacus League placed itself “outside the organization” by taking the initiative to hold a national conference in October (see the preceding Chapter). Excluded *de facto*, it accepted the IKD’s position and left the USPD. A small minority (Luxemburg, Levi, and L. Jogisches) was very hesitant, since it judged that the situation was not “mature” enough for the creation of the revolutionary party. But they followed the majority. The Congress set the date when Spartacus would convoke its second national conference: December 30.

Except for certain specialized histories,¹⁶ whenever the matter of the radical movement of 1918-19 is discussed, it is the Spartacists who get the most attention. The left groups of Bremen, Dresden, etc., are generally treated as marginal organizations. History (among others, the official histories of the communist parties) uncritically appropriates the point of view of the public opinion of the era, which considered the entire radical movement to be an effect of a Spartacist conspiracy. The same phenomenon is reproduced with respect to every revolutionary movement: if there is something which public opinion (= bourgeois ideology for the general public), and along with it the various ideologies derived from Leninism, cannot admit, it is that the revolutionary masses are the authors of their own movement, that they are their own leaders, and that only in those conditions are they authentically revolutionary. In its obstinate search for culprits and “ringleaders”, the bourgeois campaign after the Commune had already fabricated the image of the IWA as the executive committee of gifted leaders who were active everywhere. This idea later penetrated the revolutionary ranks and contaminated the Marx-Bakunin debate. At a moment of revolutionary retrocession, the bourgeoisie imposed its own representation of the subversive movement itself. So it would proceed in relation to the events after 1917, particularly with Lenin and the Communist International (cf. the Introduction above).

At the founding Congress of the KPD it became evident that the overwhelming majority of the delegates, although not all of them members of the IKD, adhered to the theses of the IKD. The party would have 90,000 members in March 1919. According to F. Kool, it was formed of mostly young workers “without political experience”. According to Bock, the sociological profile of its recruits was much more varied and included workers from all layers of the

¹⁴ Waldman: p. 150, No. 92.

¹⁵ R. Lowenthal, *The Bolshevisation of the Spartakus League*, in *St. Anthony's Papers*, No. 9, Chatto-Windus, London, 1960, p. 26.

¹⁶ Bock and Kool, in particular.

proletariat. Subsequently, a consensus concerning the “lack of maturity” of the delegates to the founding Congress would become established.¹⁷ Historians and political organizations cannot admit that proletarians could “spontaneously” adopt such radical positions.

After having unanimously adopted the program which had been written by Luxemburg and had already been published on December 14 as the “Program of the Spartacus League” under the title of *What Does Spartacus Want?*, along with the slogans of the “Communist Party of Germany (Spartacus League)” or KPD(S), the leftist tendency crystallized around two questions, that of participation in the elections (for the constituent assembly) and that of working in the trade unions.

The Congress held a debate on the question of organization, but for the most part opposed centralism. Workers autonomy, if not workerism, occupied a preferential place in the Congress. Eberlein declared:¹⁸ “The organizations of the old SPD, except for periodic elections, were inert and empty... We must construct our organization on totally different foundations. We demand that the workers and soldiers councils exercise all political power. The factory councils are the basis of power. Our organization must be adapted to this situation. It would then be best, probably, to create communist groups in the factories. It cannot be tolerated that orders should be imposed from above. The industrial organizations must enjoy complete autonomy. The task of the central organ is above all that of synthesizing the movements which develop outside of it and assuring political and ideological leadership.” Each organization must have full autonomy of action; the central office has a minimal political role: information clearing house, preparation of congresses and managing day-to-day business. Above all it was not to be a revolutionary general staff for all of Germany. The representatives of the party’s minority faction were elected to leadership positions: Luxemburg, Liebknecht, Jogisches, Levi. The only “leftist” among the party’s leaders, Frölich, was dispatched to Bavaria. The KPD would not adopt Bolshevik centralism as a “principle” of organization until its third Congress (October 1920), after having excluded the left, which would denounce the centralism-federalism alternative as false and argue that it had been superseded by the “*union*” (cf. the texts of the KAPD and the AAU):¹⁹ this was the beginning of the critique of organizational fetishism.

Participation in the elections was rejected by 62 votes against 23; among the latter, Liebknecht declared that he had only reluctantly voted “in favor”.²⁰ Knief, on the other hand, of the Bremen IKD, was a supporter of revolutionary parliamentarism. The 62 votes represented the IKD and the party’s “rank and file”.

Luxemburg reproached the abstentionists for “transforming radicalism (which in German is synonymous with ‘leftism’) into something quite comfortable”. A more “useful” tactic was needed, Levi explained in his report, which would consist in participating in the elections in order to destroy parliamentarism. Rühle presented the opposition’s report. The majority of those “lacking in political experience” did not want to hear any nonsense about classical politics, and their hostile shouts often interrupted the speeches of Luxemburg and Levi.

It was crucial for its current and future activities that the KPD Congress should affirm that the party should work for the destruction of the trade unions and call upon all of its members to leave them: such was the opinion of the abstentionist majority. On behalf of the left, Frölich (Bremen) expounded the obligation to end the old separation between political organization

¹⁷ Among others, Badia, in *Le spartakisme*, conclusion; Waldman, p. 152, note no. 96; and Lowenthal, p. 27.

¹⁸ Waldman: pp. 155-156.

¹⁹ Cf. *La gauche allemande. Textes*.

²⁰ Bock: p. 95.

(party) and economic organization (trade union): the theme of unitary organization already broached in 1917 in *Arbeiterpolitik* and which would be championed by Rühle and the AAU-E. Luxemburg and the rest of the party minority did not directly address this issue: it was only after the revolution that the trade unions, they said, could be replaced in their economic role by the councils. Luxemburg managed to have this question tabled and referred to a committee and consequently it was not the subject of a party resolution. Opposition to the trade unions was by no means assured, since it was largely based on a preference for the councils, and it was already known that the latter were, in their great majority, reformist.²¹

The radicalism displayed by the Congress was one reason why the *RO* refused to join the KPD. Under Däumig's leadership, they formed a "Community of Labor" and in 1922 returned to the rump USPD (that is, what was left of it after the departure, in 1920, of its left wing for the KPD; cf. Chapter 13), which soon rejoined the SPD. A minority chose to remain outside of the SPD and the KPD and preserved the name USPD, which later split in its turn into two groups in 1923, which would join the SAP (another centrist party) in 1931. The ex-USPD members who returned to the SPD in 1922 preserved certain characteristically "leftist" positions: hostile to national coalitions of the socialist party with the bourgeois parties, in 1923 they initiated the abortive experience of the "workers government" in Saxony.²²

Luxemburg's maneuver regarding the trade union question and the fact that the party minority was elected to the party's leadership positions demonstrated a certain inexperience or incompetence in political affairs on the part of the KPD majority: this would be further confirmed when, in October 1919, the minority managed to exclude the majority. The German Left would be constituted and would distinguish itself in opposition to Spartacism, in the course of which it would experience more difficulties than in other aspects of its break with its social democratic past.²³ But if there is a clear difference between "Spartacism" and the "German Left", neither the one nor the other had become petrified in 1919. Had proletarian action followed an ascending course, which did not happen, profound analyses would have been possible. It is just as impossible to draw a hard and fast line between the two currents, as the golden legend of Spartacism is false. The KPD Congress was divided over "the question of the 'unitary' organization defended by ISD elements... and the 'leader-masses' problem, which in addition to garnering the support of the above mentioned 'radicals' also had sympathizers among the Spartacists, who had defended these positions although in a somewhat vague manner when they had constituted the 'International' fraction of the USPD".²⁴ It would be the left, however, which would be consolidated during the course of the struggles of 1919, and its divergences with the KPD's right wing would become so profound that they would lead to a split.

The Spartacist leaders proved to be incapable of breaking with social democracy and its methods. One of the errors of the left was that of not criticizing the party program itself. According to *What Does Spartacus Want?*, a revolution had taken place: its first phase (up to December 24) had been "exclusively political"; from that point forward, it had to be oriented towards what was essential: towards the field of the economy.²⁵

"The conquest of power cannot be accomplished at one blow, but must be incremental: we shall introduce ourselves into the bourgeois State until we occupy all of its posts and defend

²¹ Cf. Lange's report: Waldman, pp. 153-154.

²² Hunt: pp. 206-207 and 210, et seq.

²³ *PC*, No. 58, pp. 91-115, concerning Spartacism and pp. 100-101 for the IKD.

²⁴ *La question syndicale...*, p. 5.

²⁵ Luxemburg: *Oeuvres*, Maspero, Vol. II, 1969, pp. 126-128.

them against all external attacks... It is a step-by-step, hand-to-hand struggle, in each State, in each city, in each village, in order to put all the instruments of power into the hands of the workers and soldiers councils, instruments which must slowly be torn from the grasp of the bourgeoisie. While achieving this goal we must, first of all, educate our comrades...”

It serves no purpose to insist on those aspects which separate Marx (concerning which Pannekoek and, later, Lenin, would write at length) from this “incremental” conquest of the capitalist State by a proletariat which “introduces itself” into that State. It is the same kind of absence of a rupture as is found in the Kautskyism of *The Road to Power*. Luxemburg’s contradiction, like that of so many others, was that of effectively being a revolutionary, and not only in words, but without acquiring the means to really be a revolutionary. Her originality resides in the method chosen for her purpose: it is always a question of teaching and educating, but by means of action and not classical pedagogy. The fear of a failed putsch caused Luxemburg to renounce proposing a centralized struggle: “It is among the rank and file, where each factory owner confronts his wage slaves, where we must uproot the instruments of power, little by little, from the rulers.”

Luxemburg did not understand that even though the class struggle is especially fluid and mobile, it also crystallizes into organizations, both revolutionary and reactionary.²⁶ Hence her refusal to create an independent organization. Her reasoning in relation to the State born in November 1918 was like her reasoning concerning the SPD and the USPD. Conceiving of social life primarily as movement, she neglected the moments of rupture. She rejected a frontal assault on the November State (as she had previously rejected an attack on the SPD) because the workers occupied a considerable position within it and could influence its further development. Of course, if there is no rupture, a destruction of the institutional forms which originated in the old phase of stability, the movement would still be a movement *internal* to capitalism, and would even help capitalism to adapt to the new conditions. Capitalism only assumes the appearances of the revolution in order to modernize itself: as Marx said about the democrats, they recruit the revolution to their side. A few weeks later, the same kind of reasoning would lead Luxemburg to suicide due to her desire to “stand with” the masses, to be present within the proletarian *movement*. The same attitude of wanting to stay close to the masses caused her to remain in the SPD, and later, to remain in the USPD, and then even later to opt for the insurrectionary adventure.

²⁶ R. Paris: Introduction to *La révolution russe*, Maspero, 1964.

Chapter 7

The Confrontations: November 1918 to May 1919

The Councils Commit Suicide

On November 10, the delegates of the councils in the Berlin region met and proclaimed the “Socialist Republic”, and elected a provisional executive committee (*Vollzugsrat*), composed of six SPD members, six USPD members, and twelve soldiers, all of the latter being SPD supporters. Although it considered itself to be the repository of all power, it delegated all of its power to the council of peoples’ commissars, in whom it declared that it placed all its confidence. This explains why, on the 13th, it opposed the creation of a proletarian red guard.

In some regions the councils would go further. In Bavaria they proclaimed the “Council Republic” (cf. above). In Saxony, Brunswick, Braunschweig, etc., the councils deposed the local authorities and took power. The left radical Metzger was elected president of the socialist republic of Braunschweig. Power was also exercised by soviets/councils in the industrial regions of central (Mansfeld, Halle) and northern Germany. On a national scale, however, the German Congress of Workers and Soldiers Councils (December 16-20, 1918) ceded its power to the council of peoples commissars: of the Congress’s 485 delegates, 375 were “governmental” (SPD and right wing USPD). Since Liebknecht and Luxemburg were not accepted as delegates because they were Spartacists, and since numerous members of the IKD had decided not to attend the Congress, the only opposition was led by revolutionary shop stewards like Müller, Ledebour and Däumig, that is, by political representatives of the non-Spartacist USPD left. Their opposition consisted in demanding that the councils should be conceded major importance in the pending constitution. The principle decision of the Congress was, effectively, to accept the SPD’s proposal to quickly convoke a constituent assembly, in which all power would be vested. But the councils wanted to continue to exist as institutions and demanded that they be conceded a role in the constitution.

It is clear that, throughout this entire period, the example of the soviet-Russian revolution led to a fetishism of the soviet form. For the German movement, not having reached the point of its most extreme radicalization, “making” soviets became a substitute for revolutionary action. During the Congress, the Spartacists, who had been excluded from its deliberations, led a demonstration calling for another round of elections for the councils.

The Conflict in Berlin: December 1918 to January 1919

With this SPD victory and the SPD’s success in the local elections for the Brunswick assembly, Ebert thought that the moment had arrived to make his first move by attacking the *Volksmarine-division* which, composed of 3,000 sailors from Kiel, had installed itself in Berlin “to defend the conquests of the revolution” against the attacks of the reaction. For the government, it was the principle military manifestation of the revolution: it was best neutralized as soon as possible.

Immediately after the Council Congress, an attempt was made to provoke the sailors by withholding their pay. On December 24, the sailors responded by occupying the Chancellery. Ebert, who could not yet act openly, contacted General Lequis, who assembled the security forces and surrounded the sailors. The latter took refuge in the royal palace, which they used as a base camp. The battle began with a volley of artillery fire, killing and wounding 60 sailors,

who resisted until the moment when a radical demonstration began. Lequis' troops, having themselves been surrounded, were forced to withdraw: their officers only escaped being lynched thanks to a speech by Ebert. At that time, demonstrators also occupied the *Vorwärts* offices for the first time: the Berlin workers judged that they had repossessed their newspaper and published a "*Red Vorwärts*" for a few days. The sailors stated in this "*Red Vorwärts*" that, contrary to what was being said in the press, they were not Spartacists. The *Rote Fahne* admitted this but added that "the spirit of this detachment is our own spirit, the spirit of the world socialist revolution".

After the failure of this State offensive, the USPD peoples' commissars resigned from the government, just as the *RO* had been urging them to do since the 21st. It was against this background that the founding Congress of the KPD was held. In assessing the strength of the revolutionary camp, one must keep in mind the fact that the radicals convened a congress instead of immediately taking advantage of the revolutionary victory, which had just struck an important blow against the government. On the 25th, this episode having come to an end, Ebert could do no more and would go to bed saying that he did not know who would be in power when he awoke.

"When Ebert awoke", with the resignation of the USPD members, three members of the SPD were co-opted onto the council of peoples commissars. Among them, Noske was put in charge of military affairs and reasserted his authority over the vacillating remnants of the Army in Berlin. He demonstrated great efficiency in this task. On January 4 he dismissed Eichhorn, chief of police and a member of the USPD.

On the 5th, a huge demonstration (700,000 people) took place demanding Eichhorn's reinstatement. This was the initial purpose of the demonstration, but the ensuing series of events proved that there were other, more radical currents within it. Great strikes and revolutions often begin with such absurd slogans. For the second time, demonstrators occupied the *Vorwärts* offices: members of the Berlin IKD group took control of the building.

Directly implicated, since Eichhorn was one of its members, the USPD, after having abandoned what they thought was a sinking ship on the 29th of December, saw that, an insurrection having taken place, it should control it through the *RO*, a good instrument for taking power: it practiced "leftism". On the 5th of January, it formed an "insurrection committee" which was joined by the Spartacists Liebknecht and Pieck, who were opposed by a minority (Luxemburg) of KPD leaders. It is false to speak of a "Spartacist insurrection" as if it was inspired by the KPD, when the insurrection was the result of the conjunction of two forces: the USPD, which aspired to power, and the KPD left, which only sought the social revolution. In general terms, the insurrection was in reality above all directed against the State. The KPD, the *RO* and the USPD published a leaflet calling for a demonstration and the abolition of the despotism exercised by the government. Of course, only the dictatorship of the proletariat can overthrow the government: but the leaflet did not mention this. It invited the workers to mobilize and to struggle but did not provide a clear objective. Although a member of the USPD, Eichhorn was part of the State apparatus: most of the *Sicherheitswehr*, created on his initiative with socialist workers and soldiers, would furthermore take the government's side. The extreme left mobilized not to destroy the State in leftist guise (which was as dangerous as its rightist guise), but to purge this Statist left of its reactionary elements (the SPD); it intended, therefore, to purify the State. The technically premature aspect of the insurrection has often been emphasized without, however, emphasizing its meaning. The adversaries of this undertaking (Luxemburg, Jogisches, the central committee, along with Radek) were only worried about squandering the small revolutionary forces. It was not understood that this insurrection was the logical outcome of an attitude informed by opposition to the State but which did not seek its destruction.

The leaders of the KPD followed the *RO*. For its part, the communist left, which had not even wanted to take the party's leadership into its hands, was even less capable of putting itself at the head of the street actions. What was tragic about this was not the fact that some revolutionaries tried to carry out an action which would be judged *a posteriori* to be hopeless, but that once they went into action they would only go *halfway*.

On the night of the 5th, the insurrection committee elaborated a plan for the next day's insurrection. Noske, meanwhile, marshaled the city's security forces, positioned them on the outskirts of Berlin, and elaborated his plan of reconquest. On the 6th, the insurrection occupied strategic points in the capital. A revolutionary committee (Liebknecht, Ledebour and Scholze, *RO*) declared that the government had been dismissed. However, now that it was master of the city, this committee, while not breaking apart, was divided over the following point: Should it negotiate? The sea was calm, and was not overflowing the reformist dikes. In its own good centralist fashion, the USPD had never stopped trying to negotiate with Noske. It even began unilateral negotiations while its members who supported the insurrection and had gone so far as to overthrow the government still trusted the democracy of their committee, without breaking with it in order to install it in power on their own initiative. Noske thus gained precious time and used it to put the finishing touches on his plan. Each detachment of his troops would be assigned a Berlin neighborhood to pacify. The reconquest began on the 7th and showed no mercy. The besieged occupiers of *Vorwärts* were murdered when they left the building under the terms of a cease-fire. The bourgeoisie denied the reality of the class struggle in theory, but recognized it better than the workers in practice. Luxemburg insisted on remaining with the rebels until the end: the idea of "merging" with the masses is as false as that of "leading them". Luxemburg and Liebknecht were arrested, and then murdered on the 15th.

Central and Northern Germany

On the 19th, the elections for the Constituent Assembly, from which the KPD abstained, delivered an overwhelming victory to the SPD: 37.5% of the votes against the USPD's 7.8%. The new socialist government presided over by Scheidemann, with Noske as its Minister of War, included ministers from the *Zentrum*. Established in its trademark image, radicalized since the month of November, the USPD, upon being consulted, refused to participate in the government.

In Bremen, however, on the 10th, the KPD (its left wing and the USPD) proclaimed the council republic. In Hamburg, the left was still strong, but the SPD focused its propaganda there on the radicals' failure to guarantee normal living conditions (lack of food and fuel).¹ In effect, the left's continuous agitation brought few effective changes, which increasingly isolated the minority of radical workers. In the midst of the confusion even Laufenberg himself was arrested and then freed after a few hours. Forced to resign on the 19th in favor of a member of the SPD, he explained that the police were still under the control of the SPD. This fact proves that there were not two parallel power structures, but just one, the capitalist State which a few revolutionaries thought they could conquer from within with the help of a few street actions: once again we discover, in a sense, Luxemburg's attitude (see the preceding chapter). It was always the same practice, only with radical "extra-parliamentary" methods. The elections to the Constituent Assembly delivered a resounding victory to those who had proven themselves most coherent: in Hamburg, the SPD obtained 51% of the vote, the USPD 7%. Among the dele-

¹ Comfort: Chapter II.

gates to the “Workers Council of Greater Hamburg”, 239 were from the SPD, 14 represented the ADGB, 37 were members of the USPD, and 25 were left radicals. The collapse of the Hamburg revolutionary movement was a result of local developments and was not due to intervention from Berlin: it would be defeated from without, after having collapsed from within.

The Ruhr was the scene of insurrectionary strikes, but the Essen miners council, upon proclaiming the socialization of the mines, merely decreed what would today be understood as “nationalization”. The most important revolutionary undertaking in this region was carried out by the anarchists of the FVDG (cf. Chapter 9): joint action between the FVDG and the KPD lasted until May 1919. After having momentarily crushed Berlin, the counterrevolutionary troops hurried to the Ruhr. The SPD had already prepared the terrain: present in the councils and committees alongside the USPD, the KPD and the FVDG, it helped disorganize the strike. The troops then intervened and pacified the region. The workers of the Ruhr, who had a certain degree of faith in the SPD in the past, abandoned the party and the trade unions in droves in order to create *unionen* (the “unions” of the future AAU).

At the end of January, Berlin decided to dispatch troops to Bremen, where the SPD had been excluded from the local government. In Hamburg, Laufenberg issued a call on February 1 for a general mobilization to “assist Bremen by all possible military means”. In order to dissociate itself from this announcement, the Hamburg SPD called attention to “the danger of Prussian militarism”. After fierce fighting, Bremen was occupied, and Hamburg had not so much as lifted a finger to help it. The left decided to arm itself and formed some *Volkswehr* units: the Council executive decided to take up arms.² The radicals had in any event exerted pressure upon the structures of capitalist power (whether old or new, representative or executive), but they did not create new institutions which corresponded to the necessity of carrying out an effective struggle against capital. The disturbances of the second half of 1919 would be vain reactions against the capitalist “normalization” which eliminated the radicals from the power structures they had infiltrated. The police were purged and reorganized: at times, the former *Freikorps* (which had officially been dissolved) formed their core personnel.

With the occupation of Bremen and the surrounding region, the government had again opened up the road to the sea, shattering the strategies of the Hamburg leftists who intended to form an uninterrupted chain of rebel regions from the Baltic and the Dutch frontier to central Germany and eastern and western Saxony (Leipzig and Dresden). At the end of January, armed gangs devoted themselves to the destruction of the council powers around Mansfeld (central Germany). On March 3, martial law was declared in that region. The victory of the *Freikorps* was everywhere followed by the most ferocious repression. After January 1919, the number of people killed in the German revolution exceeded the number of those killed in both the February and October Russian revolutions combined.

The second blow struck by the reaction extended from Berlin (March) to the second defeat of the Ruhr and the fall of Bavaria (March-May). Faced with the rampages of the *Freikorps*, the *Rote Fahne* published a call for a general strike in protest, but advised against street-fighting. The Berlin workers councils elected a new, more leftist strike committee, which demanded the recognition of the councils, the liberation of all political prisoners, the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with Russia, and the creation of a workers guard. This program and its practical aspects were an obvious return to the ideas of the KPD’s rightist central committee. Noske responded in conformance with the actual situation: any individual captured with arms in hand would be shot on the spot. 1,200 workers were killed and thousands wounded. Jogisches, the

² *Ibid.*, Chapter 4.

last of the three historic leaders of Spartacism, was executed. At the same time, the Constituent Assembly granted the means for inflicting the final defeat, voting for the reconstitution of the *Reichswehr*.

The *Freikorps* departed in order to destroy the new proletarian powers reconstructed during the street fighting and those which had survived their first assaults: Magdeburg (April 10), Brunswick (April 14), and then Saxony: Leipzig (May 11), and then the other cities or regions where local power “was not proportionate” to the distribution of seats in the National Assembly.³ In Saxony, for example, the USPD was still in power: it was deposed. A new and important factor was the new resurgence of the petite bourgeoisie, which formed *Einwohnerwehren* (local self-defense groups) under the protection of the *Freikorps*. At this time, as well, “voluntary strikes” by shopkeepers and white collar employees took place. This phenomenon helps us to appreciate Gorter’s thesis concerning the “isolation” of the proletariat which had to fight alone in Western Europe (cf. his *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*).

Between the crushing of Magdeburg-Brunswick and the reduction of Leipzig, the defeat of the Ruhr took place. At the end of March, the movement there provided the first instance of an autonomous organization on the scale of an entire industrial region. On the 30th, delegations of revolutionary workers from throughout the Ruhr, breaking with all trade union ideologies, formed the *Allgemeine-Bergarbeiter-Union* (General Miners Union) in Essen; unable to prevent its creation, the other groups were forced to strangle this “union” in its cradle. Its existence would be brief, but it was the first *union* and prefigured the AAU. The KPD’s leftist faction saluted it as the *ne plus ultra* of revolutionary proletarian organization, since it was oriented towards the suppression of the party-trade union dichotomy, and was the creation of the masses themselves. Its birth was the subject of commentary in the *Kommunistische Arbeiter-Zeitung* (Communist Workers Newspaper) of Hamburg and was mentioned in Wolffheim’s pamphlet, *Factory Organizations or Trade Unions?*

The *union* launched a strike whose defeat allowed the government to dismantle the new organization in a massive police raid. The Ruhr region would not go into action again until the Kapp Putsch of March 1920 (cf. Chapter XII). Once the *union* was destroyed, the revolutionary trade unions decided to create their own organization in the region, the FAU of Rhineland-Westphalia, and to break with the policy of joint action with the KPD. The KPD *Zentrale* followed suit. The movement had provisionally come to an end, each group recuperating its resources: it was the beginning of the period of the constitution of numerous faction-based organizations.

Bavaria

The *Reich* of 1918 was too large for one State to control all of its territory at the same time during a revolutionary crisis. This was an important reason for Bavaria’s unique trajectory until the movement was crushed throughout the rest of the country.

1. November 1918-February 1919

On the 7th of November, 1918, the democratic revolution immediately handed over power to the USPD, with Eisner as the government’s president, with considerable anarchist influence (Mühsam and Landauer). Despite its declarations in favor of the councils, the government

³ Badia: *Histoire de l’Allemagne contemporaine*, Vol. I, p. 143

organized democratic elections in which all classes participated, without granting members of the working class, for example, more votes than the other classes (as was the case in Russia). On January 12, the USPD only obtained 2.5% of the vote in these elections. On the 10th, Eisner had no doubts that he would be able to prevent the supporters of an electoral boycott, members of the KPD and the Revolutionary Workers Council under the influence of Mühsam, from abstaining.

The Bavarian USPD (and this was also true, to a lesser degree, of the USPD in general) was a party of enlightened democrats. Either there is a proletarian dictatorship, in which case, instead of organizing a referendum, the proletariat proceeds to the destruction of capital (abolition of the commodity: that is, immediate free access to all abundant products, a vast reduction in the compulsory working day due to the suppression of all jobs dedicated to the metamorphoses of the commodity, to buying and selling, and the dedication of these employees to other more useful functions, etc.) if the country is a highly-developed one. (This was not the case with Russia: the problem of the Russian proletariat, so small in number, was that of resisting, of holding on to political power and military supremacy by means of a policy of alliances with the petty-bourgeois and peasant layers, until the world revolution: hence the organization of non-democratic elections with a plurality of votes for the workers). Or, a party having just arrived in power, in the wake of an insurrectionary, but hardly radical movement, as happened in Bavaria, does not want to go beyond the limits of the bourgeois exercise of power and wants to hold elections, in which it only gets 2.5% of the vote after two months in power. This enlightened and criminal attitude on the part of the Bavarian USPD would culminate in the proclamation “by decree” of the council republic.

2. February-March

The USPD having received 2.5% of the vote, a conflict necessarily erupted between the recently-elected general assembly and the USPD central power which, paying close attention to the appearances of the electoral game, appeared to be an ultra-minority. This conflict seemed to be easy to resolve since Eisner, at the end of February, decided to faithfully submit his letter of resignation to the “peoples’ representatives”. As he was entering the assembly, however, he was assassinated.

The central committee of the Bavarian councils proclaimed a general strike. The assembly spontaneously dispersed. The real balance of forces, which could be summarized as at least a toss-up between the council power and the parliamentary democracy, was not reflected in the electoral results. Eisner’s funeral was the occasion for a massive demonstration. The councils implemented more dictatorial measures: they arrested 50 reactionary hostages, shut down the bourgeois press, and tried to arm the proletariat. Except for these measures, it did not take advantage of the situation and thereby deprived itself of the full value of the measures it did take: these measures appeared to be a substitute for revolutionary action, whose model was the Commune or Russia. The councils handed over power to the assembly, which elected an SPD-USPD government, presided over by Hoffmann (SPD). (As an illustration of Bavaria’s exceptionalism: during the same period, the central government at Weimar, under SPD leadership, had bourgeois ministers.)

In other regions, the *Freikorps* intervened to restore the powers seized by the councils from the local assemblies, but in Bavaria the councils themselves surrendered their power. Despite the proclamations of “council” (Bremen) or “socialist” (Braunschweig) republics, nowhere were irreversible measures taken for the destruction of capital: it was hoped that others would initiate

these measures. The provinces hoped that Berlin would take the step; the local revolutionary powers (including those of the great industrial regions), in expectation of such an event, limited their activities to carrying out numerous reforms. In Berlin, the SPD government was firmly established in power with its tactic of successive attacks. This mutual passing the buck of initiative back and forth remains a democratic attitude.

3. First and Second Council Republics: April-May

It was G. Landauer who proposed, on April 6-7, the creation of a "Council Republic". One part of the Bavarian government, composed of the enlightened members of the USPD, the anarchists, and even some SPD members, pompously decreed this Republic under the influence of Russia, Hungary which was so near and above all of the power of the Bavarian councils. The communists, led by Levine, who was trained in Russia, and Frölich, the only member of the Central Committee, exiled in Bavaria,⁴ did not form part of the government of the new republic. Some (Frölich and the left) worked to drive matters further than the USPD desired. But they were criticized by the rightist faction (undoubtedly Levine) which, with the just argument that one does not create a council republic by decree, foresaw the fall of the new regime. But as in January in Berlin, they participated in its defense when it was under attack.

Hoffmann, president of the old government, formed a new one in Bamberg, the most tranquil Bavarian city, and began planning his next steps. He rallied various cities to his cause, and the peasants refused to supply the city of Munich. The initial reactionary assault was annihilated in Munich. On April 13, factory delegates created a committee led by the KPD. They proclaimed a ten day general strike, paid for by the factory owners (who, consequently, were not suppressed as such), in order to allow the workers to prepare for combat. The Red Army held massive parades. The revolutionaries took complete possession of the central rail station, but did not transform social and economic conditions. The problems of supply would continue to be felt: demobilization had led to unemployment and relative overpopulation which obliged 50,000 people (out of a total population of 650,000) to be housed in a hundred apartment buildings and common dormitories.⁵ The revolution failed to organize these refugees. With each rifle, the insurrectionary army gave up ten days of its future pay. An army was formed, based on the proletariat (an indispensable condition for victory), but without a fight against the prevailing social relations: it was a purely *military* force, which accentuated its isolation (compare to M. Hölz: cf. Chapter 15).

With the beginning of the civil war, the communists joined the government. The anarchists resigned, since Mühsam and Landauer were theoreticians of non-violence. As in many movements in which the masses had pushed ahead, they had remained, despite their opinions, for a while. At the hour of repression, however, Landauer would be assassinated, Mühsam would be taken prisoner, and another anarchist, Toller, would become one of the leaders of the Red Army. Their tragic fates were not in contradiction to their suicidal positions, for themselves as for the others. By conceiving of the revolution as a gigantic act of bringing pressure to bear on behalf of the oppressed, without securing the necessary organizational and military means, they participated in the movement only to separate themselves from it at the moment of confrontation and, despite everything, perished in it.

⁴ According to Bock.

⁵ Mitchell: p. 320.

This second government gave itself the title of the “Second Council Republic”. Despite its initial successes, it was militarily crushed during the first days of May. Future Nazis played their parts in the White Army: Himmler, R. Hess, and Von Epp.⁶

The Positions and Evolution of the Various Organizations

“It is now impossible to accurately depict the activity of the various organized forces and their relations with unorganized forces within the strike movements and insurrections from November 1918 to May 1919.”⁷ The relative radicalization of the USPD was due above all to the real radicalization of the movement itself and of the communist organizations: the social current which corresponded to the positions of the ex-IKD, with the practical aim of completely transforming the State, became a political factor. In order not to lose its autonomous existence in relation to the SPD, the USPD had to force itself to play the role of a parliamentary extreme left and had to play the game on two boards. Although numerous leaders of the SPD had joined the USPD, many were in favor of reunification, since the principle cause of the schism—the war—had disappeared after 1918. The only reproach they had for their old party was that it went too far in its support for the bourgeoisie. Thus, the USPD, after the start of the social democratic repression in Berlin, abandoned the central government, but the party’s national leadership did not cease to continue advocating alliances with the SPD on the local level—in Hamburg, for example—even though the USPD’s local leadership rejected this policy. The USPD grew from 100,000 members in November 1918 to 300,000 in March 1919. The electoralist right of the KPD, which was barely distinguishable from the USPD, then wanted to rejoin it.

The united front of the anarchosyndicalists and the communists (November 1918 to May 1919) corresponded, within the FVDG, to the ideological hegemony of Roche: non-rejection of violence, dictatorship of the proletariat, defense of the council-form. These were positions close to the form assumed by the revolutionary movement, not advice about what had to be done to prevent a “return to capitalism”. This observation could be applied to the left as a whole. Its merit was its boycott of elections of all kinds, *de facto* destruction of the trade unions, and theorizing these attitudes as affirmations of an authentically proletarian movement. But if it is true that antiparlamentarism and anti-trade unionism constitute the movement’s best points, they are not enough. These points would be assumed by the only capitalist party which would rise to the occasion of the German revolution and would also be capable of repressing it, Nazism. Roche provided a definition of the councils which indicated their limitations: “the councils are the parliaments of the working class.” After all the struggles of the month of May, the syndicalist camp returned to a more classical anarchosyndicalism: remaining in the minority, Roche would become a theoretician of the AAU.

Along with the trade union and parliamentary questions, another important disagreement divided the KPD and to some extent was the foundation of the first two, since it determined the assessment of the historical situation. Those who based their perspective on *What Does Spartacus Want?* felt that Spartacus, and subsequently the KPD, must not “take power unless it is the clear, unequivocal will of the great majority of the proletarian masses of the entire country”. Luxemburg would again declare at the KPD’s founding congress that the revolution would be a long, drawn-out affair and that the situation was not mature: the masses “do not con-

⁶ Badia: p. 149.

⁷ Bock: p. 110.

sciously accept the views, the goals and the methods of the Spartacus League”.⁸ The Luxemburgist minority, and after her death the Central Committee, considered any attempt to take power in the advanced centers as “putschist” or at least “adventurous”. However, once the struggle had begun, Luxemburg participated in it until she was killed: one cannot say as much about her Levist epigones.

The majority fraction of the KPD, supported by many Spartacists (cf. Liebknecht, at the time of the Berlin insurrection), thought that the situation was fully mature. It found itself between the bourgeois and the proletarian revolutions. Its task was neither to discourage action nor to make excuses, but to push the whole proletarian movement forward: however revolutionary the party was, it would never have the power to start such movements. Rühle spoke to this effect at the founding congress of the party, and it was within this framework that the members of the party’s left would act in 1919. The left tendency of the party was all the more dominant due to the fact that the Central Committee’s influence barely extended beyond Berlin.

At this point we must mention the Wolffheim/Laufenberg tendency (later known as “National Bolshevism”),⁹ as it played such an important role in Hamburg. According to Bock, it is the German left tendency most frequently studied in Germany.¹⁰ Wolffheim and Laufenberg, who, in the name of a theory they had yet to fully elaborate in early 1919, had fought for the autonomous organization of the working class, later strove to prevent actions which would lead to the outbreak of civil war in Germany, in other words, they sought to convince the German people to restart the war in alliance with Russia. The victory of revolutionary Russia and Germany would be the victory of the world revolution. In November of 1918, Germany was far from being militarily defeated. The representatives of German capital had sold themselves to western European capital so as to fight the proletariat, their common enemy, which had just re-arisen. The situation of Germany and that of the German revolution was comparable to that of France after the surrender of Sedan to Prussia in September of 1870: the war of national liberation became a revolutionary war supported by the IWA. The German bourgeoisie was denounced for its betrayal of the German people. This was the thesis propounded by Wolffheim and Laufenberg in November 1919 in their *Counterrevolutionary Civil War or Peoples’ Revolutionary War? First Communist Memorial to the German Proletariat*. They therefore condemned the January insurrection for different reasons than Luxemburg. They also embarked upon an original critique of the KPD leadership, accusing Levi in 1920 of being “an agent of international Jewish finance capital”. The NSDAP would not prove to be an innovator in this regard. The national bolshevik current would remain a small minority throughout its history and would be excluded from the KAPD shortly after the party’s foundation. In 1923, however, it would re-emerge within the KPD (the “Schlageter tendency”: cf. Chapter 15).

It is still one of the favorite arguments against the left, despite all evidence to the contrary, that it had incubated a current of this kind. The question, of course, was far from being so obvious at first. Lenin called Laufenberg’s text, *Between the First and Second Revolutions*, an “excellent pamphlet”¹¹. This pamphlet did, however, invoke a “national group identity”. The

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113.

⁹ In this city, the USPD split at the beginning of 1919. Comfort doubts that the (Levist) KPD had any real existence in Hamburg prior to 1930 (p. 106, footnote), which amounts to saying that the left was overwhelmingly dominant among Hamburg communists in 1919.

¹⁰ Bock: p. 274. Cf. the thesis of L. Dupeux, *Stratégie communiste et dynamique conservatrice. Essai sur les différents sens de l’expression “national-bolchevisme”*, University of Strasbourg, 1974.

¹¹ *Oeuvres*, Vol. 30, Moscow, 1964, p.48.

author concluded his text as follows: “According to this communist conception, all intellectual and manual workers belong to this active nation... Lassalle’s national tactics are enjoying a resurgence and comprise a whole in conjunction with international tactics...”¹² One of the manifestations of the crisis of the movement was the fact that, for some, in the process of transcending the point of view of the individual enterprise (which had been amply theorized), they had fallen into a national and non-class-based viewpoint. The German revolutionary proletariat did not know how to provide itself with a “national form” without falling back into the bad habit of nationalism; it did not know how to be “national” (how to constitute itself as a class at the level of the nation, of its capital) without becoming “nationalist”. As Pannekoek said: “the revolutionary proletariat of all countries constitutes just one mass, one army, and if, while taking an active part in the struggle, it does not remember this, it can be annihilated ‘again and again’”.¹³

Unity is not a question of organization, but of communistic measures as well as efforts to unify the movement. It will not be unified if it is not a movement which acts to change the relations of production: the latter can only be changed if the movement is unified. Prudhommeaux would later write¹⁴ that the military struggle and social transformation are not possible unless they are carried out simultaneously.¹⁵

¹² *Zwischen der ersten und der zweiten Revolution*, Hoym, n.d. For a bibliography of national bolshevism, cf. An-
gress, p. 327, note 34

¹³ *Bulletin communiste*, November 18, 1920, “Un monde nouveau”.

¹⁴ *La tragédie de Spartacus*, in *Spartacus et la Commune de Berlin*.

¹⁵ See the testimonies of G. Regler, *La glaive et le fourreau*, Plon, 1960, Chapter III (Berlin) and Chapter IV (Bavaria), and E. von Salomon, *Les réprouvés*, Plon, 1962, Chapter I, which describes the dead end of the revolution, which both men fought against in their time.

Chapter 8

The International and Domestic Situations

May 1919-March 1920

If Trotsky was correct when he wrote, in 1922, that “in 1919, the European bourgeoisie was completely disconcerted”,¹ before recovering its strength in 1920 and 1921, it is equally true that 1919 was the decisive year when a combination of violence and democracy allowed it to resist a proletariat which was restive yet, despite appearances, had not taken the *offensive*. The period between May 1919 and March 1920 was not characterized by great battles in Germany. The proletarians were still burdened by the crushing weight of the defeat they suffered in the war. In June, hunger riots broke out in Hamburg which could not be contained by the *Volkswehr*.² The *Freikorps* repressed the riots, but its units were immediately disarmed. The *Reichswehr* intervened and occupied the city from June to December. Order was essentially reestablished by a “Committee of Twelve” which claimed to represent the factory councils, the unemployed and the *Volkswehr* units under the control of the councils. On the 25th of June, this Committee issued a call to “watch out for agitators and help the police”. The masses took to the streets to oppose the refurbished rule of military force: it was not that they wanted to radically transform their living conditions; their aversion to the Army was an aversion for a particularly concentrated and symbolic form of oppression, but they did not attack it at its roots.

A state of siege reigned everywhere and imposed clandestine conditions upon the revolutionary groups. It was during these few months that important splits took place and that the new “leftist” organizations were formed.

Hungary

On the international plane, Hungary offered the only example, besides Russia, of a revolutionary seizure of power. But the Hungarian experience provides an additional illustration of the communists being defeated due to their involvement with socialists. Founded in November 1918, the Communist Party only “seized” power thanks to the collapse of the State. After proclaiming the republic, the prime minister resigned to protest the armistice terms imposed on his defeated country. The communist leader, B. Kun, replaced him as head of state, and joined the socialists who were already members of the government.

There were not two socialist parties in Hungary, but only one, which cloaked itself in leftist garb when the possibility of coming to power appeared to be at hand. The resolution of the national question was a bloody affair: conflicts broke out between Hungary and its neighbors concerning the frontiers established by the peace treaties. The new, independent Hungary still possessed regions inhabited by non-Hungarian populations (Germans, Slovaks, etc.); the counterrevolution exploited these differences and Hungary was invaded by Romanian and Czech troops allied with Hungarian counterrevolutionary forces. Isolated in the capital and sur-

¹ *La nouvelle étape*, Librairie de l'Humanité, 1922, p. 13.

² Comfort, Chapter IV.

rounded by hostile peasants, the council republic was overthrown: the socialists then abandoned the communists during the ensuing repression.

The least that could be said about them was that the Hungarian revolutionaries, inspired by the Communist International, persevered in their illusions. In the first issue of the *Communist International* (May 1919), L. Rudas wrote that “the entire socialist party” had recognized “the necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat. And now, the proletariat stands as one man behind the new socialist party.” The social democracy had previously participated in the government after Hungary’s secession (November 1918), and had reached an agreement with the communist party. When the socialist head of state resigned, the socialists would *remain* in the government in which Bela Kun had replaced the prime minister. A curious dictatorship of the proletariat. Like other revolutionaries, the Bolsheviks were mistaken when they spoke of a “revolution”. They forgot the essential criterion: the destruction of the State. The State had not been overthrown.

Lenin admitted that he had forgotten about the depth of the Hungarian revolutionary movement: but a telephone conversation reassured him; in this socialist-communist unity, he said, only the left socialists³ participated. On May 27 he wrote that “in the matter of organization, the Hungarian proletariat seems to have outdone us”. He thought that its organization would allow it to avoid the massive use of violence which was necessary in Russia: “you have set a better example than Russia, because you have known how to win over all the socialists, from the start, to a program of true proletarian dictatorship.”⁴ In other words, it was a centrist phenomenon, already seen in relation to the USPD, with one difference, that in Hungary the USPD and the SPD were the same entity. Lenin was following the disastrous line which he would partially apply to Germany when he advised the KPD to unite with the USPD left. The Bolsheviks were in favor of the reunification of the old workers movement, only purged of its right wing elements. Those communists who would be only momentarily inclined towards the left (cf. Chapter 17) would not make this decisive critique of the Communist International. The future right wing leader of the KPD, Levi, who was more lucid because of his moderation,⁵ denounced the putschist and artificial tendency of this “soviet republic”. He had already discussed (in relation to Levine) the problem of communist participation in struggles which were condemned to failure, and Radek had implicitly attacked him, speaking of “political philosophers” who did not want to fight unless they had a “certificate of guaranteed victory”.⁶ Lenin thought that “the Hungarian revolution might play a greater historical role than the Russian revolution.”⁷ A highly advanced country in the heart of Europe, Hungary enjoyed a strategic position. But while the Communist International, led by Zinoviev, boasted of victory, Lenin was more circumspect and pressed B. Kun to work with firmness. The situation of the Red Army, attacked on several fronts, did not allow for military aid to Hungary, which the latter had desired.

The Communist International misunderstood the Hungarian experience. It saw, above all, the power of the socialists, first in order to combat them (1919), but then (after 1920) in order to conclude with the need to attract them to communism: hence the schisms which were pro-

³ *Oeuvres*, Vol. 29, 1962, pp. 244-245.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 392 and 396.

⁵ *Survey*, October 1964, “Paul Levi and the Comintern”.

⁶ Lowenthal, p. 34.

⁷ D. Cattell, *Journal of Central European Affairs*, January-April 1951, “The Hungarian Revolution of 1919 and the Reorganization of the Comintern in 1920”.

posed in the leaderships of the old socialist parties, the united front and the conquest of the trade unions. On this last point, however, after the bourgeois defeat, more praise was bestowed upon the opposition. Roudniansky stated⁸ that in Hungary one had to act outside of the “professional unions”: “not because the professional unions are generally incapable of bringing the class struggle to a favorable conclusion, but because the Hungarian professional unions are penetrated with the bourgeois spirit and opportunism, because... they in fact constitute the vanguard of the counterrevolution.” He rejected the trade unions in the name of Hungarian specificity, and only in this particular case. The structure of the unified socialist party (which took the name “socialist” under trade union pressure) was, on the other hand, modeled on the basis of the factory organizations. A member of the socialist party was also a member of the trade unions. Only 10% of party members had entered the party *directly*. A note from Zinoviev demanded that the editorial committee of the Communist International must not share Roudniansky’s opinion: the revolution “gives new life to the trade union movement... making it one of the points of support for the dictatorship of the proletariat.” And he would return to this theme in June of 1920⁹: “A great movement has begun among the old trade unions. The trade unions are no longer what they were five years ago. One could say the same about the American Federation of Labor. In Germany, the replacement of the old bureaucrats has begun and is being pursued with vigor.” This development corresponded to a re-adaptation of the trade unions to the *same* (reactionary) function, and not to a change of function: but the CI needed to invent a movement in the trade unions like that of the “left-leaning” centrists in order to incite the communists to collaboration.

In January of 1921, two Hungarians, Kabatchiev and Rakosi (future leader of Stalinist Hungary prior to 1956), CI delegates to the Livorno Congress, where the Italian Communist Party was founded, explained that the error of the Hungarian communists must not be repeated.¹⁰ They explicitly compared the two cases, deducing from the first that one must break with the socialist center as well as with the right (in Italy, with Serrati). “The reasons which impelled them (the Hungarian communists) towards unity are the same ones which are today used on behalf of the reformists and centrists in Livorno. They, too, yielded to the sentimental fraction of the working class which wanted just one party. The Hungarian communists had also postponed the exclusion of the reformists, expecting that they would provide them with the pretext for justifying their expulsion in the eyes of the backward masses... None of their hopes were realized.” They also warned against the trade unionists, recalling the Finnish and Bavarian cases. Levi, who was also present at Livorno, defended the unity thesis and later regretted the outcome of the Congress (cf. Chapter 13). The international communist movement only learned half the lessons of the Hungarian experience.

The Treaty of Versailles

In June of 1919, the Weimar assembly accepted the conditions of the Versailles Treaty: the property of the Saar Basin mines was seized and the entire left bank of the Rhine (facing the Ruhr) was occupied. Germany lost its colonies and had to pay an enormous debt (primarily to France) whose exact amount was not yet established: in the meantime it had to pay 20 billion

⁸ *L'Internationale Communiste*, No. 5.

⁹ *Ibid.*, No. 10.

¹⁰ Gruber, pp. 297-298.

gold marks in reparations. In May of 1921, the debt would be fixed at 132 billion gold marks: in contrast, France's debt to Germany after 1871 was 3 billion gold francs.

The treaty signified an enormous transfer of surplus value from Germany to the victors, and consequently aggravated the exploitation of the German proletariat. The treaty was an attempt to divide the world proletariat, by ensuring that the costs of economic reconstruction would be borne by the German workers alone. All the Communist Parties of the time energetically denounced the treaty except the Dutch CP (cf. *The Opportunism of the Dutch Communist Party*, written by Gorter in 1919). In addition, the territorial settlements which were adopted at the peace conferences, taken as a whole, tended to isolate the Russian and German proletariats. A reconstituted Poland was inserted to drive a wedge between the two revolutionary heartlands and took over the great industrial region of Upper Silesia. The application of the alleged Wilsonian "idealism", "the right of self-determination", divided Europe into bits and pieces and laid the groundwork for the world hegemony of the USA.

The communist parties jointly launched a *specific* struggle against the treaty, whose abrogation they demanded: abrogation was one of the principle slogans of the 1920s. Gorter, and along with him the German Left, analyzed the treaty as a terrible blow dealt to the proletariat, and not just the German proletariat. But it was not a question, for either Gorter or the left, of making the treaty's abolition into a "partial demand": since it found itself facing an agreement between capitalist states, the proletariat, in any event, had nothing to say, unless it accepted the terms of debate and sought the lesser evil within the framework of the system of capitalist States (in the same way that antifascism would seek the least unfavorable capitalist formula for the proletariat, within the system of bourgeois political powers). It is a kind of false realism to believe that the proletariat could have some impact on facts whose very existence implies that the proletariat has not played a historical role. The revolutionaries had no more reason to zealously demand the abolition of the treaty than to demand the disarming of the police. The fact that these slogans were launched proved the invisibility of the proletariat as a class power, and its effort to find a substitute for that power by indirect means. The proletarians had not been invited to have an influence on the relations between States: should such a thing occur, they would be integrated into one or another State. This is what would happen on several occasions during the time of the Weimar republic, when the KPD demagogically competed with the Nazis by demanding the annulment of the treaty.

The Establishment of the Weimar Republic

On August 11, 1919, the Weimar Constitution was born. In December of 1919 and January of 1920, agitation for the "enterprise councils law" took place. This law (*Betriebsrätegesetz*) was a further extension of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* and the policies initiated during the Sacred Union (*Burgfrieden*) of the war years. In December of 1916, a decree had instituted trade union/employer parity committees in all enterprises with more than 50 employees: the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* reduced this number to 20. After November 18, of course, alongside these business-sponsored trade union organs, the ubiquitous soviets appeared. The demand of the supporters of these soviets was, basically, to be recognized by the new constitution. The First Council Congress refused to admit the Spartacists (cf. Chapter 6): the second was just as adamant in its refusal to admit the KPD as a whole. This is certainly a measure of the revolutionary significance of a slogan like "All Power to the Workers Councils".

An article in the constitution promised the integration of the councils. On October 9, the law was presented before the Assembly.¹⁴ In the view of the USPD and numerous councils

particularly the clandestine executive council (*Vollzugsrat*) of Berlin who wanted “authentic participation of the workers in economic decision-making” and not simply in matters pertaining to the company cafeteria and social events, the law was insufficient. The working masses committed themselves to this fight in favor of council participation in decision-making, and in December, demonstrations took place in Hamburg and Essen. On January 13, “in order to exert pressure on the deputies”, 50,000 people attended a demonstration in front of the Reichstag in Berlin. Troops opened fire on the demonstrators and killed forty people: a state of siege was declared. On the 18th, the law was passed. The KPD (at that time, only its right wing remained in the party: cf. Chapter 10) criticized the idea of these legal councils, but nonetheless, by virtue of its two principles “revolutionary parliamentarism” and “do not become isolated from the masses” joined the demonstrations.

Chapter 9

Revolutionary Syndicalism and Unionism

Marx's analysis of trade unions in the *Manifesto* and *Wages, Price and Profit*,¹ dating from the second half of the 19th century, is no longer applicable. Workers struggles, with their victories or defeats, no longer have the sole objective of consolidating labor unity, but are also intended to strengthen the trade union as a reactionary organization. The German Left would be compelled to understand this, while other revolutionaries (among others, Bordiga, despite his visionary traits) would want to *reconstruct* the old movement. Others would later be tempted by the idea of forming broad-based, democratic workers organizations, which would be based on rank and file workers organizations.² At the end of his life, Pannekoek's achievement would reside in the fact that he understood, despite his councilist and educationalist illusions, that revolutionaries would never be able to recreate the old movement:³ like Bordiga, Pannekoek is also profoundly contradictory. It is not the reformist *organizations* which oppose the revolution: it is *reformism* itself which drives the proletarians away from the revolution.

Revolutionary Syndicalism

The rupture (in the USA and other countries) between the official socialist movement and a more leftist movement with a Marxist orientation, as was the case in the split between the reformist *Socialist Party of America* and DeLeon's *Socialist Labor Party*, was characteristic of a period when the proletariat was incapable of unity. The alternative was between obtaining reforms and "preparing" for the revolution: in the first case, there was integration into capital; in the second, a break with the real practice of the workers. This explains why the *syndicalist* perspective was the only one which thrived: it established the unity of immediate struggles and revolution. For the syndicalist perspective there is continuity between: 1) the immediate struggle, with trade union organization (by trade or, like the IWW, by industry); 2) the revolution, with the industrial organizations taking power; 3) socialism, with a social organization on this basis. Such an illusion has the merit of being coherent. The groups (DeLeon) which tried to unite with these syndicalists in order to penetrate the working class failed, because, by definition, this form of action rejected any kind of structure which was not formed "by the workers themselves" at the point of production.

The "syndicalists" were divided into two major currents. The first was a survival from the 19th century workers movement and of the "workers separatism"⁴ which rejected both the communist movement and capitalism for the same reason, preferring instead to deal with the labor question in its own way, in terms of its exclusively worker-based organization. It was connected to the Proudhonist tradition, which was not so much an ideological tendency as it was a theorization of workers aspirations; its contemporary analogue is the politics of self-

¹ *Oeuvres*, Gallimard, Vol. I, 1963, pp. 530 and 532-533.

² Munis and Peret, *Les syndicats contre la révolution*, Losfeld, 1968.

³ *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils*.

⁴ A. Kriegel, *Le pain et les roses*, PUF, 1968, p. 37 et seq., and P. Ansart, *Naissance de l'anarchisme*, PUF, 1970.

management.⁵ This current, which was predominant in the early days of the CGT, entered into crisis after 1906 (when the general strike for the eight-hour day failed) due to the expanding industrialization which liquidated its base in trade- and skill-based organizations. French revolutionary syndicalism never underwent a factional struggle between moderates and radicals: the revolutionary tendency, by virtue of its own development, was transformed in a reformist direction. In 1914, there was no surprise: “For several years, Griffuelhes, Pouget and Merrheim had discouraged antipatriotic action.”⁶

The second current was much more modern and was inseparable from large industry. The IWW was the organization of the unskilled, Taylorized labor and the unemployed. This organization did not decay like the CGT, but was destroyed as an active movement. The trade unions of the CIO would come to occupy the positions which the IWW could not, because, as a hybrid movement, the IWW simultaneously wanted revolutionary action and an organization of all wage workers on an economic basis. The shop stewards,⁷ on the other hand, were the organizations of workers delegates, often skilled, whose trade unions had not defended their privileges during the war. They often used original means in organizing to obtain the satisfaction of their demands, but their struggle was not revolutionary. Rather than preventing an autonomous organization of the workers against capital, they filled a vacuum abandoned by the trade unions.⁸ Germany combined the first and second currents of revolutionary syndicalism in an original synthesis, which would be adapted to events under pressure from the workers, and this development would be accentuated as the positions of the SPD and the ADGB drove the workers towards more leftist organizations.

The drift towards the more radical groups (USPD, KPD, syndicalists) would create a new conception of organization: unionism. At the beginning of 1919, the metal workers union, which, with 1,240,000 members and comprising 1/5 of all organized workers, was the leading German trade union, elected new leaders sympathetic to the USPD. During the war, its minority had already voted for a proposal, which was defeated by 77 votes to 44, to withhold its dues from the ADGB, whose patriotism it denounced.⁹ The Mannheim Accord of 1906 (cf. Chapter 2) had expired. But the ADGB responded by getting rid of its opponents: it would reintegrate the *RO* opposition and exclude the communists. In Halle, for example, where almost all the trade unions were led by communists, the local trade union committee fused with the council organization at the beginning of 1921; the ADGB immediately provoked a trade union split.¹⁰ In 1919, however, the KPD’s lack of a precise position on the trade union question at its founding congress led to an absence of relations between communists and trade union organs during the first half of the year, although the situation varied from region to region. “In Hamburg and Bremen, the communists attacked Legien’s trade union offices, seized their funds and distributed them to unemployed workers; the workers did not so much as lift a finger in defense of ‘their’ organization. The conference of the northern German sections of the KPD (August

⁵ For example, the case of LIP in France: cf. *Négation* No. 3, and *LIP: Bilan et tentative de dépassement*, Paris, 1973. In English, see *LIP and the Self-Managed Counter-Revolution*, Black & Red, Detroit, 1975; now available online at the John Gray website (www.geocities.com/~johngray/lip.htm).

⁶ Lefranc, *Le syndicalisme en France sous la III^e République*, Payot, 1967, p. 190 et seq. Cf. also the article by Tilly and Shorter on the strikes in France, *Annales*, July-August 1973.

⁷ Cf. the introduction to MacLean, *The War after the War*, Socialist Reproduction, London, 1974.

⁸ *Révolution Internationale*, n.d., No. 8.

⁹ *La question syndicale...*, p. 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.

1919) ruled that the members of the KPD must leave the ADGB.”¹¹ It was only at the end of 1919, and thus after a series of defeats, that the purged KPD would adopt the orientation of conquering the trade unions, in which the USPD “had already conquered the leadership position in the legal trade union opposition”.¹² Not much was accomplished in this regard, and the (right wing) KPD was not in touch with the spontaneous tendencies of the workers.

As often happened, once the revolution was over, the workers joined the most radical organizations which were, or appeared to be, correct, or created new ones, which slowly became counterrevolutionary if they survived into a prolonged period of “calm”. The rupture took place between a pre-existing tendency from before the revolution and the other, more recently produced tendency, which could not survive after the revolutionary defeat. The same process would take place in the communist party.

The FVDG broke the radical front by opposing the renovation of the General Union of Miners, destroyed in May 1919, and turned to the creation of an organization on the principles of revolutionary syndicalism in the Rhineland-Westphalia region, where it was strongest: the *Freie Arbeiter Union (Rhineland-Westphalia) (Free Workers Union)* was founded at the Düsseldorf Congress on September 15-16, 1919. The very name, FAU, was a compromise between anarchism (*Freie*: free) and unionism (*Union*). Indeed, besides the members of the post-November 1918 reconstituted FVDG, local unionist organizations sympathetic to the KPD also attended the congress (the Essen AAU, the General Union of Miners). The opposition of the two tendencies was clearly defined: the syndicalists appeared as “dogmatists” who wanted their 1906 program to be adopted. At that point, the differences revolved around organization by trade, an article of faith for classical revolutionary syndicalists, or by factory. A compromise was reached: in theory, organization by trades was adopted, but in practice the organization was based on what actually existed (organization of miners by shafts, and the others by factories). All political parties were condemned except the KPD. The FAU (R-W) would remain a coalition of organizations until the creation of the FAUD and the AAU.¹³

The FAUD was founded at the XIIth Congress of the FVDG in December 1919. This new name reflected the adherence of the various locals of the FAU, born since May, to the FVDG: the FAU of Rhineland-Westphalia, discussed above, was by far the most important. The organization had spread throughout Germany (FAUD, D: *Deutschlands*) and must have had approximately 200,000 members at the time. The left unionist opposition was weaker at that time and the FAUD returned to classical anarchosyndicalism, under the influence of Kropotkin, filtered through R. Rocker, the ideologist of the movement. It called itself the FAUD(S) to distinguish itself (S: Syndicalist). It broke with all political parties, declared itself against the dictatorship of the proletariat, for not being a dictatorship of “the whole class” “from the bottom up”, and was in favor of non-violence as a matter of principle. Its leadership was to disapprove of many of the revolutionary actions in which its rank and file would participate in 1920-1921. “Revolutionary syndicalism” (=FAUD(S)) was there to decree the general strike of all workers (proletarians), so it said: this strike would paralyze the economy and the bourgeoisie, and the trade unions would take affairs into their own hands and would organize the society of “the free and equal producers”.

The FAUD(S) was led by a central committee of old syndicalists, at whose head were R. Rocker and F. Kater, who defended a pacifist and anti-revolutionary syndicalism. They had

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹³ The text adopted by the congress appears in Bock, Document VI.

been the first to proclaim the slogan of a united front, inviting the Spartacists and independent socialists, already in 1918, to join a “social-political” front. They would even continue to follow this policy in 1921, issuing invitations to the USPD as well as to the KPD/VKPD. In parallel with the Levi tendency, the German syndicalists adopted the same “anti-putschist” positions during the course of the March-April 1920, and March 1921 events. Like the Levists, the central committee of the FAUD(S) would characterize the attacks which the left communists (of the KPD and KAPD) carried out against the trains carrying arms to Poland during the summer of 1920 as “romanticism”.¹⁴ As a delegate from the Ruhr declared, requesting that the term “syndicalist” be abandoned: “the syndicalists are not revolutionary enough in the eyes of the Ruhr miners.”¹⁵

In the next period, the FAUD split into three principle tendencies. The leadership, now in the minority, upheld anarchosyndicalism in its original purity. It tried to set up a trade union international to rival the Communist International: the “IWA”. The IWW, the shop stewards and the CNT, however, tried to join the Communist International, through its affiliate the Red Trade Union International, founded in July of 1921. But the CI’s policies repelled them, since it wanted the traditional trade unions to join the RTUI, as well as to promote reformist struggles using more aggressive slogans and methods. If the IWA, founded at the end of 1922, would only have an ephemeral impact, by taking advantage of the RTUI’s opportunism, it at least managed to detour numerous revolutionary workers into a dead end. The primary activity of this new IWA would consist of denouncing the “communists” who were trying to shift the workers struggle away from its true terrain: the workers struggle. The behavior of the Communist International, at both the national and international levels, helped to push the revolutionaries since at least some of these workers organizations showed a tendency towards radical actions and positions into the arms of the reformists. It reinforced tendencies towards confusion and conciliation, which were strong in some trade unions (CNT), instead of extirpating or eliminating them.¹⁶

Equally insignificant, the second tendency was grouped around the Düsseldorf journal *Die Schöpfung* (The Creation), characterized above all by its activism and its “anti-dogmatism”. Some of its adherents judged that they “had to vote despite their principles”. Others, in September 1921, elaborated a program of action which involved issuing an ultimatum to the government and the trade unions, whose rejection would lead to the general strike. Its members also created “communes” and anarchist schools, etc.

The most important tendency, whose further development is most noteworthy, was the so-called “FAU of Gelsenkirchen” (FAU(G)), whose nucleus was formed by former members of the USPD and the General Union of Miners. It only superficially adopted the syndicalist ideology, and became the economic organization of the VKPD, while retaining a certain degree of autonomy (concerning the VKPD, cf. Chapter 13). It left the FAUD in November 1920, and had 110,000 members at that time, primarily in the FAU of the Rhineland-Westphalia region and the General Union of Miners of Central Germany and Upper Silesia. After its founding in December 1920, the VKPD acknowledged it as a revolutionary factor. The FAU(G) admitted, for its part, that many of its members were members of the VKPD. In September of 1921, the FAU(G) fused with two other trade union organizations which had existed since 1918 to form the General Union of Manual and Intellectual Workers of Germany (Council Organization),

¹⁴ *La question syndicale...*, p. 16.

¹⁵ Bock, p. 57.

¹⁶ *La question syndicale...*, pp. 17-19.

with 168,000 members.¹⁷ It would be the only German trade union to join the RTUI. However, after years of opposition, the VKPD and the CI would force it to dissolve into various reactionary trade unions in 1925.

The phenomenon of the *unionen* reflected a situation in which the proletarians were neither capable of nor wanted to attack capital, but refused to carry out purely economic actions in the usual corporatist manner: this explains their anti-trade union reaction and their efforts to *unify themselves* in the *unionen*. Of course, since the assault was not undertaken with a firm resolve, reformism, no matter how strong it may have been, was condemned to failure. These new organizations would be eclipsed or would fall into dependence on another form of syndicalism, with apolitical aspirations but much more concerned with fighting against the Marxists than in driving the workers actions forward, and which would sabotage local and regional attempts at unification with unions inspired by left communists, who were judged to be “authoritarian” and violent. This narrow-minded spirit was a revelation of a *competitive* attitude typical of politics. Unionism would develop as a reaction against classical “revolutionary” syndicalism as much as against the ADGB.

The Origins of Unionism

(It should be emphasized that the *Unionen* discussed in this book were not (and in fact fought against) what are called “unions” in the English language (*Gewerkschaften* in German)) (Author’s note to the American edition).

Unionism, as a concept of proletarian revolutionary organization, was conceived by elements which had arrived during the war, at the time of the revolution in Germany, from the USA. The IWW, an organization of radical economic struggle, born in the USA at the beginning of the 20th century, had historical roots which extended back to Owen’s theory of *One Big Union* (ca. 1830). The workers in the IWW were organized by factory and by industry. The IWW had various tendencies, one of which a minority asserted the need to form an alliance with a revolutionary political party; this tendency was inspired by DeLeon and was actually excluded from the IWW. The DeLeonist SLP and the workers groups under its influence worked in parallel with but separately from the IWW. DeLeon thought a party distinct from the unions was necessary in order to destroy the State: once this purely negative act had been consummated, the party would be eclipsed by the unions’ administration of society. The majority of the IWW’s membership rejected this dual party/unions structure, and wanted to make the IWW the sole revolutionary organization. Dannenberg, having arrived from America, led a small unionist tendency in Braunschweig, and was undoubtedly influenced by DeLeon. The greatest difference between the IWW and anarchosyndicalism was the IWW’s dedication to the principle of the factory organization.

The IWW was considered to be a sympathetic but confused movement, or as one of those rare cases of a workers organization which was “not manipulated” from outside by a “party”. It played a role in the formation of the German Left. When the KAPist worker P. Mattick immigrated to the USA in 1926, he joined the IWW. The IWW’s real nature must be acknowledged, as well as its *failure* in 1914, *just like* that of the parties and trade unions against which it carried out such an effective struggle. Its failure was not due only to its repression, which it had neither wanted to prepare for nor was capable of confronting. From its founding in 1905, it tried to remain on the margin of political groups, but it had an overwhelming tendency to ig-

¹⁷ Its extensive statutes are reproduced in Bock, p. 367.

nore the question of power as well as that of the destruction of the State. It was more apolitical than antipolitical.¹⁸ The IWW's 1916 congress called for the organization of a general strike in case of war. *Just like* the resolutions of the Second International (cf. Chapter 4), this proposal would not be respected. A minority fraction demanded the implementation of the decisions of the 1916 congress when the US entered the war in April 1917. The IWW's *General Executive Board*, after long deliberation, refused to do so. Even after April 1917, when the IWW was under attack by the State and armed gangs (assassinations, arrests, destruction of its offices), the GEB took no action. B. Haywood, the IWW leader, stated that everything would return to the way it was before the war and that the organization would rebuild itself. For the next two years, the IWW restricted its defensive activity to the legal system... which the State itself did not respect.¹⁹ The war revealed its limitations, just as it had exposed those of the trade unions and socialist parties.

Unionism held that the workers should be organized by factories and then by *economic regions* (and not by industries). This difference is crucial (within the context of the period under consideration, and obviously not as an abstract, ahistorical opposition): the point of view of industrial unionism, in its debates, and its power position, was framed in relation to the cartels and industrial trusts – it was a form of organization designed to return to the roots of true trade unionism. Organization by economic regions, however, united all the workers in the same region, transcending not only the trade or profession (like all unionism) but also the industry and even the factory; this kind of unionism which goes beyond the interests of trade, of factory, and of industry is, in fact, a geographical-strategic grouping with a view to revolutionary action and had a tendency to supersede the proletarian condition itself. Furthermore, the one time when a union, with the assistance of the AAUD, led a reformist struggle (in 1927), it was an industrial union: the Union of North Sea Fishermen.

In 1919, the unions were temporary associations which worked on the formation of councils: it was the councils and not the unions which were called upon to manage production. For all the currents of the period, socialism was a problem of management: the different conceptions of socialism concerned the form of workers management of production (by the party, by the council, the trade unions, the union, etc.). The unions appeared spontaneously during the war and the revolution. When the workers abandoned the trade unions they did so factory by factory and not by the basic units of trade union organization (the trades).

The idea of *unitary* organization (neither party, nor trade union, but something beyond both) appeared for the first time in an anonymous article in the Bremen *Arbeiterpolitik*, and was presented as a concept which had originated among rank and file workers. The “soul of the proletarian” cannot be divided into a “political soul” and an “economic soul”. In *Mass Strike, Party and Trade Unions*, Luxemburg had expressed the idea that the separation of the party and the trade union was by no means absolute. In a sense, what was taking place was a return to the primitive organization of the proletarians, except, this time, as the fruit of a more advanced movement. The trade union-party distinction was proof that the previous era was not revolutionary: the same was true of the distinction between maximum and minimum programs. The mere fact, however, that a proletarian organization would define itself, in the first place, in relation to the *workplace* shows that the proletarian offensive was deadlocked.

¹⁸ Our position is anti-political, but not *a-political*: cf. *Le Mouvement Communiste*, No. 5, October 1973, “De la politique”.

¹⁹ Dubofsky, *We Shall Be All*, Quadrangle Books, Chicago; *Journal of Social History*, Summer 1974, for the IWW between 1909 and 1922; and H. Bötcher, *Zur revolutionäre Gewerkschaftsbewegung in Amerika, Deutschland und England*, Jena, 1922.

At the KPD's founding congress, the left defended the concept of unitary organization. During the ensuing period of struggles, the party's majority implemented the slogan "abandon the trade unions" and also helped to create the elements of the future AAU. The unionist current was seeking its own identity at the moment (May 1919) when the syndicalists broke with the revolutionary front. At that time, revolutionary groups were once again forming in the Ruhr, in Central Germany, and above all in various cities in the North (Bremen and Hamburg) in a series of organizations which were neither classical trade unions nor revolutionary syndicalist trade unions. In Hamburg, a direct line of descent connected the IWW to the unions. Wolffheim had spent several years with the IWW in California. With Laufenberg, he urged the workers to join the AAU when it was created in August of 1919, and they considered it to be the German section of the IWW.²⁰

It was in Hamburg that unionism was theorized in particular detail. The Hamburg *Kommunistische Arbeiter-Zeitung* published numerous articles from May to August 1919 from various sources ("theoreticians", "rank and file militants", "trade unionists", "communists", etc.) under the rubric of "a contribution to the debate concerning the trade union question". It was here that the idea arose that the party should end by dissolving itself into the AAU, after having contributed to the latter's generalization. Moreover, all the tendencies and future splits were to be found in embryo within the debate concerning the *rate* at which this dissolution should proceed.

Organizations of the AAU type (by factory and by region) expressed a primordial fact: the workers who formed them carried out a revolutionary struggle by attacking the roots of the economic relations and not their effects. To declare oneself in favor of the dictatorship of the proletariat was also the sole criterion for membership in the AAU. Viewed negatively, only those workers who rejected any idea of reformist or partial struggle could organize in the AAU. When the revolutionary wave receded and was submerged in the sea of reformist action, the trade union-type organization, with its professional divisions, reigned unchallenged. The AAU ceased to be an instrument of struggle, since the struggle which it served no longer existed, and it would be relegated to the status of a subsidiary sect of the KAPD.

The relation between organization based on skills/trades and the reformist struggle would be negatively confirmed in 1923. The spectacular inflation of that year caused a day's wage to lose one-third of its value after 24 hours.²¹ The wage struggle once again having become impossible, the trade union organizations were dismantled and replaced by factory organizations: but this time the latter did not undertake any revolutionary action worthy of the name.

The Formation of the "AAUD"

In August 1919, factory organizations, acting upon the basis of the positions of the KPD, met in Essen to found the AAU of Essen. For the last time, the Levist central committee gave its assent to such an act. In itself, this meeting was of little importance, but the AAU was the focal point for the foundation of the AAUD. It participated in the foundation of the FAU(R-W) but quickly broke with the latter, since unionism was in the last stage of acquiring its own identity. The founding congress of the AAUD (General Union of German Workers) met on February 14, 1920. The principle spokespersons for unionism had become isolated: Wolffheim and Laufenberg had devoted themselves exclusively to propaganda for their national-bolshevik the-

²⁰ Bock, Document V.

²¹ Badia, p. 186

ses. Frölich and Becker had remained in the KPD and joined the fight against “leftism” (cf. Chapters X, XIII and XV, for the Bremen left).

The two leading tendencies at the congress were composed of those who called for the immediate abolition of the party organization (Roche, from Hamburg, and Rühle, from Dresden) and those who thought that it was necessary to maintain the party for a certain time (Schröder and the leadership of the future KAPD). The Hamburg national bolsheviks comprised a very small minority of the congress delegates. The first theoreticians of unionism were thrown overboard at the very moment that unionism began its existence.

During this period, Becker thought that the unions should “be intermediate organs between the party and the class”, a position which the other tendencies felt was too rigid. The split which developed among the “centralists” helped to hand over the leadership to the “federalists”, who were particularly strong in Hamburg and Dresden, and who would dominate the organization’s leading positions in 1920. For example, supreme authority was vested solely in the hands of the national congress: “The AAUD’s organization would never completely achieve the same stable character as the FAU. The AAUD was, more than any other union, the expression of the revolutionary movement of the *Betriebsräte*, and from the moment the revolutionary movement began to stagnate, this would appear as an enormous weakness.”²² But this was only true from an extremely “organizational” point of view: as if the proletarian revolutionary movement should provide itself with (mass) organizations capable of resisting an extremely long counter-revolution. Again: organizations like the AAUD were so exceptionally subversive because they were so completely attuned to the revolutionary movement; they overcame the opposition between the movement and a petrified organization. The fact that they disappeared at the end of the revolutionary period would, instead, be a good sign, if one did not know that they would never admit the full extent of their failure and all of its implications.

Dannenberg’s tendency advocated “industrial unionism”: the unions should federate by industry and not by region, and should link up with a political party (in this case, the USPD). This tendency disappeared along with its leader in 1921, after having been excluded in 1920, “attacked by all other tendencies for its pro-USPD sympathies and its ‘economistic reformism’”.²³

The debate at the congress was very confused, and the delegates had just enough time to agree about what the AAUD *was not*, before the police arrested them. But the organization’s foundation responded to a real movement. The formation of the unions coincided with a *de facto* break with and a rejection of trade union organization. To conceive of the AAUD in purely organizational terms, as one more link in “the life of groups”, is to have not understood it in its essence. In August 1919, the Union of Port and Shipyard Workers of Hamburg was formed, with a communist leadership. Such splits had a *political* basis: “It attacked the trade union *Zentrale* for its support of Ebert and the Kaiser’s generals, it supported arming the proletarians, recognition of the Russian soviet republic, militant solidarity with Russia, and opposition to Ebert-Scheidemann’s support of the Poles and the White Army. Had the revolutionary situation remained more generally aggressive, the events which took place in Bremen and Hamburg would have been repeated.”²⁴

²² *La question syndicale...*, p. 19.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

The second conference of the AAUD, which took place on March 10-12, 1920, just before the Kapp Putsch, adopted some very simple statutes.²⁵ The Roche-Rühle tendency emerged victorious: federalism, no party. In November 1920, the third conference convened while the KAPD was in its ascendant phase, after it had excluded Rühle and his supporters. Joint action between the KAPD and the AAUD was especially extensive during the month of August due to the sabotage of arms shipments to Poland. The KAPD tendency (Schröder) gained support. This tendency recognized the temporary necessity of the party as a separate institution, even after the revolution, at the advent of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The conference also adopted a very succinct program and a set of “General Guidelines”.²⁶ These two texts were in absolute conformity with the KAPD program, from which entire passages were borrowed.

Rühle’s current separated from the AAUD (cf. Chapter 14). The destiny of the AAUD after its third conference was indistinguishable from that of the KAPD. What is essential is that, from the organizational point of view, the AAUD was not merely an appendix of the KAPD which the latter had created.

Particularly strong in Hamburg, Berlin (30,000 members in December 1920) and central Germany, the AAUD had 150,000 members in the winter of 1920-1921;²⁷ during this same period the KAPD never had more than 40,000 members. In December 1922, the AAUD would have no more than 120,000 members in its so-called “Berlin” tendency and a few hundred in the “Essen” tendency (cf. Appendix I). It was during 1919-1920, however, that the union was most active, even in terms of its propaganda: the union had at least ten weekly newspapers and its numerous pamphlets sometimes had print runs of 120,000. After 1923 it was left with almost no members. While the FAU(G) was stronger in the mines, the AAUD was especially strong in the metal industry. “The trunk of the class”,²⁸ as Radek had described it at the congress of the Communist International, had thus abandoned its traditional organizations. This phenomenon of workers regroupment also took place, prior to 1914, in the British trade union movement, where the Triple Alliance consolidated the miners, the railroad workers and the transport workers in order to stage turbulent but non-revolutionary actions. The IWW, on the other hand, recruited mostly in the newer industries with a heavy representation of unorganized immigrants. These facts, by the way, refute the legend according to which the German Left was mostly composed of “déclassé” elements. The members of the AAUD were not *lumpen*, as Rosenberg would have us understand in his *History of the Weimar Republic*.²⁹ All layers of the working class were to be found in the AAUD, as well as in the FAUD, the KAPD and the KPD.

First, the members of the KAPD and the AAUD came from all layers of the proletariat. Furthermore, after half a century of social democratic domestication, and in opposition to the despotism of the factory, the rejection of the discipline of the various parties was something completely positive, especially in Germany. It has been said that the “leftists” lacked any experience of organization. But this is utterly untrue: they knew the organizations of their time all too well and knew that these organizations considered them to be a simple “mass” which was always led to defeat and massacre. An important fraction of radical proletarians acted in a revolutionary way and knew what they had to do. It is all to their credit that they did not want to hear of any

²⁵ *La gauche allemande...*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *La question syndicale...*, pp. 19-20. Bock estimates a maximum of 100,000 in March 1921.

²⁸ *La question syndicale...*, p.20.

²⁹ Bock, p. 1.

discipline which did not originate among their own ranks. What would be absurd would be to raise anti-discipline, anti-organization and anti-authority to the status of categorical principles, as if the rebels of the various insurrectionary movements had not had their own leaders, organizations and discipline. The principle that “the whole world must give the orders” is only valid where there is nothing that has to be done.

As long as the AAUD was a living organization, its polemic against the anarchosyndicalism which was attempting to return to organization by trade had a real basis. It was the expression of the movement of radical proletarians which, by organizing to achieve goals held in common by the whole proletariat, also entered into conflict with the forms which were keeping them isolated in stagnant compartments. As a distinct ideology, revolutionary syndicalism played a reactionary role during this phase. But when, during the period of reaction, some survivors of unionism devoted themselves to making a fetish of the forms of organization of the radical current of the German Left (councils, factory organizations, AAU, etc.), this propaganda underwent a change of function. Encouraging the workers to create these organizations was in this case a substitute for revolutionary action. And this was all the more dangerous insofar as these forms, which had previously expressed a subversive content, could become the vehicle for tendencies which were simply reformist, as a result of the further development of capital and of the forms of its domination.

Chapter 10

The KPD: January 1919 to March 1920

The Minority Right-wing Leadership goes on the Offensive

The opposition between the KPD's tendencies would revolve around the basic problem which was not resolved by the first congress: the position to be taken on the trade union question but the battle lines would not be firmly drawn until the struggles were over. In effect, in early May of 1919 the *Rote Fahne* (organ of the Berlin central committee) was still directing the members of the KPD to participate in the reconstruction of the General Union of Miners. The central committee also helped form an Agricultural Workers Union and a Railroad Workers Union. Both would collapse after the failure of the strike called by the central committee. Despite its unfortunate experiences, the central committee, into whose leadership Levi was reluctantly co-opted in April, supported working with "what already exists": the trade unions dominated by the SPD. The failure of the proletarian movement irremediably blocked any possibility that the former Spartacists would move towards the left, although some of them were open to the ideas of the left.

The left's attitude did not change. The focal point of the tendency at that time was in northern Germany: Wolffheim and Laufenberg were the radicals' spokesmen, and the central committee concentrated its attacks on them. But the theoretical expression of the movement was provided by Pannekoek who tirelessly wrote for the left press under the pseudonym of K. Horner. Hamburg paved the way by violently destroying the trade unions. The AAU was strongest in the north.

Levi, a lawyer by profession, had met Lenin in Switzerland during the war and had collaborated with the Zimmerwald left, moving closer to bolshevism, particularly in regard to the need for another party besides social democracy. He contributed to bringing about closer relations between Spartacus and the IKD. He situated himself at the point where bolshevism and Spartacism intersected. Once he was co-opted into the KPD leadership, he announced a new "centralist" line which was soon destined to lead to the exclusion of the leftist currents. From his contacts with the Bolsheviks he would retain only the idea of a *strong* party: what basically attracted him to Leninism was what the latter preserved of social democracy, and not those aspects which went beyond social democracy. He considered the left to be responsible for the defeats and denounced "verbal radicalism": "to be a communist does not mean using the most radical phrases, but having the clearest vision of social reality at every moment" precisely the kind of false opposition in whose name the Bolsheviks extirpated the leftist tendencies in Russia. The left responded immediately: the Hamburg *Kommunistische Arbeiter-Zeitung* published an article on *The Roots of Dictatorship*.¹ The new centralizing measures were due to the fact that many KPD members came from the USPD (the Spartacists). The party must be "the means provided to the masses for their own intervention". Levi had applied, to the KPD, principles imported from the USPD, "an organization where the leaders rule the masses".

The central committee did not carry out its attack directly on the basis of crucial strategic issues (trade unions, elections), but with the help of the false centralism/federalism opposition,

¹ 1919, No. 83.

and did so obliquely. At the Frankfurt conference in mid-August 1919, Levi still did not call for working in the trade unions. He carried on a polemic around the concept of unitary organization, calling its supporters syndicalists; on the issue of participation in parliament, since almost all the party's local organizations were controlled by the left, Levi and the central committee, avoiding a frontal assault, executed a carefully-planned maneuver by inviting all kinds of editors, secretaries and traveling orators to attend the conference. Meanwhile, the 22 districts of the party were represented by only one delegate for each district. The Hamburg communists immediately attacked this ploy as "the first beginnings of a new *Bonzentrum* which they were trying to introduce into the party". Despite this kind of manipulation, the central committee did not win a majority, because the extraneous elements which it had invited to the conference went over to the left. The conference also voted in favor of a resolution which deprived the central committee of the right to vote in future party congresses. Even though Levi did not explicitly say so at this conference, Hamburg and Bremen foresaw that the central committee would return to the issue of working in the trade unions.

The Heidelberg Congress

The Heidelberg Congress met secretly between October 20 and 24. The party's representational arrangements were distorted by the central committee. Each district had only one vote, no matter how large or how small it was. Levi caused the resolution approved at the Frankfurt conference to be brought up for another vote and the majority of the delegates, 23 versus 18, voted to restore the central committee's right to vote. This gave eight votes to the central committee, which then had 31 votes against 18: the outcome of the Congress was decided.

Availing itself of the method employed by the SPD right wing and center against the left prior to the war, the central committee lumped the members of the opposition together with the syndicalists: it would prove, however, that it knew perfectly well how to distinguish between them.² The central committee wanted to transform the debate into a struggle between Marxism and anarchosyndicalism. With this purpose in mind it quoted articles which had appeared in the leftist press. Since the left allowed all the currents of the real movement to express themselves in its press, it was hardly difficult to find articles which confused syndicalism with unionism in its columns: in the series entitled "A Contribution to the Debate on the Trade Union Question", for example, which appeared in the Hamburg *Kommunistische Arbeiter-Zeitung*. Attending just to its texts and even to the *minutiae* of its texts, the central committee's position might seem more rigorous and more Marxist than that of its opponents: this, at least, was how the Italian Left chose to assess the German Left. Reducing the German Left tendencies to a variety of revolutionary syndicalism *post festum* (cf. Chapter 17) contributes nothing new. The Italian Left's study of the debates within the KPD provides endless proofs of textual fetishism, and shows a preference for Levi's "principles" instead of the sometimes confused revolutionary positions of the opposition.³

During the summer the left factions of northern Germany had reached a clear conception of the new organizational form and had explained it with sufficient clarity to cause unionism to be attacked by *The Syndicalist*, the organ of the revolutionary syndicalists. The left was able to direct its counterattack at the root of the question. But Levi precipitated a split by unexpectedly distributing a text at the congress entitled "Principle Theses on the Fundamentals of Commu-

² Bock, p. 142.

³ Cf., among other issues, *PC*, No. 58.

nist Tactics”.⁴ The central committee claimed that the conditions of clandestinity justified the fact that this document had not previously been published and distributed for discussion within the party. But the text ended as follows: “Those members of the KPD who do not share these views concerning the nature, the organization and the activity of the party, or those who have opposed them orally or in writing, must be excluded from the party.” This text was, in addition, quite clever in that its first consequence was a split within the left, between the majority (Hamburg) and a minority (Bremen, with Frölich and Becker). The weight of the decentralizing tendencies within the left led Bremen to remain within the KPD,⁵ all the more so as it seemed to find leftist aspects in the KPD. Within the KPD, it would be “the only communist current within the German section of the Third International. With its 8,000 members in Bremen and its daily newspaper, *Der Kommunist*, the *Bremerlinke*... would only have a limited influence”.⁶

Indeed, that portion of Levi’s theses dedicated to electoral and trade union tactics was ambiguous in the highest degree and could be used to justify rightist and leftist methods at the same time, depending upon the situation. This will contribute to a better understanding of Bremen’s break with the left.

“The KPD cannot reject, in principle, any political means which contribute to the preparation for these great struggles. But these elections, considered merely as a preparatory means, must be subordinated to the revolutionary struggle, and the application of such means can be abandoned in utterly extraordinary political situations; when revolutionary actions have begun and move towards the decisive phase, then the application of parliamentary methods becomes obsolete or provisionally superfluous.”

Ultimately, the KPD program would not go beyond this expression of the problem. Among German communist theoreticians, only Rühle would analyze the issue by maintaining that the phase of the proletariat’s participation in parliamentary activity had utterly come to an end, and justified abstentionism in both the revolutionary period as well as the period of reaction.

The central committee’s “Theses” defined the trade union question in the following manner: “The task of the political party consists in assuring to the proletariat the free utilization of economic means, even, should it be necessary, at the cost of the destruction of the trade union form and the creation of new forms of organization.” The text’s tone was decidedly revolutionary and anti-unionist, and articulated an ideology of the “vanguard”.

“The idea that the party should abandon its leadership role in revolutionary actions, in favor of factory organizations [a meaningless sort of discussion, since the German party, while it was revolutionary, never “led” anything N.B.] and that the party should limit itself to propaganda, is counterrevolutionary because it seeks to replace the clear vision of the workers vanguard with the chaotic power of the masses in a state of flux.”

The KAPD would also have a vanguardist perspective. But in its case the vanguard was not the group of people who were thought to have the most advanced consciousness, of those who possessed the clearest “perspective” on the issues, but all of those people who dedicated themselves to initiating, *before anyone else did*, the fight against society: they would thus set an example for the rest of the working class.

The “Theses” contained an idea which was seldom expressed during this era: “The conception according to which one can create mass movements by means of a particular form of or-

⁴ Bock, Document VIII.

⁵ Frölich, *La maladie syndicaliste dans le KPD*, quoted in *PC*, No. 58, pp. 176-177.

⁶ *La question syndicale...*, p. 19.

ganization, and consequently that the revolution is a matter of the form of organization, is rejected as a relapse into bourgeois utopia.”⁷

Only those who understood the true social and political nature of the authors could reject this text: they would consequently also know what the Levist leadership had done (and would yet do) (return to parliamentarism, work in the trade unions, fusion with the USPD) independently of what it first stated in accordance with the circumstances. It was this fraction of the left which rejected the “Theses” with 18 votes against 31 votes. On the fourth day of the congress, 25 delegates (the 18 plus 7 others with consultative votes) were excluded. These delegates represented the regions of Berlin (including, at that time, the *Rote Fahne*, the party’s mouthpiece), Hamburg (which would not join the Frölich-Becker tendency), Hanover, Essen, Dresden and Magdeburg.

After this first purge, there was still an internal opposition, since the abstentionist tendencies had remained in the party, *believing that their position was justified by the theses* they had just adopted. In regard to the trade union question, the central committee was forced to reach an accommodation with the representatives from Rhineland-Westphalia who did not want to hear anything about a return to the trade unions. In November 1919, the Ruhr sections of the KPD were still in favor of collaboration with the AAU, which might have prevented the infiltration of syndicalists into the region’s unions. But the KPD leadership opposed this proposal.⁸

Many have argued that the preparations for the First Congress of the KPD were rushed in order to deny its “representative” character. In any case, Heidelberg could barely achieve a slim majority in favor of parliamentary and trade union action: the last thesis on exclusion was adopted with 29 votes against 20. The opposition was still strong at that time. At the Third Congress (February 1920), “the majority of the districts of Northern Germany, including Berlin, had joined the opposition; the total number of party members was officially registered as 106,000 at Heidelberg, even though it could not have been so many, having been reduced by almost one-half”.⁹ The theses approved at Heidelberg, according to Eberlein, generated strong opposition when they were publicized in the various party locals. In the summer of 1919, the KPD dissolved its organization in the army, the League of Red Soldiers, which had become a focal point of the opposition. But many combat organizations (*KO*) continued their activities after they were officially dissolved. Eberlein states that the majority of the operatives of the armed groups were later incorporated into the KAPD. Other exclusions would be necessary and the Third Congress would implement them.

The KPD and KPD (Opposition)

Between October 1919 and March 1920, the proletariat was still reeling from the effects of its defeat. The left honed its perspective, as did the right, represented by Levi, and above all by Radek. Radek had played an important role in Russia in the struggle against the left Socialist Revolutionaries and anarchists, which had caused him to lose his radical ideas and metamorphose into a convinced “anti-spontaneist”. Commissioned by the Bolshevik government, he returned to Germany at the end of 1918, and intervened in favor of the Spartacus-IKD fusion. After February 12, 1919, he spent one year in prison: however, while in prison he carried out a

⁷ Expressed by the PCI, in 1921, in its famous formula: “The revolution is not a question of the form of organization” (*Parti et classes*, Ed. Programme Communiste, 1971, p. 25), cf. also *Le principe démocratique* (1922).

⁸ *La question syndicale...*, p. 19.

⁹ Lowenthal, p. 31, et seq

considerable amount of activity on two levels. On the one hand, he was the first to re-establish diplomatic relations between Russia and Germany, receiving numerous visits while in prison from various political and military figures.¹⁰ He then became convinced that the German revolution was provisionally terminated and that the Soviet Union had to be consolidated through traditional diplomatic means. In addition, and this aspect of his activities was obviously connected to his diplomatic efforts, he supported Levi's positions and pressed for the exclusion of the leftists. His work *A Contribution to Communist Tactics*, published by the central committee, was the ideological expression of the KPD's tactics. The role of the party was analyzed in this pamphlet in totally Bolshevik terms: dictatorship of the so-called "conscious" elements over the rest of the class, which was conceived as a mass of labor power incapable of raising itself to a level of consciousness sufficient to carry out the revolution. To assume this role, the party must purge itself of all impure elements, and first of all, of all those who deny the revolutionary validity of the Leninist concept. Without explicitly saying so, Levi and Radek were equally guided by the idea of fusion with the USPD, which had several hundred thousand members, while the KPD had approximately 50,000 after its split: this was one more reason to exclude the left. The party had to return to "revolutionary parliamentarism" and to "entrism" in the trade unions, particularly since the membership of the latter had grown by 600% from November 1918 to December 1920: trade union membership had almost become compulsory with the institutionalization of the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft* (cf. the KAPD program).

Criticism came from many different leftist publications: *Die Aktion*, the Hamburg *Kommunistische Arbeiter-Zeitung*, the Bremen and Dresden *Der Kommunist*, etc... It was a very diverse movement. Some subversive artists (generally expressionists) contributed to *Die Aktion*: this was the source for the accusations of dilletantism and estheticism directed by the CI's polemicists against the German Left. Some of these artists had a long history of opposition to the conservatism of the official workers movement. C. Einstein (a close associate of Pfempfert, the editor of *Die Aktion*), an enemy of rationalism and, in art, "classicism", wrote in 1914: "A union of rationalists will never change anything; it would do nothing but bring about a little more order. The social democracy, the military academies and the public schools are perfectly identical."¹¹ The revolutionary reflux would cause them to return to art, in one form or another.

In the meantime, they became acquainted with the texts of Pannekoek, especially *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, published in *Der Kommunist* of Bremen in December 1919.¹² Another one of Pannekoek's articles, published in the same journal, was entitled *The New Blanquism*.¹³ This is how Pannekoek characterized the ultra-centralizing conceptions established as principles by the KPD central committee, for whom a political minority "gathering together the conscious proletarians" seizes and holds political power, identifying this process with the conquest of power by the proletariat. This is what happened in Russia: the party was justified there by the enormous mass of the peasantry, a significant part of which aspired to private property, to capitalism rather than to socialism. The preservation of a proletarian dictatorship therefore requires, in Russia, an enormous effort, and hence the appearance of a dictatorship of one part of the class over the class itself. In the conditions prevailing in the highly-

¹⁰ Cf. his "Diary", published in Germany in 1962: cf. Kool, p. 108.

¹¹ *Revue d'Allemagne*, April-June 1974, "Carl Einstein: de l'arte pur à l'action politique". On the "revolutionary artists" of that era, cf. *Action poétique*, No. 51-52, devoted especially to the artists associated with the KPD.

¹² Reproduced almost in its entirety in *Invariance*, n.d., No. 7. Extensive extracts can be found in *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils*. Published in full in English translation in *Pannekoek and Gorter's Marxism*, ed. D.A. Smart, Pluto Press, London, 1978, pp. 93-148.

¹³ Bock offers numerous extracts.

developed capitalism of Western Europe, however, the revolution can only be the spontaneous uprising of the working masses. This is why the proletariat must overcome its bourgeois “culture”: this task cannot be accomplished by a leadership clique, however conscious it may be, but only through the maturation of social contradictions (for which theoretical works comprise a precondition and a basic element).

“Such a doctrine (that of Radek and Levi) implies that it is not the entire party but its central committee which exercises its dictatorship, first within the party itself, from which it excludes, on its own initiative, the militants, and rids itself of any opposition by underhanded means.”¹⁴

“The arrogant proclamations about the centralization of revolutionary forces into the hands of a proven vanguard would be more impressive if it was not known that they are being used to justify, on the one hand, an underhanded opportunist policy, and on the other, a nostalgia for the parliamentary tribune.”¹⁵

Pannekoek soon reached the conclusion that the German revolution had come to an end: unlike Gorter, he remained on the margins of the various organizations of the left, even though he was most sympathetic to the perspectives of the AAU-E and Rühle.¹⁶ Prior to the war, he had already made an essential distinction, in *Marxist Theory and Revolutionary Tactics*,¹⁷ between the existing organizations (he was speaking of the SPD) and what he called “the spirit of organization” in the proletariat. After 1919 Pannekoek undoubtedly soon adopted the idea that no organization, however “leftist” it may be, unless it was the organization which the proletariat created for itself during the revolution, could justify calling itself the party of the proletariat.

The German Left is undoubtedly more than just an oscillation between organizational fetishism and an exaggeration of the importance of the party “nucleus” (cf. Chapter 14). More precisely, these two “deviations” reflect the two extremes of the desperate struggle of proletarians seeking, in an organizational form, the solution which would allow them to overcome their continually repeated defeats. Its critique of the rest of the left (cf. the texts of the KAPD) is much less radical than that of Pannekoek; although it was quite violent in the terms it employed. This would all remain on a formal level (on this aspect of the German Left and on Pannekoek’s later development, cf. Appendix I).

¹⁴ This formulation strikingly recalls Trotsky’s 1904 theses on Bolshevism: cf. *Nos Tâches politiques*, Belfond, 1970, and *Rapport de la délégation sibérienne*.

¹⁵ Bock, pp. 149-150.

¹⁶ Kool, p. 128.

¹⁷ Extensive extracts can be found in *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils*. Published in full in English translation in *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism*, pp. 50-73.

Chapter 11

Between the First and the Second Congresses

Of the Communist International¹

The First Congress

The First Congress of the Communist International (March 1919) was originally intended to be merely a preparatory conference for the foundation of the new International.² The Congress was not representative of the world movement: almost all the delegates came from Russia or the adjoining countries controlled by the Russians, and the westerners present came from small groups residing in Russia. The European delegates who attended the Congress only did so because they happened to be in Russia at the time. Only the presence of Eberlein, the KPD delegate (an adherent of the party's right wing), testifies to the existence of a revolutionary movement beyond the zone of Russian control. As for the project of creating an International, which would not really be in a position to direct the necessary struggles, Eberlein was very reticent, and feared that the International would only exist on paper, or would be something like a "spiritual center". What he wanted, however, was an "organizing center" and, unlike its predecessor, a powerful and highly-structured International. But he was swept up with the general enthusiasm and ultimately voted in favor of the immediate foundation of the Communist International.

Between 1918 and 1919, a large number of communist parties and groups evolved towards leftist positions, especially in respect to the parliamentary question, and thus underwent organizational and political crises, which were exacerbated by the actions of the Communist International (cf. Chapter 17). As in France or in Great Britain, the leftist tendencies were sometimes small minorities, but considered as a whole they comprised a significant proportion of the first adherents of the Communist International.

The positions held by the Russians were little known at that time, and sometimes were not even known at all. The subsequent disillusionment derived from the fact that people generally trusted the reports they received, focusing above all on the "soviet" aspect of the revolution. Since they had carried out a violent revolution *against* the elected parliament, the Bolsheviks were considered to be hostile to parliament, and it was thought that they would declare themselves against the employment of traditional methods. Didn't the texts of the First Congress attack bourgeois democracy? While they said that democracy is counterrevolutionary, and that the parliamentary form is not suitable for the revolution, they did not explicitly state that one should refuse to engage in parliamentary activity. The Bolsheviks knew that parliamentary democracy *is not the adequate form* for the revolution and for post-revolutionary society: only the European communist left understood that parliamentary democracy constituted a *danger* to the proletariat, a treacherous terrain where it would become lost. The Russians had fought in a

¹ This chapter deals with the situation of the international movement in general between 1919 and 1920. The relations between the Communist International and Germany are examined in Chapter 16, and the international communist left in Chapter 17. Cf. also the section on Hungary in Chapter 8.

² The complete proceedings of the Congresses of the Communist International will be published by EDI. *Le Premier congrès de l'IC* appeared in 1974.

society where democracy was opposed to the established regime. There, democracy had at least represented a small part of the real social movement, its internal conflicts and those which existed between the movement and the State found an echo and real interest outside of parliament because democracy allowed the revolutionaries to transform it into a tribunal precisely because democracy was suppressed. Only in this situation was it possible to speak of “revolutionary parliamentarism”. In Western Europe, on the other hand, democracy, within certain limits (women’s suffrage, etc.), was accepted by the State.

At the First Congress Lenin defended a confused position in respect to the institutions which had arisen in the west during and after the war, comparing them to the Russian soviets.³ In reality, the German councils were reactionary, and the shop stewards’ committees and factory councils did not sufficiently transcend the framework of the enterprise to be considered potential organs of proletarian power⁴: the Second Congress would later adopt a clearer position, despite a certain formalism, by defining the “preconditions for the creation of workers councils”⁵. In 1919, Eberlein wanted the Congress to admit the complexity of the trade union issue. It was too simple, he said, to issue calls for “revolutionizing” the trade unions whose structure was adapted to the old State system: the “leadership of the economic movement” had passed to the councils, the trade unions having become, in Germany, “simple mutual aid organizations”. It was impossible to predict developments in this sector and consequently to provide clear directives for action which would be valid for all countries. He continued: “Wherever possible, we must make use of the revolutionary trade union in the struggle.” This tactical flexibility was all the more surprising since he also demanded a centralized International. His point of view was reminiscent of Luxemburg’s assessments of the trade unions at the end of 1918. The problem was not the trade union itself, but the functions, 1) of economic struggles, and 2) of the structures which these struggles provided themselves. If there is an ascendant movement (and the left therefore always reasons from this perspective) the organs born from the purely reformist struggle during the period of stability are not neutral instruments which one could possibly make use of and acquire influence over, and win a majority: their function is opposed to the revolution. This analysis applies to the *councils* as well as to the trade unions. If they become stable institutions defending limited interests of the workers, both the trade unions and the councils must be destroyed. The Spartacists, however, went from the trade union to the council with the shift of workers activity from one to the other: they were looking for an institution where they could exercise their influence.

The relations between western and Russian communists in 1919-1921 (and thus the Communist International as well) were characterized by a certain mutual incomprehension which would not be dispelled until after 1921 (although some, such as Rühle, displayed more lucidity in this regard). The non-Russian communists made an effort to organize centers for propaganda, reflection and tactical elaboration: even though they were not at first aware of the fact, these efforts clashed with the intentions of the Russians to centralize the international activities of the movement under their leadership. But the Bolsheviks could not be victorious without the help of two convergent factors. First, the difficulties and setbacks of the revolution, which forced the communists in the most active countries into clandestinity, did not facilitate the installation of permanent centers. But this “technical” reality, which the Russians so heavily

³ *La question syndicale...*, p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁵ Cf. his biography written by C. Gras (Maspero), and his works on the history of the workers movement during the war (Vol. I, Librairie du Travail, and Vol. II, Mouton), and *Moscou sous Lénine*, P. Horay, 1953 (republished by Maspero, 2 Vols.).

emphasized, did not explain everything. The failure or the stagnation of the movement in Europe caused a large number of western communists to accept Russian tutelage on the theoretical and *organizational* planes. At the Second Congress, out of 167 delegates, 40% were Russians or “assimilables”. Germany, Great Britain and the United States had five votes each, that is, as many as Finland or Georgia. The Italian Socialist Party had 4 votes (as did the Austrian Communist Party): its three factions were represented, but only the center possessed a deliberative voice. The organization of the Congress was in the hands of the Bolsheviks: the Executive Committee named in 1919 was still Russian, since, out of all the other parties, only the Hungarian Communist Party had been able to send a delegate.

One could devote an entire volume to the study of the perfectly sincere and revolutionary communists who accepted the Bolshevik positions without ever seeing the matter from the point of view of the left; in France, *The Communist Bulletin* and Rosmer provided a good example of what is said above concerning the left’s misunderstandings. For them, Bolshevism was the entire strategy and program; all that was needed was to know how to apply it to other countries. They did not understand that bolshevism was, according to the most generous hypothesis, the best product of the socialist movement as it had existed prior to 1914, without ever going beyond those limits. Its perspective transcended the Russian framework, since the socialist movement there could not, from the beginning, triumph without the world revolution. But in order to be capable of taking all the tactics of the world revolution into consideration, a step was necessary which the Russians never took. The lack of information (which was, however, often exaggerated)⁶ was only a secondary reason: the Russians made use of the European documents by only reading into them what they had previously wanted to find. Lenin, who was often more perspicacious than the westerners in his assessments, nonetheless demonstrated a high degree of incomprehension regarding the specific problems of the *communist* revolution in the more advanced countries.⁷ The situation as it developed between 1920 and 1921, along with Russian isolation due to the *European defeat*, led to an ambiguous policy on the part of the Bolsheviks, who were as concerned with protecting their state as with promoting the world revolution. This contradiction was unsustainable and would only really be resolved by Stalin. From this point of view, Trotskyism represents neither the best revolutionary expression of, nor a layer which broke loose from the Russian “bureaucracy”, nor an aberration, but a vain effort to preserve a revolutionary perspective by taking the heroic period as a basis, and ignoring the contradictions of that period.⁸ In the dead end of Trotskyism, its confused opportunism mixed with the memory of a few doctrinal points reproduced the caricatural and congenital ambiguity of the “first four congresses of the Communist International”. Militants like Rosmer did not see that, if it had spread, the revolution not only would not have respected the line established by the Russian leadership of the Communist International, but would have profoundly transformed the status and the nature of the Russian party itself, which might have, perhaps, found other leaders. The ebb of the movement in the West, however, caused its revolutionaries to *regress* to the Russian level.

⁶ Rosmer, *Moscou sous Lénine*, P. Horay, 1953, p. 150 and *passim*, and Reichenbach. It was not, however, until the beginning of 1920 that some copies of *Il Soviet* (organ of the abstentionist fraction of the PSI) arrived in Moscow, according to D. Urquidi, *The Origins of the Italian Communist Party, 1918-21*, Ann Arbor, Columbia Univ., whose conclusion is reproduced in Gruber, pp. 308-391. This thesis can be consulted in the International Institute for Social History.

⁷ Dauvé, *Le mouvement communiste*, p. 205, et seq.

⁸ Lefort, *Les Temps Modernes*, December 1948-January 1949, “La contradiction de Trotsky ou le problème révolutionnaire”.

The Failure of the Amsterdam Bureau

The Amsterdam Conference (January 1920) was held to define the basis upon which the Auxiliary Bureau (or sub-Bureau) for Western Europe should conduct its activities. Another office, the Berlin Secretariat, was to coordinate the movement in Eastern Europe, including *Germany*. But should communist organizations unify around centers which would define their own tactics, or should they merely support the Communist International's activities? The question was hardly posed in 1919, and would soon receive an answer from events themselves. The KPN (the Communist Party of the Netherlands) played a preponderant role in the Bureau. It had distinguished itself during the war by its collaboration with anarchists and anarchosyndicalists. Rutgers, in his report to the First Congress of the Communist International, declared: "We have always got along better with the syndicalist elements of the workers movement [than with the reformist socialist party] and when the civil war broke out, our party, together with the syndicalists and an anarchist group, formed a revolutionary committee."⁹ Although the KPN sent two deputies to the Dutch parliament, Pannekoek, Gorter and Roland-Holst were opposed to parliamentary action. It was one of the first parties to break with the Communist International, which it had joined in April 1919 when it named Wijnkoop as a delegate to the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI). Rutgers (cf. Chapter 17), who had arrived in Amsterdam in November, intervened in the debate on the parliamentary question and took the side of the left.¹⁰

The Amsterdam Conference was attended by the leaders of the KPN, S. Pankhurst, Willis and Hodgson (British Socialist Party, a centrist party which would contribute the bulk of the membership of that country's Communist Party), Murphy (delegate of the Shop Stewards Movement), L. Fraina (American communist) and Borodin.¹¹ What particularly distinguished the debate was the high proportion of Anglo-Saxons present. With some 20 participants, this conference was more representative of the international revolutionary movement and specifically of the weight of the left in that movement than was the First Congress of the Communist International. Zetkin, who arrived just before the end of the conference, denied its representative character. The discussion would end prematurely due to the intervention of the police. One part of the delegation dispersed, while others, in a private capacity, carried on the discussion elsewhere.

Pankhurst proposed the organization of an international strike against intervention in Russia, with at least one month of preparation. Gorter expressed his approval and wanted the same thing to be done in the event of a revolution in Germany. Wijnkoop thought it would be difficult to organize an international action, and contested Gorter's key argument, which the latter had often made during that period and which he would mention in his *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*: that the unification of capital also obliges the proletarians to unite. Wijnkoop denied that capital was as unified as Gorter had claimed, and did not believe that a revolution was immanent in Germany. The resolution passed, advocating the preparation of the proletariat for a general strike if the revolution were to break out in any country.

Fraina's resolution on the trade unions combined "industrial unions" (not organized by trade) with political action. It implicitly rejected the theses defended by, for example, the Italian "*ordinovistas*" associated with Gramsci: "The conception according to which the workers, under

⁹ IC, No. 4.

¹⁰ J. Hulse, *The Forming of the Communist International*, Stanford Univ. Press, 1964, p. 154, et seq.

¹¹ On Pankhurst and Fraina, cf. Chapter 17.

capitalist rule, must acquire in their industrial unions the experience and the technical skills to run the new society, and that they have to gradually acquire, through their industrial unions, power over industry, is confused with the proposals of parliamentary socialism which hold that the workers must gradually conquer experience in the affairs of State by means of control over the bourgeois State. Each of these conceptions rejects, in its own way, the fundamental problem of the revolutionary conquest of State power. The conquest of State power: that is the goal of the revolutionary proletariat.”¹² The institution for this conquest was the soviet. This resolution, however, was still confused: it fought against “laborism” and the traditional trade unions, but called for the conquest of the “industrial unions”. The trade unions were weapons of capital, but the industrial unions were potentially weapons of the proletariat. These industrial unions would become the classical unions of the post-war era, particularly in the United States (the CIO) but also in Europe: the evolution of the trade unions at Renault illustrates this development quite well.¹³ This position was all the more contradictory since the resolution admitted that “the development of imperialism determines the definitive absorption of the trade unions by capitalism”.

Concerning parliamentarism, the conference limited itself to outlining the divergent positions, without pronouncing in favor of one or the other. Almost all of the delegates were in favor of breaking with the socialist parties. The resolution on communist unity, drafted by Fraina, advocated breaking with the member organizations of the Second International, and rejected the idea (which was supported by the Communist International and accepted by the English centrists) of communists affiliating with the Labor Party. It was also decided that “shop committees and other workers organizations” should be admitted into the Communist International, without making this a question of principle.

These measures, which were approved but never implemented, due to a lack of means and time, testify that the Bureau considered itself to be one of the centers of the movement in Europe. The Bureau published documents and issued a *Manifesto to the English, French and Belgian Workers* calling upon them to take action in case of allied intervention in Germany. The KAPD was accepted into the Bureau in April, even though Germany was the responsibility of the Berlin Secretariat, which was hostile to the KAPD and instead advocated working with the USPD.¹⁴ In May, the Bureau announced its opposition to communist affiliation with the Labor Party. Speaking at the SFIO’s Congress in Strasbourg (February 1920), Roland-Holst recommended the expulsion of its right wing. The Bureau, composed of Wijnkoop, Rutgers and Roland-Holst, was torn apart by the factional struggles within the KPN. On May 15, Radio Moscow announced the closing of what it simply referred to as the “Amsterdam Bureau” rather than the “Western European Bureau”, a title reserved for the Berlin Secretariat, which had played no effective role. The first and last attempt to coordinate the communist movement in the West had developed under the influence of the Left, and had resulted in failure. A second attempt would also fail. Created in Sofia in May of 1920, the Balkan Communist Federation, composed of the Bulgarian (cf. Chapter 17), Yugoslav, and Greek parties, as well as the communist fraction of the Romanian Socialist Party, which would found a Communist Party in May of 1921, would not accept the directives of the Communist International. The Yugoslav Communist Party (founded in April 1919) did not adopt either the slogan of national self-determination or

¹² *Bulletin du Bureau Auxiliaire d'Amsterdam de l'IC*, No. 2, March 1920.

¹³ *Le mouvement social*, October-December 1972 (on the automobile industry in France, and particularly the Renault factories).

¹⁴ *PC*, No. 58, pp. 154-157.

that of the distribution of land to the peasants (cf. Luxemburg's critiques of the Bolsheviks' positions on these two issues in her notes on *The Russian Revolution*). One of its leaders characterized national struggles as "fights between rival bourgeoisies". But this Communist Party accepted centrists as members and practiced parliamentarism on a grand scale. The Balkan Federation would disappear after 1923.¹⁵

The Second Congress of the Communist International

Some of the rather optimistic positions of the Second Congress (July 1920) must again be set in context. After having been invaded by Poland, Russia counterattacked and penetrated Polish territory. Between sessions, the delegates received reports on the war, viewing the advance of the Red Army on a large wall map. The advance upon Warsaw was quickly stymied and the Russians had to beat a hasty retreat. The appeals directed by the Russians to the Polish workers clashed with the Poles' sense of national solidarity against their ancient foe: "the right of national self-determination"... This conflict also demonstrated that the Red Army, composed primarily of peasants, was more suited to the defense of Russian territory than for the world revolutionary war, as Gorter had already pointed out.¹⁶

Confusion persisted concerning the Russians' position advising the revolutionaries in other countries not to "imitate" them. Many revolutionaries (Welti in Switzerland, Lorient in France, Pankhurst, Roland-Holst) interpreted this statement as the Russians' acceptance of wide-ranging autonomy.

In reality, however, by saying "do not imitate us", the Russians actually intended to say: "Don't think anymore about revolution", "don't remain a small minority", "form large mass parties"; and "imitate us" basically meant "make compromises" and "be disciplined"; what was essential for the Russians was, at that time, to stay in power, rather than worrying about the regression which their power was undergoing.

In September 1919, Roland-Holst asserted that profound differences existed between the Russian and Western masses.¹⁷ Others wanted the most rigorous centralism in order to prevent deviations: this was the position of the Italian Left, which was hardly more consistent than the other left tendencies, since it would be the (Russian) leadership of the Communist International which would be the great centralizing force for right wing deviations. The Russians wanted tactics adapted to the circumstances, *but only as they* understood them. A clear change of course on the part of the Russians took place in relation to the tactics to be followed in the West, and consequently, in relation to the Left as well. In 1919, the criteria for the membership in the communist parties, established after long deliberation, were agreement with the dictatorship of the proletariat, breaking with the socialists, and internationalism. Even among those who would join the Communist Party, some refused, in 1919-1920, to make parliamentary activity (which, however, they supported) a criterion for membership: "the differences of opinion on this issue will not interfere with the unification of the forces of the extreme left in Great Britain."¹⁸ On August 28, 1919, in reply to Pankhurst, Lenin announced his support for a realignment which would by no means exclude the antiparlamentarians:

¹⁵ F. Tych, in *La révolution d'Octobre et le mouvement ouvrier européen*, EDI, 1967, pp. 195-228.

¹⁶ Gorter, *L'Internationale Communiste Ouvrière*, in *Invariance*, n.d., No. 5, p. 36. Cf. also the analysis of the Second World Congress made by the Italian Left in *PC*, Nos. 59 and 60.

¹⁷ *IC*, No. 5.

¹⁸ E. and C. Paul, *Creative Revolution*, Allen Unwin, 1920, pp. 121-122.

“If we consider the problem in its general and theoretical form, it is... the same program, that is, the struggle for soviet power... which can and, today, must unify all honest and sincere working class revolutionaries... The question of parliamentarism is now a partial and secondary question... I would consider the immediate foundation of Communist Parties, that is, of parties fighting for the transition from bourgeois parliamentarism to soviet power, to be an authentic step towards complete unity.”¹⁹

During the same period, Lenin advised Levi not to make parliamentarism grounds for a split. Similarly, on the topic of the trade unions, the Communist International evolved from a somewhat flexible position, not transforming the conquest of the traditional trade unions into a principle, to a tactic based on that very principle. During its first period, until the winter of 1919-1920, the Communist International rejected the destruction of the traditional trade union organizations wherever the revolutionary movement was growing (Germany). On the other hand, however, it allowed that American proletarians should leave the AFL and create another union based, among other organizations, on the membership of the IWW, not because an important movement existed at that time in the United States, but because the IWW had already organized a significant part of the working class.²⁰ Later, in 1920-1921, under the influence of an increasingly difficult situation for the workers movement, the Communist International evolved towards the ambiguous position mentioned above. It is true that Lenin had never hesitated, for example, to seek “personalities” like Zetkin, Serrati, or the Romanian Rakovsky, for some *legitimacy*. He needed a successor, and chose an heir from the “true” Second International. Altogether contradictory, Bolshevism developed its weakest (social democratic) aspects under the pressure of the decline of the movement: these aspects, never having been criticized, despite the revolutionary practice of the Bolsheviks in 1914, 1917, etc., returned to appear in force after 1919, when they would play a despicable role within a different context.

A little later, the tendency which sought parties capable of exercising pressure on their respective parliaments incited the Communist International to support the entrance of centrists into the Communist Parties (VKPD) and to encourage splits which would preserve the center (PCF). The year 1919 witnessed the consolidation of the revolutionary regime in Russia and the defeat of the proletariat everywhere else. The movement was crushed everywhere: France, Great Britain, Italy, the USA, and Central Europe. The paradox resided in the fact that these defeats allowed the communist movement to become conscious of itself and its enemies, without thereby acquiring the means to assert itself and seize the initiative. Nothing had yet been definitively decided, but its weakness remained and would significantly diminish its possibilities in the following years. It increasingly abandoned the offensive into the hands of the Communist International, and consequently to its Russian leadership. It was not Lenin’s maneuvers which allowed him to control the Communist International, but the real situation of the divisions within the Communist International which demanded his leadership. Lenin was very careful not to do anything which would promote the unification of the international trend towards the left. He endeavored not to attack Loriot, even though Loriot was sympathetic to antiparlamentarism, because the French communists were not associated with the “international” left. Lenin treated Wijnkoop with caution, who maintained an intermediate position, against the affiliation of the socialist parties, but in favor of parliamentary activity whenever possible.

There was no contradiction between the first two congresses. Bolshevism had originally conceived of itself as the Russian method to create in Russia what *already* existed in the other

¹⁹ *Lenin on Britain*, Moscow, Lawrence and Wishart, 1930, pp. 422-428.

²⁰ *La question syndicale...*, pp. 30-32.

large industrial countries, not to impose its own methods on others. What is to be done? Lenin copied Germany; he tried to be a better student of Kautsky than all the other Russian socialists. In 1907, while reflecting on the history of the Russian movement, he offered a modest reevaluation of his work *What is to be Done?*, defining it as “a summary of *Iskra* and its policy on organization between 1901 and 1902. Just a summary, nothing more. ...”²¹ If the European revolution had been successful, the Communist International probably would have been led by others, not by Russians. It was the defeat of the German and Hungarian revolutions which led the Communist International to advocate something other than strictly communist party groups. It was because the workers, everywhere, really accepted the elections, that the Communist International recommended parliamentary action, and why Lenin dared to say at the Second Congress that “Parliament is always the arena of the class struggle”. Arguing that the function of the Labour Party was to be an “organization of the bourgeoisie... which only exists to systematically deceive the workers”, he nonetheless held that one had to “join it”.²² This contradiction cannot be understood unless one sees that for Lenin the revolutionary task consists in regrouping, in organizing the masses. He therefore sought an “institution”, a framework where agitation could take root: “can one conceive of any other institution so capable of interesting all classes, as parliament?” he asked in the speech quoted above. We should go wherever the masses are, from parliament to the cooperatives, from the trade unions to the town halls, etc... His point of view was imposed on a movement in decline, because he advocated organizing large masses of workers, even the majority, by means of all kinds of activities (trade unions, parliaments, etc.) whose “communist” character, however, would be guaranteed solely by the fact that communists would be their leaders: an appeal to principle of the kind Kautsky used to justify anything as long as “the doctrine” is guaranteed. The 21 Conditions would then serve as a filter.

Approved by the Second Congress, the 21 Conditions manifested an anti-reformist organizational illusion, and were a means to make the Russians’ positions accepted. Far from being the proof of the communist character of the sections of the Communist International, they testified to the presence and the overwhelming weight of the centrist mass parties which would soon take over the organizational tasks of the degenerating communist parties: the Bolsheviks would never forgive the Italian Communist Party for having prevented what was “achieved” by the PCF and the VKPD (cf. Chapter 17). It is too often forgotten that the 21 Conditions were directed against the Left as much as against the centrists (who would enter *en masse* and accept the 21 Conditions: the latter having served the purpose of isolating the Left). Among the Conditions, working in the trade unions and parliament were explicitly included (Conditions 9 and 11), as well as support for “all colonial movements of emancipation”. Henceforth, being a communist would mean, among other things, being a trade unionist and a voter. But the defense of the Russian State did not yet, in fact, dominate the Russians’ attitude: this decisive change would not take place until after 1921.

At first, the Russians expected to open the Executive Committee of the Communist International to KAPD delegates, but Levi’s opposition obliged them to grant the KAPD only a consultative vote (cf. Chapter 16). A few days later, the Russians again proposed granting votes to the KAPD, the IWW and the Shop Stewards Movement, but only the latter two groups were conceded the right to vote. Zinoviev’s speech on parliament and the trade unions criticized the French antiparliamentarians, the IWW and the SSM, although he considered them to be “friends and brothers”. This speech was followed by an arduous debate on the question of

²¹ Quoted in *Cahiers du communisme de conseils*, No. 9, September 1971, “De la nécessité de la théorie”.

²² *Oeuvres*, Vol. 31, Ed. Sociales, 1961, p. 261, et seq.

whether the British communists should join the *Labour Party*, which ended in victory for the proponents of affiliation, but only after a long and acrimonious debate which ended with the Left accepting this position without admitting its rationale, hoping (Pankhurst) that the Congress would return to the question for discussion at a later time. The Congress voted in favor of the resolution, 48 votes to 24: "It was not such an impressive victory for the Russians when one considers the vast arsenal which had been brought to bear against the 'British Left'."²³ We should not allow the violent ruptures which took place later to mislead us. At the time of the Second Congress, not only Bordiga (who, from a sense of discipline, accepted "revolutionary parliamentarism"), but also Pankhurst and Gorter (cf. the latter's *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*) thought that there were infinitely more shared views than divergences between their position and the Communist International--the Russians, they thought, made mistakes because they were extrapolating their situation to the other countries of the Communist International--and that experience would lead them to change their positions, especially since they expected that the movement would grow. Organizational fetishism appeared in all the currents of the Left, and not only in Germany. The PCI renounced its abstentionism, placing more value on the existence of a world center than on this tactical disagreement. Of course, submission to discipline makes no sense unless this center would act in a revolutionary way. Such was not to be the case. The PCI fought for a form, deceiving itself concerning its content: organizational fetishism. Excessive faith in the revolution, "automatism", and sometimes the weakness of their theoretical tradition made the European communists yield to the Russians. The authority of the Russians, and among the Russians Lenin's opinions, were frequently imposed without too much pressure: "whoever wanted to persist in holding an opinion which was different from that defended by the Russians, was sure to be isolated", the KAPD's representative on the Executive Committee of the Communist International, a delegate who spent several months in Russia in 1921, would declare long afterwards.²⁴ The Left tended to grant little importance to arrangements which it considered to be provisional. Soon, faced with the confirmation of the proletarian defeat, which seemed to vindicate the Communist International's condemnation of the Left, the official policy appeared to be the only realistic one, and in retrospect the only one which might have prevented that defeat. The prudent counsel of the Communist International ("prepare yourselves") would offer the prospect of permanent employment to a new generation, or to the older one which could not recycle itself back into the traditional workers movement.

A strong current in opposition to the centrists took shape at the Second Congress. The French delegate of the Socialist Youth, Goldenberg, decried the fact that the French communists had been attacked "precisely by those whom we intend to accept into the Third International for the sole reason... that they display a verbal solidarity with its principles". He also lamented "this artificial means of bringing undesirable elements into the International".²⁵ Soon after the start of the debate concerning the USPD, after Wijnkoop's speech, the Estonian M nzenberg warned the Congress against the danger "of diluting and weakening revolutionary propaganda and activity". Lenin interrupted him: "And who is talking about admitting the USPD?" M nzenberg replied: "The debate in the Executive Committee has clearly proven it. The fact that comrades who only a few weeks or days ago were still fighting with every means at their disposal against the Third International, now declare themselves prepared to sign, without any reservations, the proposed conditions -- this proves, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that these

²³ Hulse, p. 200.

²⁴ *Survey*, October 1964.

²⁵ S. Page, *Lenin and the World Revolution*, New York University Press, 1959, pp. 162-163.

conditions have not been formulated with sufficient precision.” Wijnkoop emphasized that if the KPD could criticize the USPD, the KAPD could do the same in respect to the KPD. “Is it totally correct” he asked ironically “to say that the KPD is always in the vanguard of the masses? This question must be posed here and it must have an answer. But this would undoubtedly be very difficult in the presence of the USPD. We are not alone, among ourselves, we find ourselves with these gentlemen, the government socialists. We must meet among ourselves alone and speak the truth to one another. But this has been rendered impossible by the Executive Committee” (by admitting the USPD into the Congress). Ultimately, despite the 21 Conditions, the KAPD was admitted as a sympathizing party into the Communist International.

The trade union debate, to some extent, concerned the United States. The *Communist Labor Party* (J. Reed) was close to the Left and was opposed by the *Communist Party* (Fraina), which defended working in the trade unions (concerning these two American parties, cf. Chapter 17). Reed was against working in the AFL, but ultimately accepted it in order to *destroy* that trade union federation and not to conquer it. The *Shop Stewards Movement* wanted to remain outside the reformist trade unions. Reed and Gallacher, of the Shop Stewards, “thought that there was no more reason to try to change the nature of the old trade unions than there was to try to change the nature of the capitalist State”.²⁶ The CLP’s argument was unlike the position defended by the KAPD, as Bergmann would explain at the Third World Congress.²⁷ It was based on the fact that only 20% of the workers in the USA were organized in trade unions: we should therefore organize the unorganized. This viewpoint was closer to that of the IWW than to that of the Communist Left, strictly understood. An Italian delegate, Bombacci, who was a trade union leader for many years, opposed Lenin, and denied that the trade unions had “any revolutionary function whatsoever”²⁸... The ensuing debate in the committee on the trade union question resulted in reciprocal concessions.

The Bolshevik position was also based on the conviction, shared by the Italian Left, that the trade unions (led by the Party) would be needed after the revolution to organize production and to represent the immediate interests of the workers. This was Lenin’s position in the debate at the 10th Congress of the Russian Communist Party in 1921.²⁹ Such a position was justified, at best, in a country like Russia, which is *not socialist*, but cannot be applied to a revolution in Western Europe. The problem in the latter case is not one of representing the workers but of organizing production and society. Such administrative tasks cannot be undertaken by a trade union: its whole anti-proletarian past (both by virtue of its organizational structure and its anti-communist activities) makes this impossible. Quite the contrary, after and by means of the indispensable destruction of the trade unions, new organizations will be born which will take control of production and the regulation of working conditions. By trying to supersede the trade union-party rupture, the radical German proletarians had at least vaguely perceived that the communist revolution was not a question of managing society, but of overthrowing all of its

²⁶ Hulse, p. 214.

²⁷ *La gauche allemande*...

²⁸ Page, Note 75, Chapter 12.

²⁹ Dauvé: *Communisme et “question russe”*, pp. 81-82. An English translation of these same two chapters is available in *Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement*, Antagonism, London, 1998, and also on the Antagonism website: www.geocities.com/antagonism1.

relations. Lenin, as well as Bordiga, at that time, never advanced beyond a leadership conception, which is but one aspect of the managerial conception.³⁰

However, unlike what is taking place today, it must be said in favor of Bordiga and Lenin that they were at least conscious of the goal: an economy without market exchange. The centralization of their forces, by means of the constitution of a leadership cadre, seemed to them to be the most economical road, and even the only possible one, to achieve this goal. Lenin criticized the “non-centralists” from a tactical point of view: their inability to resist the reaction. This view was very political and military and did not apply to a generalized revolutionary movement in which, as in Germany, the military dimension was only one aspect of an economic subversion. For Russia, as long as the revolution did not become a world revolution, Lenin’s position was correct: it was a question of administering political power in a society which could not be profoundly transformed, but had to be ruled as it existed, nonetheless. Of course, this position had to become false, when the hopes for a world revolution had evaporated. Bordiga implicitly went further in defending the need for the “party”: he was a critic of Proudhonism, and not just regarding the strategic problem of striking at the heart of the matter: the State.

In its essence, the German Left cannot be reduced to revolutionary syndicalism: it went beyond the economic-political rift. It is in this sense that one should understand the rule established by certain *uniones* that their members must acknowledge the principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

At the Second Congress of the Communist International, the “Left” (taken in its widest sense) was split over the trade union question into two positions which sometimes overlapped. Must the old trade unions be destroyed or should new organizations be constructed which are both “trade unions” (acting in defense of the workers’ immediate interests) and “revolutionary” (fighting for the communist revolution) at the same time? As in the case of the question of joining the Labour Party, the Left yielded. Reed declared: “The American and English delegates tried to introduce a new spirit into the old trade unions... the communists must transform the trade unions or remain isolated.”³¹ In the plenary session, the Russians acted as if the committee had reached an agreement, which gave rise to vehement protests, which became more aggressive as the Bolsheviks sandbagged the debate (by increasing the number of Russian speakers). Gallacher, although he was inclined to favor affiliation, and would become one of the leaders of the British Communist Party for several decades, stated: “The English comrades have the impression that it was simply a matter of preventing debate.”³² The final resolution recommended that communists should be present in the trade unions and should join the Red Trade Union International. But the creation of this organization would only make the problem worse. Was it a new mass workers movement, radical yet still based on trade union activities, or was it situated beyond trade unionism? Was it an attempt to build a trade union international whose ultimate purpose was to replace the “yellow” International, created in July 1919, or was its goal only to regroup the minorities within the trade unions and to keep alive the hopes of conquering the old trade unions? The presence of observers and sympathizers from traditional revolutionary syndicalism (Spanish, Italian and French) did not make clarifying this issue any easier, and it would only be resolved under the pressure of events: the “communist” trade unions would be-

³⁰ It was only after 1945 that Bordiga rediscovered the communist position of Marx: cf. *Bordiga et le passion du communisme*, Spartacus, 1974.

³¹ Page: p. 180.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

come trade unions like all the others, confirming the fact that there is no such thing as an anti-trade union trade union.

“The real founding Congress” of the Communist International³³ did not resolve any crucial problems. It ended without clarifying the trade union question due to a desire not to confront the trade unions,³⁴ which were reluctant to yield to the Communist International’s will to control the trade union movement (some, because of a revolutionary conviction in favor of trade union autonomy IWW, Rosmer others because of their anti-revolutionary position Italian CGL others oscillating between these two views the Spanish CNT). The Communist International and the Red Trade Union International would assume a defensive posture by allowing the reformist centrals to exclude the revolutionary trade unions or those which had joined the Red Trade Union International. In the name of the “unity” of the movement, they left all initiative in the hands of their adversaries, while their adversaries knew how to utilize the weapon of unity when they found it useful, and later forced splits when their interests required them.³⁵ Pushed to the sidelines, the red trade unions could not exist unless they acted like trade unions: those organizations with revolutionary tendencies, even if they were, at times, contradictory, like the IWW, would disappear.

The weakness of the non-Russian revolutionary movement was manifested in the Communist International’s organizational structure, and was symbolized by the enormous weight of the Russians in the Executive Committee. Wijnkoop tried in vain to warn the delegates: “In reality, we are not building an international Executive Committee, but an enlarged Russian Executive Committee. I have suggested that the Communist International should have its headquarters outside of Russia, in Italy or Norway. Levi has proposed Germany... It is a very important question because we have given enormous power to this committee, even that of excommunicating individuals, groups or entire parties. This cannot be done without a precise knowledge of the domestic situation in each country.”³⁶ The Executive Committee which was finally named was composed of 15 members, 5 of whom were Russians.

The Communist Parties were not “branches” of the Communist International. They had been formed *from within*, as outgrowths of the social movements in various countries, often with novel aspects. Despite appearances, it was the Communist International which had been formed by its sections, even though its construction was characterized by clashes. The idea of a “mold” conceals the movement which individuals and groups followed in joining the Communist International. One could ask why they accepted this mold. For example, their emphasis on education was well adapted to what was proposed or imposed by the Communist International, and corresponded to the practice of the classical socialist movement before and after 1914-1918. To guide, to convince, and then to *lead* the class: where the accent had been placed on education, the communist parties displaced it to organization. It was the same tendency, but extended. Lenin’s fundamental counterrevolutionary traits (the Kautskyist theory of consciousness being brought to the class from without) came from Europe, and all he did was systematize them. Except for a minority (the communist left), the post-1917 European revolutionaries did not criticize him: it was, then, inevitable that these conceptions would come to life again from the moment when the movement ebbed. The conception of an “elite” which leads the workers,

³³ PC, No. 56, p. 39.

³⁴ PC, No. 60, pp. 9-14.

³⁵ *La question syndicale...*, pp. 22-23.

³⁶ Page: pp. 182-183.

however, was not limited to just the socialist movement. Before 1914 it was shared by *revolutionary syndicalism*. We quote Pouget:

“Most people are sheep-like and unconscious. If by some chance they have... moments of lucidity, it is under the influence of revolutionary minorities.”

“The revolutionary problem consists entirely in this: to build a minority which is strong enough to overthrow the minority of leaders.”³⁷

The obsession with the rupture represented by the “Leninization” of a large part of the European, and even of the world’s workers movement, has led to an underestimation of its *continuity* with certain practices and conceptions which had roots, prior to 1914, among both socialists and trade unionists... Anarchosyndicalist *elitism* was one of the channels through which the Leninist conception of the party was transmitted and which would facilitate its imposition. If the CGTU rapidly came under the control of the PCF, and if the Shop Stewards Movement submitted to the leadership of the British Communist Party, it is not because these parties had practiced such clever manipulation: the educational orientation and the organization of conscious minorities had been almost naturally transferred from the trade union to the party.

³⁷ C. de Goustine: *Pouget, Les matins noirs du syndicalisme*, La Tête de Feuilles, 1972, pp. 80 and 84.

Chapter 12

The Kapp Putsch and the Ruhr Insurrection

The Coup d'État and the First Instances of "Workers Government" and "Anti-Fascism"

The Kapp Putsch (May 13-17, 1920) was an attempt on the part of reactionary elements in the Army to take the first steps towards building a strong right-wing government. The German Army (*Reichswehr*) was reestablished by the constituent assembly: by June 1919 it had 100,000 men, the maximum allowed by the postwar treaties. Including the *Freikorps*, however, by the beginning of 1920 the Army had 400,000 men, which provoked the protests of the victorious powers.

The *Freikorps* arose during the period of military demobilization and State disintegration, and their only purpose was to serve as an instrument of the counterrevolution in Germany and Russia. They were paid by the State. As the situation appeared to have stabilized, the government solved part of its problem in September 1919 by prohibiting the creation of local militias, while directly transforming numerous *Freikorps* units into *Reichswehr* detachments. But it could not integrate all of them, as it wanted to provide the army with a republican "varnish". The majority of the troops who would participate in the Kapp Putsch were from *Freikorps* units which had returned from Russia after having participated in the foreign intervention. They feared they would be discharged due to the terms of the Versailles Treaty. A right-wing faction, encouraged by Kapp, a senior Prussian official, established contacts with their commanders in order to carry out a political operation.

Discovering that 6,000 men under the command of Lüttwitz (one of Noske's direct subordinates in January 1919) were going to occupy Berlin on March 13, the socialist government fled to Dresden and then to Stuttgart. Ludendorff, who supported the *Freikorps*, installed himself in the Chancellery in order to establish a "dignified government". Despite the socialist government's flight, the Kapp regime fell after four days due to a general strike called by all the parties, except for the rightist KPD. Reacting against "leftism", it had moved in the opposite direction, becoming hostile to any and all action: the KPD delegates would admit this at the Third World Congress, along with other "errors". Levi had not expected the "crisis" to break out until 1926. The (excluded) left, however, issued a proclamation calling for the formation of a red army and for an insurrection. The Communist International would reproach the KAPD for having demonstrated its thoughtlessness by prematurely opening "recruiting offices" for a red army.¹ In its discussion of the battles in the Ruhr (cf. below), the Communist International declared that "the party must know how to call off the struggle at the precise moment when its continuation would be likely to lead to military or political defeat". The accusations of "leftism" and adventurism were based on this kind of criticism: they would stand in stark contrast to the facts.

Despite Kapp's declaration that "all those who do not report to work will be shot", there is no doubt that there has never been such an absolutely effective general strike in all of history. The bourgeois parties, which had been very prudent since the end of the war, did not support the conspirators. The Bank of Germany refused to grant Kapp the 10 billion marks needed for government operations. Unable to even find a press which would publish his proclamations,

¹ IC, No. 10.

Kapp fled to Switzerland. The episode of the Kapp Putsch did, however, leave 3,000 victims in its wake. Prior to the coup d'état, the *Freikorps* carried out various outrages, such as burning down the Leipzig Peoples' Hall, killing three hundred people. There were also pitched battles throughout the rest of Saxony, in Thuringia, and especially in the Ruhr.

The coup was totally successful only in Bavaria. The Hoffmann ministry – the Bavarian Ebert (cf. Chapter 7) – was overthrown: the diet was replaced by a right wing ministry led by von Kahr. The central government returned to Berlin, where it hastened to call an end to the strike and disarm the workers. The strike committee, however, under the leadership of Legien, who was undoubtedly using the rank and file's militancy to bolster his position in his personal rivalry with the leaders of the SPD, attempted to form a "workers government". The communists of the KPD, "prisoners of their leftism",² distrusted this government almost as much as Noske's government. This "workers government" was to be composed of the SPD, the USPD and the KPD, along with the trade unions.³ The USPD rejected the proposal in order to preserve its leftist reputation: its own left wing had grown since December 1919 under Däumig's leadership. The representatives of the KPD (among others, Pieck)⁴ accepted the proposal and later had their authority to negotiate revoked by the KPD leadership.

The KPD, however, later declared its support for a policy of "loyal opposition", defined as "the renunciation of preparations for any violent action" against a socialist government. Since the proletarian dictatorship was impossible, it was necessary to create "a situation in which bourgeois democracy cannot act as the dictatorship of capital".⁵ A perfect definition of *anti-fascism*: preventing capitalist democracy from becoming a capitalist dictatorship, *without* revolutionary action, of course. The entire party (including Levi, who had just been released from prison) was outraged by this proposal. A short time later, however, Levi resuscitated the same theme with his suggestion of a possible gradual transformation of the bourgeois republic into a soviet republic. It was thus in Germany that the slogan of a "purely working class" government, that is, one composed of parties which "represent" the working class, first arose. Everything which the Communist International would impose upon the young Communist Parties came from Europe: the united front, for example, and the Spartacist tactic of "conquering the majority", and the idea of the majority of the workers acquiring socialist consciousness *before* the revolution; or the cult of the worker, combined with bolshevization after 1924-1925 (factory cell organization). At the KAPD's Congress, one delegate's assertion that "here, there are no intellectuals, there are only workers", was greeted with a burst of "lively applause" according to the official minutes. The same is true of anti-fascism. Germany, the most modern country, not from the point of view of technology but from that of the development of the class struggle (on both sides) and of the forms of capitalist rule, was the cradle of all the essential weapons of the counterrevolution which still plague the proletariat so many decades later.

Lenin criticized the right-wing leadership of the KPD in his *Infantile Disorder*: the formula of "loyal opposition to a government composed solely of socialists" is not correct because a government composed of "social traitors" cannot be called "socialist". Otherwise, this was a good example of a "Bolshevik-style compromise".⁶ The left, faced with this policy of the central committee, drew the opposite conclusion, and realized that it had no interest whatsoever in

² Badia: p. 170.

³ PC, No. 58, p. 110 et seq

⁴ On Pieck's career, cf. *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, No. 14, pp. 62-65.

⁵ *Rote Fahne*, March 26, 1920.

⁶ *La maladie infantile*, 10/18, p. 169.

availing itself of its rights within the party. Understanding that an abyss separated it from the KPD and that any discussion was superfluous, it founded the KAPD in early April (cf. Chapter 14).

The Red Army of the Ruhr

During this period, the Ruhr was the stronghold of the revolution in Germany. It was there that the influence of the Left and of the revolutionary trade unions was strongest. But no one group was strong enough to unleash a movement on its own, and the insurrection was a spontaneous offensive of the proletariat (it was the first and next-to-last proletarian offensive during the German revolution until March 1921). At the time of the Kapp Putsch, “numerous regions such as the Ruhr and central Germany had not yet undergone the great defeats suffered by the workers during the previous years...”⁷ Instead, the organization of the revolutionary movement in the Ruhr had suffered from the split in the KPD, so the *unionen* were not well-established there and their weakness worked to the advantage of the anarchosyndicalists, who were opposed to political action, which, by definition, they identified with anything which transcended the framework of the workplace. The General Union of Miners had, however, organized one-third of the Ruhr miners, whose principle region, Rhineland-Westphalia, was a *union* bastion. The USPD’s split and its lack of interest in the *unionen* facilitated the growth of anarchosyndicalist influence.⁸

The military and *Freikorps* troops stationed in the Ruhr did not oppose Kapp and some even supported him. It was the general uncertainty concerning the real position of the Army which caused the most concern, and it was an officer’s pro-Kapp declarations which would provide the immediate pretext for the insurrection. Starting on March 14, the workers attacked the Army and formed a “red army”, putting into practice, in a way which went far beyond its wildest hopes, the watchword of the Left.⁹

The workers armed themselves on two separate occasions, before and after the commencement of hostilities. The workers still possessed arms which they had concealed at the end of the war and during the “revolution”, but these would comprise but a small part of their arsenal. During the first few days after the putsch, the workers seized weapons from the *Einwohnerwehren*, legal organizations created after 1918 to keep order and protect property. Its members served as volunteers on a part-time basis: they came from a wide range of professional backgrounds. The radical workers went in groups to the homes of the members of this auxiliary police force and by fair means or foul, and sometimes by fraud and deceit, they made them hand over their weapons. Thus, for example, in one locality, where the *Einwohnerwehren* were composed of peasants who had little sympathy for the workers, the proletarians went to the peasants and proposed that they have a meeting to discuss the issue of the weapons. The workers’ speakers made long speeches to keep the peasants away from their homes as long as possible and adjourned the meeting as soon as they knew that all the arms had been collected. In addition, despite the obligation of these volunteers to take an oath swearing loyalty to the Weimar constitution, there were many USPD members among them.

⁷ *La question syndicale...*, pp. 23-24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 9 and 14.

⁹ G. Colm: *Beitrag zur Geschichte und Soziologie des Ruhraufstandes von März-April 1920*, Essen, 1921. Cf. also an article by Angress in the *Journal of Modern History*, March 1957.

Then, after the first battles, the workers seized the armories, munitions and equipment of the regular Army units which had surrendered or fled, and thus equipped themselves with all the gear necessary to field an authentic army. The insurrection snowballed, “liberating” all of the Ruhr, from east (Hagen-Dortmund) to west (Essen, Duisberg, and Düsseldorf), and then the front lines stabilized: the western limit was the Rhine, defended by the French.

The insurrection began on Monday, the 15th, as a result of the convergence of two separate events: a large demonstration of armed workers in Hagen (convoked by the parties, especially by the USPD, it had no military purpose at all, and was only supposed to be a peaceful show of workers’ power) on the one hand, and on the other, a relatively serious skirmish in Wetter, a small city not far from Hagen.

In Wetter, after the first days of the Putsch, an action committee had been formed by representatives of various workers parties. During a popular assembly, unambiguous threats having been issued against individuals who were “particularly hated by the working class” (Colm), the committee ordered that these individuals were to be arrested to protect them as well as to satisfy the wishes of the crowd: this was the origin of the rumor that “the council republic” had been proclaimed in Wetter.

The military commanders of the Ruhr then issued the order to intervene and disarm the workers at various locations in the Ruhr and especially those in Wetter where, on the 15th, a company of soldiers arrived by train. During a discussion at the train station with the action committee and the mayor, the unit’s captain declared that the Army in the Ruhr supported Kapp. The committee then broke off all discussion; in the meantime, the workers had convinced 20 or 30 soldiers to desert with their arms and equipment.

The battle began: the soldiers were barricaded in the train station, while the workers took up positions in the neighboring streets. The armed workers from the other cities in the region, who were supposed to meet in Hagen, upon being informed that hostilities had broken out in Wetter, headed there *en masse* (despite the opposition of the workers parties) and, streaming into Wetter in ever greater numbers, assured the workers’ victory over the soldiers, who were annihilated.

A company of regular soldiers also went to a neighboring city. The *Freikorps* had sought refuge in Dortmund on the 16th, but on the following day this city was taken by the rebels, who seized a significant quantity of war *materiel*. All of the cities of the Ruhr were taken during the next few days. The *Reichswehr* abandoned the Ruhr; the workers sometimes cut off its retreat, taking numerous prisoners and hastening its departure.

The rebels came from all social layers, but there were only a few intellectuals among them, and most of these were teachers. On this occasion, the regrouping was carried out upon a totally *geographical* basis: neighborhood, town, city, and region. The factories did not constitute, except on rare occasions, the site for concentration and action. The “red army” had between 80,000 and 100,000 men, as well as artillery and a small air force. It was organized around three centers: Hagen (in the hands of the USPD), Essen (KPD and USPD Left) and Mülheim (revolutionary syndicalists and the KPD’s excluded left: the KAPD would be founded shortly afterwards). Hagen was recognized as the central leadership of the army: after the government’s ultimatum imposing a ceasefire and threatening recalcitrants with military repression, Hagen would announce “the quite ambiguous directive of resuming the general strike (when the workers were armed and engaged in battle)”.¹⁰

¹⁰ *La question syndicale...*, p. 25.

The Forms Assumed by Workers Power in the Ruhr

The three “workers” parties (SPD-USPD-KPD) considered the workers’ actions to be “adventurist” and did not accept the violent intervention of the proletarians except as a force in support of the jeopardized democracy. In Chemnitz (Saxony) where the KPD, led by the rightist Brandler, was dominant, the party restricted itself to arming the workers, awaiting Ebert’s return to power, and opposed the efforts of various groups, such as that under the command of Max Hölz, to arm themselves and act independently.¹¹ Germany invented *anti-fascism*, a policy which consists of defending capitalist democracy (with arms if necessary) against capitalist dictatorship, and in repressing any subversive tendencies which go beyond democracy, as if one led to the other; as if there was a “choice” between the two which would depend upon the workers.¹²

Throughout the Ruhr, “executive committees” formed by the three workers parties took power. They restricted their activities to controlling, and sometimes purging, the existing government bodies. In most cases, they maintained contacts with local administrative offices.

In Duisberg, the KPD left deposed the tripartite executive (SPD, USPD, KPD) and replaced it with an “executive commission” (left KPD and FAU) which took power by “demagogically” (Colm) relying upon the armed workers, and arrested various “bonzes” from the workers parties and trade unions. These parties would also retaliate against the members of the Duisberg “executive commission” after the end of the movement, accusing them of having used the movement as a means of personal enrichment and characterizing them as “armed gangs”, “armed hordes” and “irresponsible elements”. In fact, the workers of Duisberg had indeed conceived of the insurrection as the beginning of the “second revolution”, and had requisitioned money from the banks and provisions from the stores and warehouses, and organized free distribution of many goods. But the bulk of the movement remained legalist and respected the democracy. On the 17th, in Dortmund, the rebels allowed the installation of a right wing, SPD-USPD-KPD local government. This error would spell their downfall.

Defeat

On the 20th the trade unions declared the end of the strike, but the entire German side of the Ruhr was still outside the control of the authorities. The government and the workers parties (including the KPD) met in Bielefeld and on the 25th signed an agreement calling for the following: the *Reichswehr* was to stay out of the Ruhr (as the terms of the Versailles Treaty had stipulated, the region was to remain neutral: but the practical outcome was that the region was to be occupied by two armies instead of by one); punishment and purging of the putschists; nationalization of large industry. But the surrender of the workers’ arms was the precondition for all of these concessions.

A large part of the red army, evidently, did not recognize the terms of this agreement. The members of the AAUs, the future KAPists and the anarchosyndicalist rank and file acted in opposition to the views of the Berlin central committee of the FAUD. According to Angress, the KPD’s militant groups formed only “an insignificant contingent compared to the anarchosyndicalist rebels, the unaffiliated, or the members of the KAPD, the USPD and even the

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹² Engels had opposed one of the first examples of anti-fascism, in relation to the issue of *boulangisme*: cf. *PC*, No. 56, p. 12.

SPD”.¹³ On the 30th, the radical workers also rejected an ultimatum. The KPD leadership was in favor of abiding by the Bielefeld agreement: it was necessary to follow the SPD-USPD directives, since these two parties represented the majority of the workers. This stance was an indication of the KPD’s extreme weakness after Heidelberg.¹⁴ The workers were unmoved. The *Reichswehr* would no longer “keep out of the Ruhr” and, from the 3rd to the 6th of April, easily defeated a red army weakened by negotiations.

The Ruhr insurrection and its repression had immediate international ramifications. The mining basin of the Ruhr provided, during that period, 70% of German coal production, and was of vital importance for all European industry, since the French mining regions were still in ruins as a result of the war. The interruption of coal production in the Ruhr very rapidly shut down economic activity in Germany, and would soon have an impact on other countries as well. The military occupation of the Ruhr by the *Reichswehr*, in order to repress the rebellion, would, of course, constitute a violation of the terms of the Versailles Treaty. In response, the French occupied Frankfurt, cutting off economic traffic between northern and southern Germany, and posing yet more difficulties for the German economy at the very moment when it was threatened by the revolutionary movement. Immediately afterwards, the English, aware of what was at stake (saving German capitalism and English capitalism at the same time) lodged a protest against the French, and, putting inter-capitalist solidarity above disputes over restitution, revealed the universal revolutionary importance of the Ruhr insurrection.¹⁵ The ensuing massacre would keep the Ruhr subdued until 1923.

The proletarians were victorious as long as they relied upon their social functions, utilizing the productive apparatus for supplies, arms and transport, without, however, remaining within the boundaries of production. The rebel cities united and sent help to the workers in other cities. But even in this respect the movement displayed its weak points, which characterized the whole epoch. After having emerged victorious from its clash with the Army, using the Army’s own methods and fighting on its own terrain, the proletarians, in their immense majority, thought that their job was done and handed over their power to the parties and the democracy. The red army expelled the military and then transformed itself into the classical workers movement. The workers had mobilized for democracy, and those who wanted to go further were mowed down by the same military force which had supported the anti-democratic putsch and to which the State rapidly turned. As the *Communist International*¹⁶ recognized, there existed both a “republican guard” and a “red army” at the same time: formed by a coalition of organizations (SPD-USPD-KPD), the first undertook to preserve order and guard the stores and warehouses. As in Bavaria and Hungary, the workers, rather than going on the offensive, had occupied a vacuum. They had occupied the social space without transforming it in a communist sense.

The June 1920 elections legitimized the power which had been supported at the crucial moment by the workers. The right having reappeared on the political scene with the putsch, the political center of gravity moved rightward. The SPD relinquished power. Its electoral count fell from 12 to 6 million. The new government was composed of a *centrist* majority, with the participation of “populists” (pre-war “national-liberals”), the traditional representatives of big capital. The USPD vote grew from 2.5 to 5 million. The KPD, free to practice revolutionary

¹³ Angress: *Stillborn Revolution*..., p. 46.

¹⁴ *La question syndicale*..., p. 24.

¹⁵ “Bassin de la Ruhr et Francfort”, in *Kommunismus*, April 17, 1920.

¹⁶ No. 5.

parliamentarism, obtained a few hundred thousand votes. The Communist International would do everything in its power to precipitate the fusion of the USPD and the KPD.

In order to understand the reality of the anti-parliamentary current among the communists, it must be seen as the expression of a real and numerically important movement within the proletarian masses. Even the adversaries of the left admitted the scale of working class abstentionism in the German elections. Bela Kun made the following observation concerning the 1920 legislative elections:

“It is hard to precisely calculate the number of workers who have abstained, following the party of revolutionary confusion (the KAPD) or the national bolsheviks. The data from the various large cities and industrial regions, however, allow the assertion that abstention has by no means been insignificant and that many workers have expressed their revolutionary point of view through the boycott of the elections.”¹⁷ The same thing happened in the elections for the Prussian legislative assembly (at least half of Germany) in 1921:

“It can be stated that in all likelihood the majority of the votes lost by the USPD in the last elections *did not go to any other party*. The proletariat’s “electoral weariness” was a characteristic feature of the political situation. In Berlin, according to *Freiheit* (the USPD newspaper), the rate of voter participation among the bourgeoisie was between 80 and 85%, while it was only 60 to 65% among the workers. Scheidemann and Hilferding interpreted this abstentionism in the same way: as a consequence of party disputes, of the splits caused by the communists, etc.

“The abstention of such a large proportion of the proletariat, however, such as took place in these elections, could not be schematized by virtue of such simplistic formulas; the crude reality expressed by such terms as “electoral weariness” and “abstention” masks two phenomena. If one part of the abstentionist phenomenon must be understood as a symptom of the proletariat’s *lack of ideological maturity*, the other part, on the contrary, indicates that a whole sector of the conscious proletariat had rejected the parliamentary electoral struggle, perceiving it as a phase of the revolutionary class struggle which had been superseded. We do not believe we are mistaken in asserting that the extreme exacerbation of the situation in Germany led many convinced communists (and not just the members of the KAPD) to accept the idea that participation in parliamentary activity could only be prejudicial to the development and maturation of revolutionary consciousness.”¹⁸

At the beginning of August, the parliament passed a “disarmament” law which triggered isolated reactions from the extreme left (cf. Chapter 14). On this front the State would have to act slowly and with caution, despite the absence of any reaction on the part of the SPD and the KPD. The decision to seize arms stockpiles in central Germany would be the detonator of the “March Action” of 1921. The extreme right was assassinating leftist and even centrist figures. The “workers organizations” demanded that the government respect legality. The government would pass a law for the “protection of the *Reich*”: between 1920 and 1933 the law would be invoked 5 times against the right and 822 times against the left.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Kommunismus*, June 19, 1920.

¹⁸ “BF”, *ibid.*, March 1921.

¹⁹ Badia: p. 184.

Chapter 13

The VKPD

The Founding of the VKPD

After the leftists were excluded, in a process which started at the Second Congress (October 1919) and was completed by the Third Congress (February 1920), the KPD, strictly speaking, no longer existed. The reports of the delegates to the Third Congress provided evidence of the party's utter prostration. In Berlin, out of 8,000 members, only 500 supported the central committee; in Essen, 43 out of 2,000, etc. "After his experience in Rhineland-Westphalia, Brandler resigned himself to saying, 'We no longer have a party at all'."¹ Its weakness led the KPD to regularly support the directives of the USPD during this period, and was also the reason for the extremely "prudent" position it assumed in March of 1920.

The USPD, on the other hand, was flourishing. It took full advantage of the SPD's deception of its voters and militants. It had 750,000 members in 1920. This was the raw material for the construction of a fraternal "mass party" for the Communist International. Lenin wrote in his *Infantile Disorder*, in relation to the "proletarian groundswell" of the USPD, that the USPD "was conducting a relentless struggle against opportunism."² The 21 Conditions for admission were intended, among other things, to allow this leftist groundswell to join the Communist International. In October 1920, the Halle Congress of the USPD voted in favor of joining the Communist International by a vote of 234 to 158.

On December 5, 1920, the USPD-KPD Unification Congress was held: the new party was called the *Unified Communist Party of Germany* (VKPD), and had at least 400,000 members. As Heckert, a VKPD delegate to the Third World Congress would say: "The Communist Party, at the moment of its unification, became a mass party..."³ The German section of the Communist International had been formed by means of deals between parties, between the parties' leaders, and would never belie this origin.

Even when, during the crisis of 1929, the KPD accepted a large number of unemployed workers into its ranks, it had already replaced the SPD in various sectors of the working class, above all in the recently-industrialized regions which had no socialist cadres.⁴ Without totally supplanting the SPD, it had become the second great German workers party. Instead of criticizing the Communist Party's positions during the Weimar Republic, one should recall that this "Communist Party" was the heir of the anti-communist centrism of the years between 1917 and 1920. The essential character of the revolutionary party created at the end of 1918 was to be upheld by the leftist groups and would disappear with the victory of the reaction.

Based on his study of Hamburg, Comfort concluded that the members of the SPD did not comprise a labor aristocracy in the sense of a distinct privileged stratum, but that it was a socio-logically more homogeneous group than the USPD, which was in turn more homogeneous than the KPD, which included in its membership workers from very diverse social layers.⁵ The

¹ Bock: p. 227.

² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

³ Minutes, in German, p. 528.

⁴ J. Droz: *Les forces politiques dans la République de Weimar 1919-33*, SEDES, 1967, pp. 75-76.

⁵ Chapter 7.

communist militants were also younger and less experienced than those of the SPD. This led Comfort to deduce that the KPD was more independent of an apparatus and, above all, of one (or several) specific social layer(s) than the other parties. The SPD and the ADGB had not been able to adapt to modern industrialization and the growth, in both numbers and importance, of the workers in large industry, especially since the majority of the Hamburg SPD's leaders, after the war, were former trade unionists.

On January 8, 1921, utilizing its new forces, the VKPD initiated a large-scale campaign in the purest style of the "workers united front". The central committee sent an "open letter" to all "workers organizations", from the most reactionary trade unions to the KAPD and the AAUD, proposing a joint struggle against capitalism. Written by Radek and Levi, the letter called for a campaign to increase wages, dissolve the "bourgeois defense organizations", create workers self-defense organizations, and to compel Germany to re-establish diplomatic relations with Russia. It was hoped that, should the recipients reject this joint action, they would stand revealed as traitors before the masses, and would lose all their influence; should they accept, it was thought that they would be obliged to collaborate with the KPD so as to continue to appear to be revolutionaries, and the KPD would thereby become the driving force of the movement. This action was to have an "educational" value for the "masses". According to the formula of *Infantile Disorder*, the KPD would have caught the organizations which called themselves revolutionary just as the "rope catches the hanged man". The KAPD and the AAUD, "prisoners of their ultra-leftism", rejected the proposal.

At the Third World Congress, Lenin sang the praises of this tactic: "The 'Open Letter' is exemplary. It must be unconditionally defended." Terracini, a PCI delegate, requested that such methods be renounced, and quoted (KAPD delegate) Hempel's statement: "The Open Letter is opportunist, it cannot be remedied." Lenin responded: "The Open Letter is exemplary as the opening act of the practical method to effectively win over the majority of the working class."⁶

This tactic responded to a precise objective, as was revealed by the debate within the KPD central committee which took place on January 28, 1921, and was advocated with particular vehemence by Radek and Levi. To come into contact with the masses, it was necessary to remain in contact with their representatives, whether "right" or "left".⁷ It was therefore necessary to undertake international negotiations with the "syndicalists", and in Germany to maintain contacts with the KAPD, so as to attract their best elements. Radek based his argument on the fact that the German working class had a high rate of trade union membership, and concluded that it was necessary to take the other parties and organizations into consideration. Levi refused to attack the KAPD but also refused to identify the KPD with the KAPD. "We have to keep up appearances for the German workers." Brandler adopted a different tone: "I have insisted that we must not cease to hit out at the KAPD." Violence or "Open Letter", the goal is the same, to make the KPD appear to be revolutionary in the eyes of the masses, so that the masses would support it. A theatrical stage upon which their organization could represent itself as "credible", so that the masses would support it. It was a matter of winning the "trust" of the masses.

⁶ Minutes, p. 511.

⁷ P. Levi and Moscow, in *The Comintern: Historical Highlights*, Hoover Institute — Pall Mall Press, London, 1969, pp. 271-310.

Elimination of the Former Spartacists from the KPD Leadership

If a “leftist” tendency immediately took power in the VKPD, this was in part the result of unification: the whole party felt the strength of its numbers and thought it could seize power by non-parliamentary means. In addition, there was a tendency in the Communist International which, aware of the crisis of Bolshevik power after the civil war, wanted to bring about a civil war in Germany at any cost, and dispatched a delegation from the Communist International to Germany, led by B. Kun; Levi, Zetkin and the other rightists in the leadership would clash with this delegation.

It was at this moment that the “Italian question” had a direct impact on the affairs of the KPD. In Livorno (January 1921), Levi had naturally sympathized with the party of Italian centrism (cf. Chapter 8).⁸ The pro-KPD position of the Italian Left was therefore all the more contradictory in that it had directly suffered from the effects of the KPD’s rightist orientation. Levi, displaying his opposition to the PCI as it had been constituted in 1921, proved that the “principles” he had defended against the German Left were nothing but the cover for his opportunism. At Livorno, Levi confronted the Communist International’s emissaries, supporters of the same strictness upheld by the Italian Left, and just as desirous as the latter of breaking with the *center* as well as with the right. Upon Levi’s return to Germany, the Italian polemic was added to the debate on the correct orientation of the KPD. Levi, referring to Livorno before the central committee (February 1921), diagnosed the “beginning of a crisis in the KPD and the Communist International”: for the first time, a split took place within a party which was *already* a member of the Communist International.⁹ Rakosi, however, deduced from the Italian experience a lesson which could be generalized to other countries.¹⁰ He alluded to the French and Czech Communist Parties and, among other things, to the case of Cachin, “who is a freemason”. “Besides the fact that *we want to set a precedent*, this question is not a purely Italian question.” He denounced Levi’s position in Livorno before the central committee. Losing the vote by 28 votes to 25, Levi resigned, together with other members of the central committee, including Zetkin.

The new leftist leadership of the central committee, led by Frölich, appointed a series of leaders from the “proletarian base” of the USPD. At the Third World Congress, the KAPD would speak of a “new, improved and revised version” of the KPD. This new version was based upon a new leftist tendency which had appeared in Berlin after the creation of the KAPD, under E. Reuter. The Bremen Left had criticized the KPD’s “loyalty” during the Kapp Putsch, but had also repeated Levi’s critiques of the KAPD, in which it had detected harmful decentralizing tendencies; nor was it entirely mistaken. But its union with the KPD which, despite its opportunism, did appear to be the only Marxist organization of any importance in Germany was a remedy worse than the disease it was meant to cure. Bremen had separated from that of which it was naturally a part: the German *Left*, depriving the latter of its precious contribution, which would have perhaps allowed an original and active synthesis. By reinforcing the KPD, it was entangled as the opposition within a party whose rightward course could not be rectified. The KPD’s leftist detour, which predated March 1921, was deceptive: the USPD contributed to the KPD its own vacillation between reform and adventurism, between parliament and the streets.

⁸ The critique of centrism made by Bordiga at this congress (*PC*, No. 50, pp. 51-72) is also a critique of Levi.

⁹ Gruber: pp. 304-309.

¹⁰ *Rote Fahne*, February 26 and March 1, 1921.

“Opportunism” and putschism are the two sides of the same coin, as Lukàcs had perspicaciously analyzed the problem:

“The decisive theoretical aspect can be reduced, expressed negatively: in the inability of the two groups (opportunists and putschists) to conceive of the *revolution as a process*; positively expressed: in their erroneous overestimation of the *organization* in the revolutionary movement.” For both, the struggle can only be the product of the organization; they do not see that there is “a permanent interaction between the preconditions and their consequences during the course of the action”. “One could even say, if one has to choose between one of these points of view, that the organization must be conceived more as the consequence than as the precondition.”

“There is no need to cite examples to illustrate this mode of thought and action among the opportunists; the way they make ballots compatible with membership cards, their expectation that the ‘moment’ will arrive when a sufficiently large number of proletarians will be sufficiently well-organized, is perfectly well-known. But it is surprising to confirm the analogous way the putschists operate. They do not count ballots, but revolvers, machine guns, etc.; a “good organization” needs less men; its effectiveness is not that of an electoral machine or a trade union, but that of an illegal military organization: all of this, in fact, changes very little in terms of their theoretical foundations. The putschists also conceive of organization and action as two distinct stages separated from one another...”

“The overestimation and the mechanistic concept of organization necessarily have the consequence of neglecting and demoting to second place the *totality* of the revolutionary process to the benefit of an *immediate visible result*.”¹¹

The former *Bremerlinke* had the illusion that it could drive the party towards the left, when all it did was help the party make one of its voluntaristic U-turns.¹² Mattick defined Bremen as the most advanced tendency, but with this proviso: “the ambiguity which characterized the politics of the *Spartakusbund* was to a great extent the result of the conservatism of the masses.”¹³ According to Frölich, after the “line had been set straight” at Heidelberg, the party went too far to the right, allowing the opportunity presented by the Kapp Putsch to slip through its hands.¹⁴ The new leadership defined communist tactics in the following manner:

“Should the action encounter any obstacles, they must know how to scale back their directives, and should it be necessary, they must quickly withdraw from the struggle and take refuge among the masses; but during certain times of tension, the communists must also go to the masses and assume the initiative in the struggle, even at the risk of being followed by only a part of the workers.”¹⁵ The first clause alludes to situations of the sort encountered in Berlin in January 1919; the second would be applied in March 1921. The VKPD was headed towards insurrectionary action.

¹¹ *Kommunismus*, August 17, 1920.

¹² *La question syndicale...*, pp. 27-28.

¹³ “Otto Rühle and the German Labour Movement”, in Paul Mattick, *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*, M.E. Sharpe, Inc., White Plains, 1978, p. 93.

¹⁴ Bock: pp. 297-298.

¹⁵ *La question syndicale...*, p. 47.

Chapter 14

The KAPD and the AAUD-E

The KPD(O)

Not all the members of the left tendencies immediately accepted the definitive split in the KPD. Before forming the KAPD, the opposition successively crystallized around three centers: Hamburg, Bremen and Berlin.

Hamburg, the rallying point for the opposition after Heidelberg, advocated the immediate creation of a second Communist Party. But it was during this period that Wolffheim and Laufenberg began to elaborate their “national bolshevism”. The adversaries of the Left reproached it for having incubated such a current (cf. *L’Internationale Communiste*, No. 11). The Hamburg communists, as Gorter recalled in his *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*, were rapidly sidelined. Bremen then assumed Hamburg’s role as the information clearing house of the opposition. The Bremen office then represented the majority of the Left: it was opposed to the split and devoted itself to various attempts to engage the central committee in negotiations, in order to assert the rights of the opposition, which the central committee routinely rebuffed. The Bremen office did not understand that Levi and the central committee had conducted their intrigues for the sole purpose of excluding the Left and that they were scarcely worried about the fact that the excluded members comprised the majority of the Party. The Left also deluded itself by believing that the Communist International would support its position (cf. Chapter 16). It was in this spirit that the Bremen office sent representatives to the Third Congress of the KPD, and even proposed amending the Heidelberg Theses. The Congress reiterated that all party districts which did not accept the Theses as they stood must be excluded: that is, the North, Northwest, Lower Saxony, Greater Berlin, and East Saxony districts. One month later, having in the meantime had the opportunity to assess the central committee’s stance during the Kapp Putsch, the KPD (Opposition) abandoned any hope of rejoining the party. The Berlin district, led by Gorter, Schröder, etc., who would constitute the whole future leadership of the KAPD, took the initiative to call a conference of the opposition.

The Founding of the KAPD

The delegates to the KAPD’s founding Congress (April 4-5) represented 38,000 militants; other regions would join the party after the Congress. At that time the KAPD embraced almost the entire membership of the former KPD, and its social background was similar to that of its predecessor (derived from every layer of the working class, with a heavy representation of youth and the unemployed). Despite the presence of three tendencies (Berlin, Hamburg and Dresden), the atmosphere was particularly “warm” and the participants had the impression of being part of something radically new.¹ The break with Spartacism was the definitive break with social democracy. The tendencies, however, were recognized and the Congress presidium included a representative from each one.

In effect, this was not a split from an already-existing organization (despite the fact that the parties’ acronyms would give the opposite impression, as if the KAPD were a split from the

¹ Bock.

KPD), but the self-organization, at the apex of a revolutionary period, of the new current which rejected the weight of the past as it was represented by the Spartacist leadership, which had been reduced to a mere skeleton financed by Moscow until it could be grafted onto the left wing of the USPD. The enthusiasm of the KAPD's militants resembled that of the first founders of the workers brotherhoods, unions and leagues of the 19th century. This newness and this lifestyle which led Rühle to say that "the KAPD is not a party in the traditional sense" would be eloquently expressed in the organization's internal life.

The KAPD asserted that it was the "party of the masses", as opposed to the KPD, which was the "party of leaders" and used the masses for its own political ends. During this period, the KAPD represented the bulk of the communist party and the revolutionary masses. Less than one year later, the polemic would seem to have been reversed, when the KPD became the VKPD and was transformed into a "mass party" (*Massenpartei*, while the KAPD saw itself as the *Partei der Massen*), and the KAPD would attack it for this reason at the Third Congress of the Communist International. But one cannot really speak of a reversal in this case unless the KAPD were to abandon the position of the "masses" in the masses-leaders opposition, and pass over to the "leader" position. A "party of the masses" is the opposite of a "party of leaders".

The favorite terrain of the German Left from its birth to its demise, the masses-leaders debate, born from the trauma of the "leaders' betrayal" of 1914, was particularly pointless. A crucial aspect of such oppositions is the fact that the positive term contains its truth in the negative term and *vice-versa*. This is also the case for a neighboring controversy, the centralism-federalism opposition. The betrayals of the leaders are contrasted with the free activity of the masses. But as long as the masses are still "masses", that is, as long as the proletariat does not constitute itself as a "class", the masses will produce leaders, and to speak of masses is to speak in the language of leaders.

Gorter was more precise when he elaborated his position on the party as a grouping of the "pure", who would not succumb to opportunism. The conceptions shared by Gorter and the KAPD also involved the same confusions, since the party of the revolutionary "masses" must necessarily become a small group when these masses are no longer revolutionary. It is also true that the Left succumbed to "educationalism": this was an enduring trait of the Third International, propagated by Lenin, who tried to replace the "bourgeois ideology" of the workers with "socialist ideology", a trait which the German Left would never lose.²

The majority (Berlin) rejected national bolshevism, but arrived at a provisional compromise with Rühle's tendency, which supported the immediate abolition of the party form. This is why the Program states: "The KAPD is not a party in the traditional sense." This thesis was the basis for Rühle's *The Revolution is Not a Party Matter*, written while he was still a member of the KAPD.

The debate on the KAPD statutes revolved around "finding the form which would allow the expression of the will of the masses". On a different level, this can be compared to Lenin's efforts in 1903 to seek statutes which could thwart the spread of opportunism in the party. These formal debates were characteristic of this world revolutionary period, along with those concerning the theme of democracy and the idea of the intellectuals bringing consciousness to the workers. The currents, or rather the individuals, whose writings escape this mold are very rare. The trend was so dominant that even individuals who had criticized organizational fetish-

² PC, No. 56, *passim*. The same criticism could be applied to M. Rubel, who considered Marx to be primarily an "educator": cf. his introduction to *Pages Choisies de K. Marx*, Payot, 1970, and *Marx critique du Marxisme*, Payot, 1974.

ism, for example, later succumbed to it: Trotsky, for one, adopting Leninism after 1917. Democracy, organizational fetishism and educationalism are typical aspects of bourgeois ideology.³

These political ideas and practices are reflections of the development of the relation between the classes of bourgeois society which sank into the revolutionary crisis at the end of the war. The petty bourgeoisie, often as threatened by the modernization of capital as the workers, enter the battle in their own way, considering themselves the salt of the earth, lacking a communist perspective. In Russia, the most radical fraction of this class, combined with the proletariat, seized power. The West also had its own problems concerning the development and organization of social groups. The most radical movements themselves bear the stigmata of their epoch.

The very short history of the KAPD shows particularly well how precisely the same statutes were capable of serving two completely opposed orientations: first, the practical life of a revolutionary organization, and second, the subsequent decay of that same organization. It could be said that these statutes were extremely democratic; but it would be more important to point out that, during the entire period from the party's foundation in March 1920 until the summer of 1921, the statutes were the faithful expression of an organization in which a "base" in the traditional sense did not exist: each member knew what had to be done, and he did not join the KAPD to follow orders and to be told what to do. Congresses and various kinds of general assemblies were quite frequent. There was no central committee invested with full powers for an indeterminate period of time: there was, on the one hand, a current affairs committee (*Geschäftsführung*) and also a "Central Committee" (*Hauptausschuss*) which met whenever important decisions had to be made, and, unlike the same structure in other organizations, was on each occasion subject for the most part to re-election by the party districts, and consisted of the standing administrative committee and the district delegates. One could say that the party line was constantly decided by the whole party, which manifested an enormous force in the KAPD; it was only in order to recuperate this force that the Communist International tolerated the presence of this party, which never ceased to openly and violently attack the Communist International's opportunism. In the KAPD, throughout its best period, that which Bordiga denominated as "organic centralism" was actually realized.

When the period of the KAPD's decomposition began, the same, quite elaborate, statutes, from the moment when they were no longer the simple formalization of a real practice, were used in the service of all kinds of maneuvers in the struggle among the party's factions (cf. Appendix I).

Everyone attempted, in their own way, to escape from organizational fetishism. For Gorter: "The organization, the union, because it is tied to the workplace, must consequently always be the object of vigilance lest it sabotage the revolution, by aiming for small improvements or conquering a position of apparent power."⁴ But everyone denounced *everyone else's* fetishism. Mattick wrote that the KAPD "seemed to be more Bolshevik than the Bolsheviks",⁵ due to its preoccupation with purity. The KAPD and the PCI (formed by radical elements who managed to subsist within the capitalist world thanks to the power of their principles) both combined an all-too-sanguinary evaluation of the role of the party with an overestimation of the workers organizations (unitary organizations for the former, trade unions for the latter). Their manner of thinking and their practice were basically very similar, but they differed in the way

³ *The Veritable Split...*

⁴ Quoted by B. Kun in *La IC*, No. 18, October 1921. "Du sectarisme à la contre-révolution."

⁵ *Conseils ouvriers en Allemagne*, p. 102.

they applied identical principles, due to differences between the German and Italian contexts. What distinguished them was the way each represented *their own* and *the other's* activity: at this level the complex interaction of traditions and ideas prevented each one from understanding the other and the other's activities. In any event, both shared the same conception of the party as "nucleus"⁶: "A cadre which can merge with the proletariat when, thanks to the general development, the latter will be led into combat." The Italian Left shared with the German Left the rejection of the idea of conquering the majority before the revolutionary period, as well as the idea of the program-party: "Each communist must be capable of being a leader on his own terrain... he must be able to resist and, whatever keeps him going, whatever captivates him, is his program."⁷ It would be idle to try to exonerate the German Left, at any cost, of the charge of "anarchism" by quoting the texts where it proclaims its desire for a pure, diamantine party, a "super-elaborated party-nucleus".⁸ Far from providing evidence of the Marxist character of the KAPD, we understand this, on the contrary, as the contradiction of a party situated in the midst of a combative proletariat, but few in number, and obliged to discover a means to reinforce its cohesion as an organization, deluding itself concerning its role as a factor driving the struggles forward (cf. the next Chapter). One cannot locate the most profound aspect of the Left in the most exaggerated assertion of *what distinguishes it* from the rest of the proletarians.⁹

During the first days of August, a Second Congress was held and adopted the KAPD's Program. The whole party was at that time convinced that all the conditions for the revolution were ripe (one can compare this view with that of the Second Congress of the Communist International, which was taking place at the same time: cf. Chapter 11). Hunger riots had broken out in May and June. A bill was pending in the German parliament, prepared several months before, which would mandate the disarming of all civilians who had weapons. It was thought that this would unleash defensive reactions which would have to be "pushed forward". The Congress decided that the party should focus on this issue: but it would fail because it would stand utterly alone in its battle.

An important point remained unresolved, however: the clarification of the KAPD's relations with the East Saxony tendency (Rühle). This led to a clash with the Communist International (cf. Chapter 16). Rühle was not excluded, but his position was condemned in Moscow. The Congress vociferously rejected an ultimatum from the Executive Committee of the Communist International which demanded that the KAPD rejoin the KPD. Rühle and his supporters were excluded only at the end of October during a session of the central committee.

In mid-August 1920, the Red Army was at the gates of Warsaw, and the Alliance sent important aid shipments to the Poles, which passed through Germany. The KAPD, AAUD and FAUD carried out sabotage operations against these shipments which as a whole were quite successful, and tried to use these actions as a springboard for an insurrection, which was a total failure. The KAPD blamed the public denunciations of these actions by the KPD and the USPD.¹⁰ Where logistical reasons prevented their cadres from receiving the orders to refrain

⁶ Hempel, debate on the report on tactics at the Third World Congress, *La gauche allemande...*. In English, see the website, *Wage Slave X's Revolutionary Anti-Capitalist Homepage*, "Discussion of Radek's Report on the Tactics of the International".

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Révolution Internationale*, n.d., No. 6, summarizing the work cited above.

⁹ Letter from Marx to Schweitzer, October 13, 1868: "The sect does not seek its reason for existence and its sense of pride in *what it has in common* with the class movement, but in a *particular aspect* which distinguishes it from that movement."

¹⁰ *La gauche allemande...*

from participating in this action, seizures of power at a local level took place: such was the case of the Köthen “council republic” in Central Germany, ridiculed by those who contributed to its defeat. Many radicals were taken prisoner. “The KAPD was the only party which took a chance on fulfilling its antidemocratic content in everyday work.”¹¹

Even one year later (at the Third Congress of the Communist International), the KAPD would insistently invoke the “action” of August 1920, accusing the KPD and the USPD of having abandoned them. According to Jung,¹² August 1920 was by no means just another incident. At that time, there was a totally unexpected change in the Russians’ program. When Jung was in Moscow (prior to the Second Congress of the Communist International) he expected, as had been agreed by the KAPD, the KPD and the USPD, that the Red Army’s counteroffensive against the Poles would not have the primary objective of taking Warsaw, but Upper Silesia (a German-speaking industrial region with a strong revolutionary movement, which had just been incorporated into Poland). A red army of German workers was then supposed to be formed there, and only then was the attack on Warsaw and the main force of the Polish army supposed to begin. The Russians did not feel that their army was in any condition to confront Warsaw and the whole Polish army, which was much better equipped than the Red Army and was also regularly re-supplied by the Alliance, and therefore counted upon the essential support of a revolutionary movement in Germany.

The German communist parties and the USPD were supposed to be prepared to assist this maneuver and to undertake an armed offensive. The decision to proceed directly to Warsaw, made in August, was suddenly taken by the high command of the Russian army; the KAPD, whose members had meanwhile organized militarily, did not understand the reason for this change of course. In fact, the Russians had been deluded by their initial military successes. Yet this proved that they paid no heed to any revolutionary movement outside their own (as is well-known, Pilsudski’s counteroffensive was successful).

Jung, placing the event within its proper context and considering its importance, did not fail to emphasize the general apathy of the German workers, which the communists’ military groups had struggled to dispel.

In a general strike of electrical workers, in October 1920, the KAPD, faithful to its role as “trigger” of the movement, denounced the betrayal of the KPD, SPD, etc. The government itself had to repress the strike. After March 1921, the KAPD worked to set up action committees in the factories and promoted “Italian-style” occupations. The Fourth Congress (September 1921) would assign itself the task of “keeping the revolutionary will of the German proletariat alive”. The KAPD had turned towards activism, becoming a “party in the traditional sense”. With the definitive ebb of the revolution, new internal divisions arose and the KAPD began to turn into a sect. The last revolutionary enclaves were reduced by external intervention (many were killed in various actions) and internal causes (activism and the clashes between tendencies). The creation of the AAUD-E was a vain attempt to react to these developments.

The Debate Concerning the “Unitary” Organization

Due to their mutual opposition to the Bolsheviks and the social democrats, all the factions of the German Left agreed on one point: it was not the “Party” which would secure power during and after the revolution, but the councils, institutions which would allow the proletarians to

¹¹ *La question syndicale...*, p. 38.

¹² *Der Weg nach unten*, p. 186, et seq.

simultaneously exercise both political and economic power. But the KAPD Program distinguished between “political” and “economic” councils: a sign of disagreement over the timing of the party’s dissolution. The AAUD-E represented the current which supported the party’s immediate dissolution.

The idea of unitary organization, as we have mentioned above, first appeared in Bremen¹³: this point was the only novel feature of the text in which it appeared, however, which otherwise still advocated a trade-based structure as well as parliamentarism. The notion remained confused for a long time, and further evolved only with the wildcat strikes during and after the war. The revolutionary workers then organized themselves by factories and by regions, and sabotaged the trade unions and elections.

The confusion, and the source of later disagreements and splits, derived from the fact that the idea of unitary organization was also shared by individuals and groups belonging to a party: the KPD. The Left defended the idea at the KPD’s founding Congress against Luxemburg and the right, for whom the tasks of the trade unions were to be carried out after the revolution by the councils.¹⁴ Since they had agitated in favor of an organization which rejected the party, while they belonged to a party, they arrived at the idea that this party (the KPD(O) and later the KAPD) must dissolve itself into the unitary organization. *Schematically*, two positions took shape: immediate dissolution or dissolution at the end of a “certain period of time”. This “certain period of time”, of course, generated new tendencies, from the moment when more refined distinctions began to be made. In the meantime, as Schröder said in his *On the Future of the New Society*,¹⁵ the party would be preserved as a “necessary evil”. The supporters of unitary organization, not being numerous enough among the proletariat, had no choice but to join the party.

While the whole radical left (uniting all tendencies) was organized in the KAPD, the split first began, as so often happens, over another issue: the position to adopt regarding Russia and the Communist International. Rühle, who was a convinced anti-bolshevik and opposed the KAPD’s joining the Communist International, was excluded from the KAPD, which wanted to collaborate with the Communist International. Rühle had often been reproached for his “semi-anarchism”. Yet the KAPD had attempted to overcome the thesis opposing Marxism to anarchism, as black to white. One of its delegates to the Third World Congress thought that the anarchists underestimated “the organized class struggle... that they lived history too quickly, that their tactic is premature by several decades”. This is insufficient, of course, but the renaissance revolutionary movement synthesized what was good in Marxism and anarchism, implicitly criticizing¹⁶ the opinions of Marx and Engels.¹⁷

Rühle’s position on Russia was quickly supported by the tendency which was in favor of immediate unitary organization, and the effective break within the KAPD and the AAUD rapidly unfolded. In December, the Saxony district of the KAPD dissolved itself into the AAUD. Later, the Hamburg AAUD excluded from its ranks all those who wanted to remain in the KAPD. Throughout Germany, a fraction of the leftists immediately entered the unitary organization. The latter would criticize the KAPD during the March Action.

¹³ Bock: p. 84.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

¹⁵ Kool: p. 353.

¹⁶ Cf. Hempel.

¹⁷ Letter from Engels to Lafargue, June 11, 1889.

In October 1921 this movement held its first autonomous conference and gave itself the name AAUD-E, the “E” standing for “Unitary Organization”. This conference adopted “The Guiding Principles of the AAUD-E”. The AAUD-E then had 13 economic districts which counted several tens of thousands of members, but would decompose even faster than the other left organizations.

The AAUD-E’s theory was essentially expressed in *Die Aktion* after 1920 and in Rühle’s pamphlets, each being a development of the previous one.¹⁸ Pannekoek, although not a member of any group after 1920, showed, in a letter dated July 15, 1920, that he was closer to the AAUD-E than to the other left tendencies: “The idea that two organizations of ‘enlightened’ workers should exist is false.”¹⁹ It was upon the principle of the unitary organization that the KAUD (Communist Workers Union of Germany) was founded in 1931, regrouping the remnants of the various groups of the German Left.

¹⁸ Extracts provided in Bock, Document XIV.

¹⁹ Kool: p. 128.

Chapter 15

The March Action (1921)

The March Action was the last proletarian insurrection of the German revolution. Neither the Hamburg insurrection, a military operation of the KPD, nor the resistance to the French Army in the Ruhr in 1923, which united all classes, could be considered as proletarian insurrections. The failure of the "March Action" marked the beginning of the decomposition of the communist left.

The Crisis of 1921

Between the defeat of the Red Army of the Ruhr and the March Action of 1921, proletarians launched a series of dispersed local actions, which were simultaneously defensive and offensive, comparable to those which had previously broken out in central Germany and Saxony, although on a different scale, but were unable to unite their forces.¹ The March Action first developed in the region of Halle and Mansfeld, which had remained as the last revolutionary stronghold after the crushing of the Ruhr. The copper mines of Mansfeld and the ultramodern chemical works at Leuna formed the backbone of the Action. The workers there had kept the arms they had seized in 1918. Saxony, which had attracted new workers to its lignite and chemical industries, was still the stronghold of the USPD, despite the inroads made by the VKPD, which had its most solid district there: in reality, it merely carried on the tradition of the USPD. The VKPD had 60,000 members in Saxony; in the February 1921 elections it won 200,000 votes, more than the SPD (80,000) and the rump USPD (75,000) combined. The 25,000 workers at Leuna were organized into military formations, and 2,000 of them belonged to the AAUD. It was undoubtedly one of the strongest districts of the KAPD-AAUD. The region had been subjected to the martial law of the Kapp Putsch in March 1920. Many weapons had remained hidden. A wave of theft spread in the factories. The workers demanded, above all, a reduction in working hours (in the Leuna works, for example) and the suppression of the private security forces in the factories, which were violently attacked.² Sooner or later the government would have to intervene to pacify the region. If the pre-existing autonomous defensive movement of the proletariat was the starting point for the March offensive, one must not ignore, on the other hand, an essential factor in the context within which the Action took place: the VKPD's change of orientation at the beginning of 1921, and the emergence of a leftist tendency in the Communist International.

The winter of 1920-1921 coincided with a social and political crisis in Russia as a result of the civil war. Important movements against Bolshevik power took place among the peasants (such as the Tambor revolt and the Makhnovist insurrection) and the remnants of the Russian proletariat (the civil war had almost annihilated industry and the workers who carried out the 1917 revolution). The most well-known strike occurred in Petrograd, and was urgently repressed by the State at the same time that the Kronstadt rebellion broke out. At a political level,

¹ *La question syndicale...*, p. 27.

² Cf. the map reproduced in *Ingress*, p. 136; cf. also *Die Märzkämpfe, 1921*, East Berlin, 1956

that is, within the party, this crisis was reflected in the appearance of the Workers Opposition.³ The crisis was overcome by the victory of the Leninists at the Tenth Congress and the defeat of the various rebel movements in March of 1921. Previously, throughout the whole period when the outcome of the crisis appeared uncertain, a tendency appeared within the International which was determined to “force” the course of events. It was this tendency which was represented by the Communist International’s delegation composed of B. Kun, Guralsky and Pogany, who were called *Turkestanis* by the KPD right wing. According to some (R. Fischer⁴), they were acting under the orders of Zinoviev, General Secretary of the Communist International. According to others (Flechtheim), they were controlled primarily by Radek, leading agent of the Communist International responsible for tactics to be followed in Germany, who was in close contact with the KPD’s new leadership. It appears that Lenin had little knowledge of the mission confided to B. Kun.⁵

The order for the “palace revolution” which was transmitted by the VKPD leadership to the leftists was inspired by the Communist International’s delegation, which had arrived in Berlin at the end of February. Levi, after having violently criticized the conceptions and methods of the *Turkestanis*, was excluded from the central committee. The virulent KAPD constituted a pole of repulsion or attraction (depending on the circumstances) for the VKPD. It was the latter pole which prevailed in March. The environment in the party was quite animated; an action had to be launched for the immediate seizure of power. When the first disturbances began, the VKPD immediately distributed a document inviting the proletarians to violently overthrow the government: the disturbances in central Germany were to be the point of departure for an insurrection throughout the *Reich*. This tactic was implemented *before* the government’s decision to occupy the Mansfeld region with police forces became known. Once the battles had begun, the central committee more or less openly issued a call for armed insurrection in the *Rote Fahne*.

The KAPD demonstrated its jubilation: “It is the proletariat itself which has spoken. The masses of the VKPD have taken action by following our watchword. They have compelled their leaders to do the same.” (*Communist Workers Daily*, organ of the Berlin district of the KAPD). A proclamation of the VKPD from March 18 declared: “All workers, ignore the law, and take up arms wherever they can be found.” With such slogans, the two parties worked together provisionally. The only current on the left which was reluctant to join in this opportunity to encourage an insurrectionary action was that of the AAUD sections which had broken with the KAPD (the Rühle tendency).

Max Hölz

The police units arriving from Berlin intervened in the Mansfeld region on the 19th. During that night the workers decided upon a general strike, scheduled for the 21st. On the 20th, meanwhile, an attack was carried out against the “Column of Victory” in Berlin by VKPD combat groups, with the indirect participation of Max Hölz.

³ Among other sources, cf. P. Avrich, *La tragédie de Kronstadt, 1921*, Seuil, 1975 (in English: *Kronstadt, 1921*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1970); and L. Schapiro: *Les bolcheviks et l’opposition*, Les Iles d’Or, 1957, pp. 186-187 and 246, et seq.

⁴ R. Fischer: *Stalin and German Communism*, Harvard University Press, 1948.

⁵ Kool: pp. 131 and 604.

Hölz, from a working class background and himself a worker, “had nothing to do with politics” before the revolution. Upon his return from the front after the war, where he had served as a volunteer, he found himself unemployed and, in his home town in Saxony, joined the movement. He first joined the USPD, and then, in 1919, he entered the KPD and became famous by organizing armed gangs which were very effective against the police, the Army and the *Freikorps*. The following is a description of one of Hölz’s units from an account written by a member of the KAPD:⁶ a motorized squad had between 60 and 200 men. A reconnaissance unit proceeded in advance, armed with machine guns or small arms; and then came the trucks with the heavy weaponry. Then came the commander in his own car “with the strongbox”, along with his “secretary of the treasury”. As a rearguard, another truck loaded with heavy guns followed behind. All of these vehicles were covered with red flags. Upon arriving in a town, supplies were requisitioned and post offices and banks looted. The general strike was proclaimed and largely paid for by the business owners. Butchers and bakers were compelled to sell their goods for 30% or 60% less than the normal prices. Any resistance was immediately and violently crushed. Such units were very active throughout Saxony after the Kapp Putsch; their activities led to a conflict between Hölz and the regional KPD leader, Brandler, who expelled Hölz from the party’s Chemnitz section. Hölz then joined the KAPD, and began to send a portion of the money from his expropriations to the KAPD leadership. Without conceding too much importance to the KAPD’s theories, he found it to be a flexible construct. While jealously guarding the independence of the armed groups under his leadership, he did not hesitate to collaborate with the KPD or with any other groups whenever he thought it would be useful.

He was very popular as a result of his tactic of retribution which consisted of “taking from the rich to give to the poor”. Quite often, workers who were in a weak position in their factory would attend one of his meetings. Hölz would then compel the business owners to pay a certain sum or face reprisals. Besides extortion and blackmail, his repertoire included freeing prisoners, the destruction of legal documents and archives, burning the mansions of the rich, etc. He was equally popular for constantly evading the police. In April 1919, a reward of 30,000 marks was offered for his capture. He would not be apprehended until after the March Action.⁷

The *Communist Workers Daily* of the KAPD expressed its unequivocal approval of the attack on the Column of Victory. On the 22nd and 23rd, identical attacks were carried out, supervised and organized by, and under the direct control of Hölz and the combat groups of the KPD and the KAPD, in Falkenstein, Dresden, Freiburg, Leipzig, Plauen, etc., against courthouses and police stations. These organizations then resumed their usual activities. But in all of these cities, the workers did not stir. The only regions where “solidarity” was demonstrated were the Ruhr, Berlin and Hamburg. Leaving Berlin, where he had lived in hiding since the spring of 1920, Hölz arrived in Saxony. Together with the radicalization of the strikes, the intervention of armed groups like those led by Hölz constituted the originality of this March Action which owed little to the initiative or the control of the two communist parties. The emissaries of both parties proved incapable of influencing the course of events.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 312. Cf. also his biography in Angress, pp. 146-147.

⁷ Hölz published an autobiography in 1930: *From White Cross to Red Flag*, London and Toronto. Angress establishes a parallel between Hölz’s ideas and the peasant revolts of the Middle Ages.

Chronology of Events.

Opposition Develops between the Local Organizations and the Leaderships of the KPD and the KAPD

When the strike was called in the Mansfeld region, the public service employees of Halle spontaneously went on strike in solidarity. In the Leuna works, on the 21st, the workers deposed the old workers council and named an action committee composed of two members of the KPD and two members of the KAPD, presided over by the KAPD's Utzelmann. They demanded the withdrawal of the police and declared they would go on strike if the *Schupos* (*Reich* security police) came anywhere near their factory, which they did on the 23rd. The vast majority of the workers of Leuna, despite its reputation as a stronghold of the left, did not want to go beyond the strike, assessing that the situation in that region was not favorable for an insurrection. This point of view was shared by the KAPD members in the Leuna factory who, isolated from their Berlin central committee, were unaware that the latter had supported the KPD's insurrectionary directives. Utzelmann would later declare that he could not understand why the KAPD *Zentrale* had not taken into account the fact that the VKPD had acted in conformity with Russian interests.⁸ The Leuna workers condemned Hölz's shenanigans and turned their backs on him when the battle came to an end. Nonetheless, it seems that during the strike they had devoted their time to the construction of an armored train.⁹ The Leuna works "had declared its opposition to the armed struggle, correctly considering it to be premature, but had participated anyway, just like the Berlin Spartacists in January 1919"¹⁰. The police occupied the factory on the 29th, killing 34 workers and taking 1,500 prisoners. Politically, the strike in the factory was dominated by disputes between the two communist parties.

The reaction of the workers was initially timid, and the strikes would only develop later, after March 22nd. The workers fighting against those who did not heed the strike call armed themselves and attacked the police.¹¹ Hölz summoned the workers to arm themselves in various cities. The first skirmishes took place in Eisleben on the 23rd: the police intervened and proceeded to make some arrests. Hölz established his command post in this region, known for its copper mines. His assault detachments were composed of 2,500 workers. Nor was he the only one to act in this fashion. The region had a great number of battle units with notorious or anonymous leaders. Plättner, for example, played at least as important a role as Hölz in the March battles, without trying to garner any publicity for his own account.¹² These people were the only real participants in the insurrection. The KPD and the KAPD only issued the directives, without having any real influence on the course of events once the fighting had started.

Eberlein, in charge of the KPD combat groups, also arrived in Halle on the 22nd. He tried to convince the commando groups of the region to carry out dynamite attacks, fake kidnappings of well-known communist leaders and other measures of the same kind to "increase the level of combativity among the masses"¹³. Garnering no support at all, he experienced complete

⁸ Bock: p. 303.

⁹ According to Badia: p. 178.

¹⁰ *La question syndicale...*, p. 29.

¹¹ Angress: p. 144.

¹² Bock: p. 302.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

failure: the same thing happened to B. Kun, who accompanied him, as well as to Rasch and Jung, who were sent by the KAPD central committee to the scene of the events.

“The leadership was in the hands of proletarian rebels who had lived for a long time under conditions of illegality and who, although not obeying the directives of the party’s Berlin central committee, are either members of the KPD or sympathize with it.”¹⁴

Hölz’s army dominated the region for ten days, but only fought particular aspects of capital without changing anything essential. It was primarily an armed gang¹⁵ which executed certain operations. The proletarians constituted themselves as a military force but would not change anything. Their violence remained without an objective, and destroyed the visible enemy, but not the enemy’s roots. It was a *negative* movement. Occupied by close to 2,000 workers, the industrial complex of Leuna was not directly utilized for revolutionary ends. One part of the proletarians remained outside of the workplace and fought without the *social* weapon which, for the proletariat, is production. The other part shut itself up within the factory. There was neither any coordination between these two groups, nor was there any concentrated employment of military force against the State. The movement ran out of steam due to both its purely *military* generalized offensive, and because it had ensconced itself *at the point of production*. Hölz robbed money, but he did not abolish it.

The rest of Germany remained calm. In Hamburg, on the 23rd, a large rally of unemployed workers and a demonstration headed for the port ended in a confrontation between strikers and non-strikers. Organized by the AAU, the workers faced off with the police in the city: several were killed. It was the only city where proletarians attempted an uprising. After the 24th, martial law was imposed in Saxony. On the same date, the KPD central committee (together with the KAPD) called for an unlimited general strike throughout Germany (only two days before Easter Sunday). According to the KPD there were one million workers on strike (Hamburg, the Ruhr, Berlin and central Germany). The number of strikers was actually somewhere between 200,000 and 300,000, with insurrectionary tendencies in Berlin and the Ruhr. Approximately 120,000 workers heeded the strike call in central Germany. In general, the strikers were primarily workers who were organized in *unionen* affiliated with the FAUD and the AAUD.¹⁶

“The little coordination which existed during the March Action was the work of the *Unionen* (Hamburg and the Ruhr) and of the AAUD and KAPD in the Leuna works, their stronghold, as well as of M. Hölz’s group.”¹⁷

Hölz wanted to link up with the Leuna works, but this proved to be impossible. On the 27th, he distributed 50 marks to each member of his armed commandos. They went towards Halle, but his troops were surrounded and forced to disperse. He took part in his last battle on April 1. Leuna had already fallen. On the 31st, the KPD central committee cancelled its general directives. The last battles took place on the 1st of April.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 301.

¹⁵ Compare with Makhno: cf. *Communisme et “question russe”*, pp. 88-95.

¹⁶ *Comfort*: Chapter VI.

¹⁷ *La question syndicale...*, pp. 28 and 30.

The “Lessons of the March Action”

1. *The VKPD*

Over the course of the next two months, the VKPD, always under the influence of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, executed another about-face and slowly abandoned the “offensive” in favor of legal activity. The Third Congress of the Communist International (July 1921) took place during the period of this about-face, at a moment when its main self-criticism was largely directed against the lack of technical “preparation”, and not against the insurrectionary directive itself. Shortly afterwards, the Action was characterized as a putsch, that is, Levi’s critique was resurrected, after Levi, of course, had been excluded. The reason for his expulsion was that he had made his opposition public and had insulted B. Kun’s delegation. But Lenin declared that Levi was *basically* correct.¹⁸

The KPD’s membership fell to 180,000 and later rose again to over 200,000 in 1922. Radek was ordered to be more attentive to the affairs of the KPD. The KPD elected a new leadership and confined itself to the legal terrain, to agreements between parties and the formation of coalition governments. As 1923 approached, the Eighth Congress declared its support for “workers governments”, that is, coalitions of the KPD and the SPD at the regional level. But a new leftist tendency was born at this Congress, led by A. Maslow and R. Fischer, representing the Frankfurt, Hamburg, Berlin and Ruhr districts. It wanted to create new red trade unions and to boycott the official trade unions and was opposed to the creation of “workers governments”. During this period, the Left, as typified by the KAPD, AAUD and AAUD-E, had almost ceased to exist (cf. Appendix I).

The leftist and rightist tendencies went to plead their cases to Moscow, where the rightist theses from the beginning of 1923 were condemned and an intensification of the struggle for power was advocated. The KPD, together with the SPD, formed “revolutionary hundreds” and established a central military committee in June of 1923. In October, workers governments were formed in Saxony and Thuringia: this implied that the SPD and KPD together had the parliamentary majority in these two states. By the end of the month, these “governments” would be overthrown by the *Reich* and its Army. That same year, the occupation of the Ruhr by the French army would allow Radek and the KPD to turn to national bolshevism, which had been so mercilessly denounced when it was supported by left communists. The KPD would even hold meetings with the Nazis. During one of these meetings, a Nazi orator rendered homage to the communists, but ironically advised them to rid themselves of the Jews who surrounded them, and especially of... Radek.¹⁹ The KPD soon renounced these joint meetings. But, years later, it would broadcast the slogan of the “peoples’ revolution” (*Volksrevolution*) and would once again collaborate with the NSDAP. In 1923, the “Group of German Communist Army Officers”, linked to the KPD, claimed to support O. Spengler, author of *The Decline of the West*, who advocated a sort of nationalistic socialism. This group even defined the council system as “a Prussian notion based on concepts of an elite, solidarity and mutual responsibility”.²⁰ In the following year, R. Fischer would briefly assume the leadership of the KPD, with the support of the Communist International, largely as a result of her support for Zinoviev-Stalin against Trotsky: during this same period, Gramsci was supported by the Communist

¹⁸ Kool: p. 132; and *Invariance*, n.d., No. 7, p. 82.

¹⁹ Carr: *The Interregnum 1923-24*, Pelican, 1969, Chapter 7.

²⁰ Angress: pp. 242-243.

International against Bordiga, because he, too, took Stalin's side.²¹ The factional struggles within the KPD during the period preceding the crisis of 1929 were more than just the expression of micro-bureaucratic confrontations. They were the translation onto the political plane (that is, the plane of power) of the vain attempt of the German proletarians to react after their defeat. All their efforts during this phase of regression only strengthened one bureaucratic group to the detriment of the others.

The history of the German Communist Party would be a continuous oscillation between the ultra-right and the ultra-left, characterized by successive waves of exclusions, and influenced by the vicissitudes of the policies of the Russian government. The debates and decrees of the Communist International, after the 1921 March Action, certainly offer the most overwhelming illustration of its incoherence, which even approached absurdity. Levi was excluded for violating party discipline, although the Communist International would subsequently basically agree with his position. Zetkin, who agreed with Levi, was not excluded, but, to the contrary, was granted (provisionally, until the arrival of R. Fischer) leadership of the party. The defeat of the March Action helped to condemn the KAPD, judged to be a dangerous proponent of the offensive at any cost, while the KPD had acted with at least as much adventurism (fake kidnappings and other "tricks" to prod the masses to rebellion). These flagrant contradictions are explained, in equal proportions, by the will of the Communist International, which was focused on "filling up" its organization in Germany (the VKPD), and by the party's own incompetence. This mess aptly marks the irreparable end of an epoch.

The continuation of "Levism" without Levi also led to the fall of the VKPD's first left-wing faction: the former *Bremerlinke* lost all of its influence in the leadership. It would not reappear until the end of the 1920s as an opposition, which would then be called "rightist": it would support Bukharin and Brandler-Thalheimer, advocates of the "Leninist united front" against the supposedly fashionable leftism of the Stalinist "class against class" tactic. Frölich would be excluded in 1928 as a "rightist". "The *Bremerlinke* appeared as the first and disappeared as the last expression of Leninism in Germany."²² The Bremen radicals "never stopped fleeing" from their connections with the German Left, thereby depriving themselves of the possibility of enriching their "Leninism" with the proletarian experience with which the other radical groups formed between 1914 and 1919 were more familiar. They bravely fought to create a Leninism for German use, but ended up isolating themselves from the proletariat.

To make 1923 the pivotal date for both Russia and the Communist International is equivalent to privileging the history of "political events" to the detriment of the social movement and the ruptures which separate historical phases.²³

The same holds true for starting with the evolution of the tendencies in the Russian Communist Party in order to write the history of Russia (cf. the Trotsky-Stalin conflict). In regard to Germany this would correspond to writing the history of the communist movement based on the evolution of the KPD: 1923 marking the great putschist shock; the rupture would be situated in 1923.

²¹ *Les Temps Modernes*, February 1975, "Gramsci et Bordiga face au Comintern"; R. Paris's introduction to Gramsci's *Œuvres politiques*, Gallimard, Vol. I, 1974.

²² *La question syndicale...*, p. 29.

²³ This is the case with Broué, as well as Gruber, p. 409. This error can also be found in *Communisme et "question russe"*, pp. 123-126.

2. *The KAPD and Rühle's AAUD-E*

Gorter and other leaders of the KAPD published *The Path of Dr. Levi, the Path of the VKPD*, whose putschism they denounced:²⁴ they blamed the failure of March on the tactics followed by the rightist KPD leadership since 1919. Reversing its policy in such a brutal fashion, going suddenly from the legal struggle to the revolutionary struggle, the VKPD had assumed a putschist attitude. But the March Action, as a real movement of the proletariat in central Germany, was not merely a putsch: it was even “the first conscious offensive action of the German proletarians”.²⁵ The KAPD would unconditionally defend the March Action at the Third World Congress.

The pamphlet briefly mentioned “the pressure exercised by certain authoritarian influences” on the VKPD prior to March, but it was Rühle’s tendency which more fully developed this theme. As Rühle wrote: “The workers must know that the Action in central Germany was an act of madness and a crime, for which the VKPD is entirely responsible.” The VKPD had acted without taking account of the situation, which was by no means favorable for an uprising. But this was not just a case of the VKPD behaving in an absurd manner: it was a case of “the totally subordinate execution of a misunderstood order which ‘came from above’”. “The Bolshevik power has used the German revolution until its internal situation was totally stabilized.”²⁶ At that moment, that is, after the 18th, when Kronstadt had been recaptured, it was too late to call off the Action.

As for Hölz, captured a few days after the end of the fighting, he was condemned to life in prison. At first, his defense was organized by the communist left and then, once the latter had disappeared, it passed into the hands of “leftist personalities” on a committee created by the KPD, which made Hölz into a legendary figure. Hölz himself contributed to his own cult. The post offices in the city where he was imprisoned were inundated with packages and letters addressed to him from all over Germany. He was ultimately released. The KPD displayed him for a while as a leading personality, but later, when he became too troublesome, the party sent him to Moscow, where he died during the 1930s, undoubtedly eliminated by the GPU. The *Workers Communist Newspaper* of the KAPD celebrated his achievements in the following passage: “Max Hölz has shown us how to annihilate the bourgeoisie. Max Hölz was our example! Our symbol! Our leader!” Thus has Max Hölz, and above all his cult, become a rather typical product of the immaturity of the proletariat.

²⁴ *Der Weg des Dr. Levi, der Weg der VKPD*, published by the KAPD, 1921, pp. 10-12.

²⁵ Kool: p. 133.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Chapter 16

The German Left and the Third International

German-Soviet Relations: 1918-1922

The “*cordon sanitaire*” was an attempt to isolate Russia and close off Germany with the help of the countries which had recently been granted their independence in the name of the right of national self-determination: Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, the Baltic nations, and Finland. The Baltic nations, which had been part of Russia until 1914, were occupied by the Germans in 1918. They then fought against the occupiers and against the revolution, driving out the large landowners of German (Estonia and Latvia) and Polish (Lithuania) origin. But these were not real “bourgeois revolutions”. None of these countries could be a viable national state in the classical sense of the term.¹ In all of these States, Capital was too weak to assure cohesion: all of them incorporated, for good or for ill, considerable minorities, who were inevitably the victims of discrimination. The native population comprised no more than 73% of the population of Latvia, 80% in Lithuania, 69% in Poland, and 76% in Romania. In two countries it comprised less than half the total population: 46% in Czechoslovakia (Czechs) and in Yugoslavia (Serbs). Ethnic hostilities would bury the class struggle a little deeper under regional, ethnic and national ideas. From their origins these “nation states” were not really nation states at all, but creations of Anglo-American imperialism. In his critique of the Dutch Communist Party, Gorter emphasized this carving up of Europe which would render it impotent and favor America, as well as the counterrevolutionary impact of the movements for national liberation in Austria-Hungary and Russia. Although “Leninist” on the right of self-determination, Bordiga would also define the two world wars as American aggression against Europe.² The German Left would be one of the first currents to recognize the return of Russia as a reactionary buttress alongside the USA, which together would assume the role played by England in the 19th century.³

Shortly after his release from prison at the end of 1919, Radek defined “the problem of Russia’s foreign policy” as follows: “reaching a *modus vivendi* with the capitalist states.”⁴ The influence of state foreign policy on Bolshevism did not yet have the character it would later assume after 1921; its ambiguity still allowed for revolutionary positions. But its impact was all the greater insofar as the left did not immediately take it into account. Russia, instead of uniting with the revolutionary West, would respond by promoting the worst tactics of the western tradition:

¹ Concerning the “bourgeois revolutions” of the 20th century, cf. the articles in *Bilan*, a journal of the Italian communist left, on the war in Spain, published in 1976, UGE (10-18). Cf. also various articles by Lukàcs in *Kommunismus*.

² *Battaglia Comunista*, No. 4, 1949.

³ Marx, Engels: *Military Writings*.

⁴ Carr: *German-Soviet Relations between the Two World Wars, 1919-1939*, Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1951, p. 23.

“Western culture has been fused with eastern culture to form a new, infinitely richer cultural content.”⁵

Broken on November 4, 1918, due to the expulsion of the Russian ambassador from Berlin, economic relations between Russia and Germany were resumed at the end of 1919.⁶ Throughout this period, Radek and other high-level soviet officials (Krasin, Minister of Foreign Trade; Kopp, Trade Attaché) held frequent meetings in Berlin and made some useful connections there. Radek undertook all of this work from his jail cell, while simultaneously busy Leninizing the Communist Party. Surprisingly, during this same period, the Communist International, far from having learned any lessons from what had happened in Germany, preferred to issue grandiloquent proclamations and to celebrate its martyrs.⁷ The Spartacist legend was soon born, whose martyrology would be used until about 1930.⁸

On May 6 a trade agreement was signed: this was two months after at least a fraction of the Communist International and perhaps of the Russian Communist Party had tried to steer events in Germany towards an insurrection. At the same time, Russia officially requested German military advisers.⁹ In April 1922, the Rapallo Treaty marked the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries, which initiated economic negotiations and agreed to consult one another whenever international economic issues arose for either country. The treaty was the source of fruitful exchanges for Germany, although it did not exploit all the possibilities the treaty offered: it fulfilled precisely the role of “safety valve”, as the KAPD delegates to the Third World Congress described it.¹⁰

Even though they knew very little about the contacts between the two countries, the KAPD nonetheless saw the crux of the matter: its declarations at the Third World Congress would prove to be totally justified. Krasin, for example, leader of a Russian trade mission which had arrived in England for negotiations in May-June 1920, declared that Russia was ready to renounce all propaganda and to cease meddling in British domestic affairs, if the English would reciprocate and reestablish economic relations with Russia.¹¹

Collaboration between the German Left and the Bolsheviks

Within the early KPD, prior to the exclusion of the Left, the two tendencies also clashed over the issue of the International: this was a continuation of the disagreement between the Left and the Center (and within the Center, with Spartacus) at Zimmerwald. The former were in favor of the immediate creation of an International based on the existing leftist groups, despite their weakness. The centrists and Spartacists thought that in order to set up an International, they would have to wait until conditions matured, judging that they were not yet mature enough; during the war the Spartacists had not yet abandoned the hope that the radicals might be able to reconquer the old International. This was why Eberlein spoke at the First Congress against the immediate founding of the International (cf. Chapter 11).

⁵ Rühle: *Brauner und roter Faschismus*, (1939), Hamburg, 1971. French translation, Spartakus, 1975.

⁶ Badia: pp. 117, 182-183.

⁷ The IC, No. 9, April 1920.

⁸ *Ibid.*, article by Pieck in No. 19, December 1921.

⁹ On the German-Russian military links, cf. Carr: pp. 56-94.

¹⁰ *La Gauche Allemande...*

¹¹ *Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy*, London, 1951, p. 191, quoted in Kool: p. 415.

The First Congress called for the seizure of power, to which all means of struggle were to be subordinated. “Revolutionary parliamentarism” was only mentioned as one means among others. As mentioned above, precise positions were not established in regard to the trade union question and the party’s organizational structure. This gave the Left the impression that it was worthy of the Communist International’s recommendation. It seemed normal to Gorter in 1919 that he should refer to the authority of the Communist International (and even to that of the KPD) in his text against the majority faction of the Dutch Communist Party. Indeed, since Gorter, Pannekoek, Roland-Holst and the ISD had collaborated with the Bolsheviks during the war (while the Spartacists had adopted a more subdued position), the founding Congress of the KAPD unanimously approved a resolution which stated that “the KAPD is unequivocally in the camp of the Third International” (April 1920). The KAPD would never again make such a sweeping declaration. Finally, the Left’s great theoretical text, *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*, written by Pannekoek at the end of 1919 (but not its postscript) as well as the texts and even the poems of Gorter, contain apologies for Bolshevik power.

But the Left brought upon itself a certain number of reprimands, which arose when the Russians (and above all, Lenin and Radek) judged that the revolutionary wave had receded. In prison, Radek established the basic framework for the future relations between the German and Russian *States* while simultaneously intervening on the side of the Levist faction at Heidelberg. Lenin, in his *Salute to the Italian, French and German Communists*¹² (October 1919), spoke of a “sickness of growth” in communism, as evidenced by the rejection of legal opportunities, the refusal to “participate in bourgeois parliament, in the reactionary trade unions or in the Scheidemann-style works councils”. This letter was reprinted in the Hamburg *Communist Workers Daily*, which did not see, or feigned not to see, that Lenin was supporting Levi. But Lenin defined the “disagreements among communists” as “disagreements which share the common basis of one essential communist foundation, solid as a rock: this foundation is that of the recognition of the proletarian revolution, of the struggle against bourgeois democratic illusions and the bourgeois democratic parliament, the recognition of the dictatorship of the proletariat and of the power of the soviets. Upon such a foundation, disagreements are nothing to fear.” Lenin compared such disagreements to the disputes which arose among the Bolsheviks in 1906 and 1910-1912. This sickness “will pass as the movement grows, and it will grow marvelously”.¹³ On October 28, 1919, Lenin wrote to the KPD central committee: “since you all agree on *what is essential*... I see unity as possible and necessary, just as the break with the Kautskyists is necessary.” On the same date he wrote to the “comrade workers” of the KPD opposition: “The disagreements concerning secondary questions, as I understand them, can disappear and will inevitably disappear.”¹⁴ One year later, he would say that it had been necessary to tolerate the Left for a while in order to absorb its best elements: now, we will not give them any publicity, we shall not speak of them any more.¹⁵

At the beginning of 1920, the Amsterdam Bureau was dissolved by means of a simple telephone call from Moscow (cf. Chapter 11).¹⁶ Other warnings followed, culminating in the publication of *Infantile Disorder*, written in April 1920, published in a Russian edition in June and in German translation in July. The constant references in that pamphlet to the Russian experi-

¹² Lenin: *Oeuvres*, Vol. 30, Ed. Sociales, 1964, pp. 49-50, 52.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁵ Vol. 32, pp. 545-556.

¹⁶ Bock: p. 252.

ence (set out at the beginning of the work) were deceitful. The European communists were supposed to be inspired by the Russians when the latter found it useful, but they should not imitate the Russians when the latter did not want them to do so. Specific conditions in England were invoked to encourage the English Communist Party's affiliation with the English *Labour Party*, which amounted to demanding that a party which was a member of the Third International must affiliate with the Second International. But he later invoked Bolshevik "discipline" to shame his opponents. Lenin attacked the Left's two weakest points, without ever trying to understand the social movement that its texts were trying to express: the oppositions, Party/Class and Masses/Leaders, for example. Lenin dismantled these constructions in an almost clinical manner, ignoring what these oppositions (badly and partially) expressed. He had undertaken a *textual* critique, an analysis of phrases meticulously selected from the declarations of the Left. Lenin feared that the break with the Left (in which he included both the Italian as well as the German Left) "would become an international phenomenon... At all events, a split is better than confusion... Let the Lefts put themselves to a practical test..."¹⁷ In reality, Reichenbach's testimony, a KAPD delegate to the Executive Committee of the Communist International,¹⁸ and especially all of Lenin's works and his practice throughout this era, show that Lenin conceded very little of his time to international questions compared to Russian domestic policy, which absorbed all the Bolsheviks' energies. The Russians had a superficial knowledge of the western movement. Above all, they wanted to build a *large* movement in Europe.

Rühle and the Conflict within the KAPD

The KAPD mistrusted the organizational and tactical centralization of the revolutionary movement, fearing that, in the conditions of that time, the inevitable domination of the Russians would cause the requirements of the struggle in the West to be forgotten. The preference for autonomy (referred to as anarchistic), although real in some (Rühle), played a lesser role at that time than the preoccupation with preserving the specificity of the struggles in the highly developed countries. It is in this sense that one must understand the KAPD's assertion: "The tactic of the Communist International is nothing but the synthesis of the tactics of the different parties, each of which acts in its own country; there is not, nor can there be, a specific tactic of the International."¹⁹

The KAPD Congress sent a delegation composed of Jan Appel and Franz Jung to Moscow in order to get a clear idea of the position of the Executive Committee and to present the theses of the KAPD. It was a hectic journey, given the situation of illegality in which most KAPD members lived, and because of the absence of diplomatic relations between Russia and Germany: Jung and Appel had to board ship in secret and, once at sea, hijacked the ship to Murmansk. When they arrived in Moscow in early May, Lenin was just then proofing the manuscript of *Infantile Disorder* and he read them a few passages.

When the Second World Congress was announced for July, the KAPD, without any news from the first delegation, sent Rühle to Moscow at the end of May. His journey was also difficult. The Executive Committee of the Communist International issued an "open letter" (June 2) to the members of the KAPD in which all ambiguity was dispelled: the Executive Committee was totally on the side of the KPD. Once again, the communists faced a familiar problem: the

¹⁷ *Oeuvres*, Vol. 31, Ed. Sociales, 1961, Appendix to *La Maladie...*

¹⁸ *Survey*, October 1964.

¹⁹ KAZ, No. 64, June 26, 1920.

KAPD had no knowledge of this letter until the Second Congress had already begun. After a journey of several weeks, Rühle arrived in Moscow and became convinced that the “western” revolutionary movement had nothing in common with the “ultra-centralist” system which reigned in Russia.

After a brief discussion of his arrival in Russia, Rühle’s *Report from Moscow*²⁰ criticized the position of the Jung-Appel delegation: “They did not have what it takes to confront the diplomacy and superior political savvy of the Moscow Executive. On questions of importance to the Party, they have succumbed to the influence to which they were subjected, and *have made concessions* for which I can in no way be held responsible – this was obvious to me at first sight. On some points they have frankly abandoned the point of view which the KAPD considered essential to defend. More serious still: they have *promised in writing* to intervene in favor of the exclusion of comrades Laufenberg, Wolffheim and Rühle...”

Rühle later described his first interview with Radek, which was occasionally “very violent”. “Every one of Radek’s phrases was a phrase from the *Rote Fahne*. Each argument, an argument of Spartacus. Radek is, properly speaking, the grand master of the KPD. Dr. Levi and Heckert are his tame parrots. They have no opinions of their own and they are paid by Moscow.”

“I tried to get Radek to give me the open letter addressed to the KAPD. He promised he would give it to me, but he did not abide by his word. I reminded him about this again, several times, but he did not give me the letter. When I found out later that our two comrades who had led the negotiations had not known about the open letter until the last moment before their departure, Radek’s behavior became clear to me from a psychological point of view. He, the worst of tricksters, the most unscrupulous, at least felt a twinge of shame at the prospect of revealing the perfidious lies and shameless insults which filled the open letter, although he was afraid to have a face-to-face conversation with one of the injured and calumniated parties.”

“The methods which I have seen employed in Moscow have filled me with the most profound repugnance. Everywhere, back-door maneuvers calculated with the most extreme exaggeration to dissimulate with overblown revolutionary appearances an opportunist background. I would have preferred to get up and leave. But I decided to wait until the arrival of the second delegation, comrade Merges from Braunschweig...”

“To begin, I took a tour of Moscow, usually without official guides, in order to see things which I was not scheduled to visit.” Later, Rühle made a journey to central Russia: “Many impressions, more sad ones than pleasant ones. Russia suffers in every part and from every evil. How could it be otherwise? I could relate many facts, but the examples set by Crispian and Dittmann do not tempt me to imitate them. Who, after all, would benefit? Only the *adversaries* of communism. But all of these defects and all of these inconveniences do not constitute *evidence against communism*. Ultimately, they constitute evidence against the methods and tactics employed by Russia to realize communism. On this point, of course, it is necessary to make ourselves distinctly understood by our Russian comrades.”

Rühle attacked the concept of centralism so prevalent among the Russians, which they had raised to the level of a “hypercentralism”. But “it is the revolution which has compelled them to act in this way. These men, the German representatives of the party organization, had their precious audience, when they became indignant and crossed themselves upon being faced by the dictatorial and terrorist aspects of Russia. If they had been in the position of the Soviet government, they would have acted in *exactly the same way* (...) What appears in Russia as a caricature is the consequence of a faulty, historically-superseded system. Centralism is the prin-

²⁰ *Der Kommunist*, Dresden, No. 37, September 1920, quoted in Kool, p. 123. The rest of the report is in No. 38, which was missing from the IISH’s files in Amsterdam.

ciple of organization proper to the *capitalist-bourgeois* era. Following this principle, one can construct the *Bourgeois State and the capitalist economy*. These must be dealt with by the council system. In Russia, however, the councils are nothing but shadows. A tentacle of the bureaucracy of the party dictatorship. But by relying on the bureaucracy Russia arrives at a caricature of communism, economically and politically; a communism of a barbarous State, sterile and unendurable.”

“Why have the Russian comrades made this error? Because they are prisoners of the belief in the *party*. Because they see the party as the means to bring about the revolution and the construction of socialism. The party, however, as a form of organization, is the incarnation of the centralist principle. This is *the source of their error...*”

“For the KAPD unlike Moscow the revolution *is not* a party matter, the party is not an authoritarian, top-down organization, the leader is not a military commander, the masses are not an army condemned to passive discipline, the dictatorship is not the despotism of a clique of leaders, communism is not used as a springboard for a new soviet bourgeoisie. For the KAPD, the revolution is an affair which concerns the proletarian class in its entirety; within this class is the party, which is only the vanguard, most mature and most determined. The masses must raise themselves to the level of the political maturity of this vanguard, but the KAPD does not expect this result to be obtained under the tutelage of leaders, discipline and regimentation. On the contrary: with an advanced proletariat, like the German proletariat, these methods obtain precisely the *opposite* result. Such methods stifle initiative, paralyze revolutionary activity, short-circuit the power of persuasion, and diminish the sense of responsibility. For the KAPD, it is a matter of giving free rein to the initiative of the masses, of freeing them from authority, of developing their self-consciousness, of nurturing their autonomy and thus increasing their participation in the revolution...”

“Russia is not Germany, Russian politics is not German politics, and the Russian revolution is not the German revolution. *This is why the tactics of the Russian revolution cannot be applied to the German revolution*. Lenin could prove a hundred times that the tactics of the Bolsheviks were brilliantly illustrated in the Russian revolution this would not make them, by any means, tactics suitable for the German revolution. We must rise up with determination against any attempt to impose these tactics upon us.”

“Nonetheless, Moscow has made this terrorist attempt. It wants to make its principle into the principle of the world revolution. The KPD is its agent. It works under Russian orders and according to the Russian plan. It is the phonograph of Moscow. Since it does not want to play this eunuch’s role, but has its own opinion, the KAPD is the object of a deadly hatred. Just read the insults, the calumnies and the poisonous insinuations with which we are fought without any concern for the revolutionary situation in which we find ourselves, without any consideration for the impact which these evil practices could have among our bourgeois adversaries. Dr. Levi and Heckert owe us for all the filth which Radek and Zinoviev put into their hands. These scoundrels are paid to do this. But, despite everything, the KAPD would not get down on its knees; it was necessary that the Congress of the Third International should decree that it must yield to Moscow’s orders. Everything was magnificently prepared. The guillotine was ready. Radek, with a self-satisfied air, examined the blade’s edge. The supreme tribunal had already been seated. It would be a grand spectacle. This was how the Executive envisioned things would proceed. Too beautiful for reality.”

“... The dictatorship of the Bolsheviks is the dictatorship of 5% of a class over the other classes and over the other 95% of its own class...” The KAPD must not join the Communist International, “an association which accepts people who assume the responsibility for the terror exercised by a party over the Russian people.” And he would go even further in the *Communist*

Workers Daily of Berlin (No. 146, November 1920): “The Russian workers are even more enslaved, oppressed and exploited than the German workers.”

In early July, Rühle was joined by another KAPD delegate, the former president of the socialist republic of Braunschweig from the end of 1918 to the beginning of 1919 August Merges. During the course of discussions with Lenin and Radek, they were made aware of the 21 Conditions proposed by the Executive Committee and upon which the Congress was to vote. Radek guaranteed that if they accepted the resolutions of the Congress, including the 21 Conditions, the KAPD’s admission into the Communist International would pose no problem (since the result was known in advance). Rühle and Merges returned to Germany even before the Congress began. Levi, who had protested against the KAPD’s “over-representation”, since the KAPD had been granted a deliberative vote while the USPD and SFIO left wings had only consultative votes, was outvoted 25 to 5. But Rühle’s departure put an end to this dispute.

Upon Rühle’s return to Germany, the KAPD was divided: Rühle, *Die Aktion* and the East Saxony and Hamburg districts, versus Berlin and the party majority who described Rühle’s conduct as a “grave error”. But the Second Congress of the KAPD (August) did not directly address the issue of resuming relations with the Communist International. It reacted violently against the “Open Letter” of the Executive Committee ordering the KAPD to merge with the KPD, and also against the Executive Committee’s plan to “meddle in the internal affairs of other parties”. The KAPD, in this connection, invoked a principle which it had by no means respected itself, since it called for solidarity between the KAPD and the Executive Committee against the KPD.

Instead of admitting with Rühle that there was no common ground at all between the Left and the Communist International, the KAPD majority believed that further discussion was possible. It was from this perspective that Gorter wrote his *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin* in the summer of 1920, in response to *Infantile Disorder*. He wanted to convince Lenin that the KAPD’s positions were correct for Western Europe, and to lead him to admit, at the same time, the falsehood of certain arguments in *Infantile Disorder*, and to rectify his information about the Left. Like the majority of his party, Gorter did not see that the Communist International’s attitude towards the KAPD was based upon the International’s intention of “recovering its best elements”. Lenin wrote in *Infantile Disorder* that the KAPD had “the advantage of knowing how to carry out propaganda among the masses better than the other parties”. Once again, the Left wasted its time by allowing itself to be deceived by politicians. During a session of the KAPD Central Committee which took place between October 30th and 31st, 1920, Rühle was excluded, and the decision was made to send a third delegation to Moscow.

The Third Congress and the Split

The KAPD delegation to the Third World Congress was composed of Gorter, Schröder and Rasch (Schröder was the political leader of the KAPD, while Gorter was its principle theoretician). Its objective was to allow the KAPD to at least get a foothold within the Communist International in order to create a revolutionary opposition within it.

The delegation attended various sessions of the Executive Committee²¹. Gorter expounded his theses on November 24. Trotsky answered him in a speech which contained the essential points of the best counter-arguments (although of a partial nature), which would later be reap-

²¹ The Central Committee included: 1) The delegates of the KAPD districts (one per district); 2) The current affairs committee, elected by the Congress.

propriated by the Italian Left in its critique of the German Left.²² He reproached Gorter for attempting to reduce revolutionary problems to “an organizational modification”. He accused Gorter of wanting a small *propagandist* party rather than a party *organization* of the whole class. It was possible, Trotsky said, that the experience of the Dutch SDP had influenced more than just the size of the KAPD. It was false, he said, to maintain that the primary goal was to transform the consciousness of the workers. Trotsky, like Bordiga after him, compared this illusion (which is only a partial depiction of the German Left’s position) to the nationalists of the 18th century and their *Aufklärung*. But the reform of consciousness was a characteristic feature of the era. This amounted to a distorted dialogue, in which it was easy for Trotsky to refer to truths by avoiding the questions which were effectively posed, but poorly-expressed by the actions of the German Left: their insufficient expression was the theoretical reflection of the weakness and contradictions of the practical conduct of the proletariat.

Trotsky was correct, of course, to recall that “the most important source of the revolution is still necessity”, and to situate the “degree of education” of the masses in its proper place. But educationalism did not yet characterize the German Left as it would later.²³ Gorter did not consider consciousness to be something which comes *before* action, as it does in the Kautskyist view, in which the proletariat could not become conscious except after having been inoculated by socialist ideas. In its practice, the Left, despite certain imprecise formulas, which are often produced by any revolutionary tendency, considered that clarification must be attained through *action* and not pedagogy. The Communist International, Lenin, and later the Italian Left, chose to attack only the weakest points of the German Left by focusing on its idealist formulations. In his *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*, Gorter noted how Lenin, instead of attacking positions which had been “officially adopted, often attacks the ‘private’ declarations of the KAPD. The same holds true for his charge of organizational ‘fetishism’”:

“The German Left, throughout its first years, demonstrated that it possessed a sufficiently healthy instinct by not theorizing too much about the form of the *unionen*, but only about their content, thus leaving the possibilities open to the future revolutionary movement... one must add, however, that, with respect to the ‘economic’ analyses of the *unionen*, there were (particularly in the AAU-E) councilist idealizations concerning the organizational bases of the *unionen*...”²⁴

Finally, on December 5, the KAPD was admitted into the Communist International “provisionally, as a sympathizing party with a voice but without a vote”. Its admission was provisional as a result of the fact that all the resolutions of the Executive Committee concerning the KAPD demanded that the KAPD should soon rejoin the KPD. The KAPD thus obtained a permanent seat on the Executive Committee of the Communist International, occupied first by Goldstein and later by Reichenbach. Upon their return to Germany, the members of the delegation were very optimistic and exaggerated their achievements. Nonetheless, the Executive Committee had contributed eight million marks for KAPD activities. The KAPD even moved to reopen contacts with the VKPD, which was then undergoing its first turn towards the left. At no time, however, did the KAPD cease to criticize the Bolsheviks and their German “fraternal party”. The Third Congress of the KAPD (February 1921) ratified the party’s membership in the Communist International. During this period, numerous communists did not deny the

²² The IC, No. 17, and *La Question Syndicale*... p. 48.

²³ Cf., for example, Pannekoek’s correspondence with *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and his 1946 text published in *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils*.

²⁴ *La Question Syndicale*..., p. 38.

revolutionary character of the German Left. In January 1921, Humbert-Droz wrote: “The KAPD constitutes a reaction, somewhat unfortunate in its manner of expression, but necessary for its revolutionary spirit, against the policies of the *Spartakusbund* and the USPD.”²⁵

But after the news of the rebellions of the Russian proletarians against the government, and the March Action, in which the VKPD demonstrated its inability to lead a revolutionary action, the KAPD rejected any idea of merging with the KPD.

After the Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party, Zinoviev announced that the next world congress “would emphasize” the question of the KAPD. For its part, the KAPD prepared a packet of materials to publicize its theses to the delegates. In May, it sent a delegation to see if it was possible to create a leftist fraction within the Communist International. The delegation was composed of Meyer (pseudonym: Bergmann), a metal worker from Leipzig who had directly participated in the struggles at Leuna during March, Jan Appel (pseudonym: Hempel), Sachs and Reichenbach.

The Left’s interventions at the Congress demonstrated that the major difference separating the Left from the Bolsheviks consisted in the fact that the Left based its tactics on the *power of capital*. Gorter’s *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin* had reproached Lenin for underestimating the power of capital’s unity in Europe and the USA: “The left... bases its tactics on this unified power.” Hempel highlighted the “economic division within the working class” produced by unemployment. In his critique of Trotsky’s report on the world economic situation, Sachs explained how the bourgeoisie used the economy as a *social weapon* against the proletariat, and how it strove to “maintain the economy as class struggle”. The Leninist position was totally different: on the eve of the Second Congress, Zinoviev was still asking about which road (revolutionary or non-revolutionary) the trade unions “would choose”.²⁶

Contrary to what Lenin had said in his speech on tactics, when he had “demagogically” aroused laughter among his audience, it was not a question of asking oneself whether it was possible to make the revolution by remaining in isolation.²⁷ The regrouping of a sufficient number of revolutionaries is necessary: but the revolutionaries cannot win over the majority of the workers *before* a revolutionary period. The Communist International was mistaken in its dispute with the Left when it insisted that revolutionaries must not hesitate to work in reactionary institutions (trade unions, parliaments, etc.), as if the Left was above all concerned with preserving its purity. This was, of course, a temptation for some, but was not the Left’s primary concern. The enemy would be strengthened by making people believe that the proletariat could use parliament, or that the trade union structure was acceptable.

The Communist International’s reaction to the March Action offers an excellent illustration of the International’s contradictions. The Third Congress resolved nothing, since it supported the Central Committee and was in favor of the strengthening of the KPD through its penetration of the masses. The final formula, rendering facile homage to the March Action, described as a “step forward”, elevated the unity of the party above all other considerations: rather than unity, however, a crisis ensued (cf. the preceding chapter). Contrary to what Trotsky said,²⁸ the presence of numerically powerful Communist Parties in Germany (400,000), France (120,000-130,000) and Czechoslovakia (350,000) was not synonymous with revolutionary progress. The flood of members into the Communist Parties was a sign of the crisis of

²⁵ *Le Phare*, January 1921.

²⁶ *La Question Syndicale...*, pp. 50-51.

²⁷ Vol. 32, pp. 498-508.

²⁸ *La Nouvelle étape*, pp. 85-86, 115.

traditional reformism, not of the emergence of a new revolutionary movement. Deceived by the trade unions and socialist parties from the pre-1914 period, numerous workers turned to “communism” and the Red Trade Union International merely in order to conduct consistent reformist struggles, nothing more. Trotsky misinterpreted this shift: “We now have real mass communist parties in Germany, France, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria... An enormous tidal wave!”

“With the nascent theorization of the ‘united front’, the Third International proved that it had the same view of the ‘workers movement’ as the Second International: there was a ‘workers movement’, which was now unfortunately divided, but which had fundamental common interests upon which a political-trade union collaboration could be based.”²⁹

One could add to the KAPD’s report on this Congress that its delegates were treated like intruders in an assembly where “serious politics” were being deliberated. All the other delegates were hostile towards them; even Radek and the other leading personalities of the Congress went out of their way to ridicule them. Lenin began one of his speeches with this phrase: “I, too, will allow myself to go on the offensive...” Radek and Trotsky were constantly comparing the KAPD delegates to the Mensheviks and the “two and a half International” (Martov, Kautsky, etc.). Bukharin’s intervention took the following form: “With your permission, we must tell these comrades: these goals, these ideas, totally unite the KAPD with its detested enemy, with Paul Levi. They rest upon the same theoretical basis as Levi. (Shouts from the KAPD delegates: and in practice?) If theory is one thing for them, and practice another, this is proof of their utterly confused spirit...”

Roland-Holst, in defense of the KAPD, declared that it would be useful for the Communist International to have an opposition, and that the leadership of the Congress did not respect the “idea of justice” in relation to the KAPD, by not granting it the same possibilities for expression as the other parties. She had previously presented a more powerful defense of the KAPD in the journal *Kommunismus* (cf. the next chapter),³⁰ “The organ of the International for Central and Eastern Europe”. Roland-Holst would leave the Communist Party in 1927; demanding freedom of expression for the opposition groups, and presciently announcing that: “Demagogic opportunism goes hand in hand with dogmatic rigidity”, which had been clear at least since 1921.³¹

The Workers Opposition and the KAPD

Quite surprisingly, for the KAPD, the Workers Opposition was the only tendency at the Congress which went beyond a simple, courteous critique of the Bolsheviks. Intervening in the debate on the tactics of the Russian Communist Party, Kollontai devoted most of her speech to a criticism of the New Economic Policy adopted by the Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party.³² The principle issue was to discover whether or not this decisive turn in economic policy would in fact serve to consolidate the foundations and accelerate the formation of a new system of communist production in Russia. Kollontai responded in the negative: “These days, the capitalist order exists throughout the world” and communism is the only system

²⁹ *La Question Syndicale*..., pp. 32-33.

³⁰ July-August 1921, pp. 207-209. Cf. *La Gauche Allemande*..., pp. 163-164.

³¹ *Bulletin Communiste*, October-November 1927.

³² Minutes, p. 776. Cf. also *L'Opposition ouvrière*, in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, No. 35. Compare with the *Manifeste du Groupe Ouvrier du PCR(B)* (1923), *Invariance*, No. 6, pp. 44-64.

which can guarantee the development of the forces of production. Insofar as it is a detour within capitalism, and risks a return to capitalism, the NEP must therefore be rejected, if only from the economic point of view.

Furthermore, from the point of view of class relations in Russia, the NEP was a massive concession to the Russian peasants who wanted capitalism. It leads to the total isolation of the working class from the other two “classes” (the quotation marks are ours): the peasants, and the bureaucracy which is progressively replacing the moribund bourgeoisie. This bureaucracy includes the State apparatus and the party machine, the managerial layers of the economy and the specialists. With the NEP, the working class loses its role as the driving force behind the development of Russian society. If, furthermore, the revolution does not break out soon enough, the concessions of the NEP will lead to the admission “that the communist principles upon which our policies have been based were not suitable for the realization of our aims. This would discourage the workers. These concessions destroy the confidence of the working class in communism and lead the peasantry to believe that all of our economic growth is due to its efforts. These concessions eliminate the confidence in the fact that the workers can achieve something by their own autonomous efforts, that they can realize the communist system in Russia.”

Kollontai advocated an alternative: “Utilize the creative power of the proletariat which has never really been used. Enemy forces prevent the expression of this power. Lenin says nothing about it in his speech about the means required to get the economy moving; he restricts himself to the technical aspect of the question (machines, electricity, foreign specialists, etc.). Nonetheless, the essential point is rooted in the fact that ‘our current system obstructs the initiative of the proletariat’.”

“If we should continue down the road of these concessions, I greatly fear that we might arrive at a situation in which, when the revolution breaks out in other countries, it will already be too late, that the conscious, just, proletarian nucleus here will have disappeared... It will be necessary, for the proletarians, to make a new revolution in Russia to realize communism.”

Understanding that, despite everything, the NEP was inevitable, she concluded as follows: “The only thing that can save us would be the existence within our party of a nucleus bound to our old tried and true principles, and that this nucleus should be present at the moment when this revolution breaks out among us. And should this decisive turn affect all soviet policies and create a non-communist, simply soviet republic out of our communist republic, this tried and true nucleus of communists should be there to pick up the flag of the revolution and help achieve the victory of communism throughout the world.”

Kollontai nurtured all the illusions of her epoch. Communism is conceived as the management of the economy by the workers and she does not take the critique of political economy into account. She makes consciousness autonomous in respect to the social process: an idea which consists in believing that a conscious revolutionary nucleus could “maintain its existence” through an indeterminate period of reaction. The initiative of the proletariat consequently also becomes an autonomous factor. The illusion is completed with reference to the aptitude of what was left of the Russian proletariat, which had launched a reformist struggle against the Bolsheviks and demanded (like the peasants) the NEP, even before the Tenth Congress had voted in favor of it. The striking Petrograd workers had asked for *free trade* between the city and the countryside.³³ Finally, she maintained the illusion concerning the ability of living labor (the proletariat), in general, to make up for the insufficient accumulation of dead (fixed) capital. This was, forty years in advance, the ideology of the Chinese “great leap forward”, which would

³³ Schapiro: p. 247.

be used by all those who want to increase the rate of exploitation of the proletariat: fascists, third world bureaucrats, etc., Kollontai not excepted. It is a distinct form of the “workers utopia”. Kristman, the theoretician of war communism, wrote in October 1919 in the *Autocracy of the Proletariat in the Factory*: “colossal forces lie dormant in the proletariat”.³⁴ What is of interest in the Workers Opposition and its contradiction derive from the fact that it was both the *workers* solution for Russian capitalist development and the expression of a defeated proletarian movement (primarily due to its international isolation, but also because of the destruction of the revolution from within, undermined by the rebirth of capitalist relations which had been reintroduced, against their will, by the Bolsheviks).

The KAPD delegates held interviews after the Congress opened with several leaders of the Workers Opposition. Kollontai gave them the manuscript of *The Workers Opposition*. According to Reichenbach, Kollontai later submitted to party discipline, and asked the KAPD after the Congress to return her manuscript: but a courier had already brought it to Berlin where the KAPD had immediately published it. In any event, when questioned about the matter the following year at the Fourth World Congress (November-December 1922), Kollontai preferred to remain silent.³⁵

In one of his interventions at the Third Congress, addressing the Russian question, Hempel repeated the gist of Kollontai’s arguments. Trotsky’s response was a masterpiece of bad faith and falsehood, evocative of his future assassins. The leaders of the ex-revolution became the leaders of the counterrevolution.

Some time later, a new letter from the Executive Committee of the Communist International, addressed “To the Members of the Communist Workers Party of Germany”, stated: “In the most important questions, your leaders’ arguments coincide with those of the declared counterrevolution and the Mensheviks.”³⁶ Zinoviev would later admit that he had fought the left when the right was much stronger.³⁷

The KAPD explained the Communist International’s position by reference to the pressure of the Russian party which had only carried out “a proletarian and communist revolution in appearance, or at least only a small part of it. It was, in reality, primarily a democratic and peasant revolution. It is this contradiction, which had remained concealed for some time, which has condemned the international tactics of the soviet republic and the communist party: dictatorship, blind obedience, hypercentralism, etc.”. The KAPD foresaw that the Russian State would carry ever more weight in the Communist International, for which “the revolution will be increasingly reduced to a mere word, with, perhaps, some putsches every now and then”.³⁸ In 1923, Gorter still interpreted Kronstadt as a peasant phenomenon.³⁹

This was a constantly recurring theme among many on the Left: Gorter, in mid-1918, had expounded the same theme in *The World Revolution*. Pannekoek, however, went much further:

³⁴ The IC, No. 6.

³⁵ Rosmer: pp. 229-230.

³⁶ *Bulletin du CEIC*, No. 1, October 8, 1921.

³⁷ The IC, No. 18, October 1921. Compare with the lessons drawn by Bordiga from the Third Congress: *PC*, No. 51-52, pp. 98-120.

³⁸ *Die Moskauer Internationale*, Berlin, Verlag der KAPD, 1921, quoted by Rosenberg: *Histoire du Bolchevisme*, Grasset, 1967, pp. 241-242.

³⁹ The *ICO*, p. 39. But another text of the KAI, *Le principe de l'antagonisme entre le gouvernement des soviets et le prolétariat* (*Invariance*, No. 7, pp. 94-101), considered Kronstadt from the perspective of the conflicts between “Trotsky and the sailors” who were opposed to the “dictatorship from above” and who were demanding “broader powers for their category”.

World Revolution and Communist Tactics suggests that the Russian revolution should not be viewed only in connection with Germany, but also with *Asia*: “Asia’s cause is humanity’s cause.” We have already seen how (cf. Chapter 3) he had entertained a global strategy in 1912. In 1920, he had come to connect the European workers movement with the “great revolt of Asia against western European capital”. His vision is broader than Gorter’s, who limited himself to theorizing the isolation of the European proletarians in relation to other geographical areas. For Pannekoek, a proletarian offensive in China or the Indies could lead to a reactivation of the movement in the “advanced” countries.

This comparison of Pannekoek and Gorter—who was closer to the activity of the revolutionary workers and consequently more of a prisoner of their deficiencies in Germany—gives rise to the thought that Gorter also theorized (like Lenin, but in the contrary sense) the limitations of the movement. Its disregard of the agrarian question demonstrated the determination and the strength of the German proletariat but it also showed that it had not begun a *communist revolution* in the relations of production. Kollontai and Gorter became the defenders of exclusively working class interests in a situation which increasingly appeared to be a revolutionary deadlock. Each saw the solution in a future revolution (even in Russia), one of whose preconditions would be the preservation of a revolutionary “nucleus”.

Chapter 17

The “International Communist Left”

Just as the Commune was the “daughter” (Engels) of the IWA, the German revolution was the daughter of an International Left which was never able to provide itself with a united organization, but whose greatest currents were the German Left, which in its struggle even dared to uphold the programmatic leadership established by the revolutionary movement itself, and the Italian Left which assumed the historical task of carrying on the work of the International Left, completing it and formulating it in its attacks on the victorious counterrevolution; they have bequeathed to us their theoretical weapons... which will constitute the basis of the future revolutionary movement which finds its greatest historical example in the German Left. The revolution of the future will not be a mere matter of “imitation”; it will be a question of continuing the “thread of time” traced by the International Communist Left.¹

The thesis of an “infantile disorder” of the Left must be jettisoned. The young communist organizations, in effect, suffered from a crisis of “growth” between 1918 and 1921 (depending on the country in question), but one which was decidedly unlike that which Lenin diagnosed in his celebrated pamphlet. The tendency towards infantilism was a lesser threat than the opportunist danger. The inability to pose the real problems, to place the Russian experience into context by distinguishing the tasks of a communist revolution in the west, to make a decision regarding the political and trade union structures of the past, in order to demarcate one’s position from centrism, to have no illusions about democracy and the capitalist state, even a “socialist” one this was the real disorder. Far from being the fruit of a lack of intellectual maturity even though theoretical backwardness weighed heavily in the balance this crisis was the reflection, among the organized minority, of the proletarian defeat at the very moment when the proletariat effectively confronted capitalist society and began to unite against the latter’s concentrated forces (State or para-State, such as the fascists). Lenin helped to solve the crisis by reinforcing the reformist elements in the young Communist Parties. He did not cure the disease of the revolutionary proletariat, he killed the patient. The crisis of growth would be resolved with the complete passage of the Communist Parties into the ranks of the counterrevolution.

It is not a choice between a majority which was evolving towards revolutionary positions, with the help of the Communist International, and a sectarian and infantile minority; nor is it an opposition between a centrist “unstable terrain” and a pure and unchanging communist left. One could pick and choose a series of *contradictory* positions (even among the best elements) comprising “attempts to extricate oneself from difficulties”, from which only a minority would emerge intact by developing what was essential and even in these cases, in a contradictory manner. Instead of compiling a retrospective history whose point of departure is what the left had ultimately become, we shall situate its evolution and constitution into small groups within a broader effort focused on clarification and radical actions.

¹ *La question syndicale...*, p. 40.

The Left in Russia

Brest-Litovsk was one of this epoch's great revolutionary milestones, as well as the first great revolutionary defeat. It also marked the appearance of a "left" which, while opposed to Brest-Litovsk, was at least quite lucid in its opposition to what the movement was "historically forced to do". In the face of the danger posed by the resumption of the German advance which was penetrating deep into Russia, Lenin's "realism" was possibly the only solution. But the "left communists" of the Russian Communist Party thought it was possible to carry out a revolutionary war against the German Army, disintegrating and demoralizing it through fraternization and guerrilla attacks. It would be incorrect to evoke a "red patriotism" in reference to this proposal, as Bordiga did afterwards.² In the spring of 1918, the left was fighting for workers control of industry in order to prevent what it called "State capitalism". At the Bolsheviks' Sixth Party Congress, Preobrazhensky had already lamented the modification of the proposed resolution on "The current period and the war": "I would prefer to return to the original formula which spoke explicitly of the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat." Bukharin responded: "We have adopted a less rigorous formula because it is absolutely impossible for us to claim that we have the power to fight a revolutionary war."³ One year later, at the Seventh Congress, having in the meantime become a "left communist", Bukharin proclaimed the imminence of an international civil war and the need to prepare for it. The left's extreme position was, perhaps, impractical. It was the demand of the most intransigent tendency of its time, obstinately determined to defend the proletariat and the revolution at every moment. Today it is easy to present the "evidence" supporting Lenin's point of view, but he had to fight hard to convince the party's leadership. Luxemburg considered the separate German-Russian peace treaty to be a catastrophe which was unfortunately inevitable whose "historical responsibility" she attributed to the German workers who allowed the war against the Russian revolution to continue. The suspension of hostilities in effect reinforced the German State and its militarism, obstructing the possible evolution of the German army towards an admittedly difficult revolutionary path. This first compromise on the part of the Bolsheviks encapsulates their later evolution: the defeat of the European proletariat compelled them to compromise, which was theorized as a "partial success" in the name of realism, while it strengthened capital, and the left rejected it without being able to propose an alternative.

The "left communists" went beyond Lenin in their conception of the content of socialism, insisting on the abolition of *value*, which was, however, understood in an administrative sense and not as a social process: the destruction of capitalism as a system was largely understood by the Russian left communists as the transition from anarchy to planning.⁴ The communist perspective was primarily viewed as a management technique. This current would later be integrated, by its own will, into the Bolshevik majority, and the European left would remain at the margin of the problem. The Russians had posed the problem of communism without having the means to realize it: the westerners, who were capable of realizing communism, did not reach that stage because the proletariat did not go on the offensive. The European left would not pose the problem of communism until after 1930. The left communists tried to defend a program

² *Structure économique et sociale de la Russie d'Aujourd'hui* (texts from 1955-1957), Ed. de l'Oubli, 1975, p. 67. Compare with Schapiro.

³ Quoted by R. Daniels in *A Documentary History of Communism*, Random House, New York, 1960, p. 97.

⁴ Bukharin and Preobrazhensky, *ABC du communisme* (1919), Maspero. In English: *The ABC of Communism*, The University of Michigan Press, 1966. Cf. also *Soviet Studies*, January 1953, "The Origin of 'The Political Economy of Socialism'".

which attempted to be *internationalist* (cf. Brest-Litovsk) and *communist* (communist social transformation) at the same time. Subsequent left groupings would be different: the Workers Opposition and Miasnikov’s Workers Group represented, in the period after the civil war, in the purest and also the most direct way, the interests of the proletarians (cf. the preceding chapter). The world socialist revolution, whatever was thought and said at the time, was not the order of the day. From that time on, the workers *made their demands* within a social system which no longer depended upon them, but on a national and international balance of forces which the revolutionaries could not affect. Neither the Russian left communists nor the European communist left could do anything to help themselves; they could not even understand their place within the epoch: their lack of international links was not a result of organizational or theoretical flaws, but the effect of the non-existence of the proletariat as an effective *international force*.

France

In January of 1916, the French internationalists formed the Committee for the Resumption of International Relations, which was composed of two elements: socialist and syndicalist. Each underwent a split within its ranks. Some of the socialists (Loriot) and some of the syndicalists (Monatte) joined the Communist International and fought to reconquer the majority of the SFIO. One part of the socialists (Sigrand) and one part of the syndicalists (Péricat) wanted a small organization based on clear principles, which would break with parliamentarism and traditional politics. In the fall of 1916, they founded the Committee for Syndicalist Defense. Renamed the Committee for the Third International in May of 1919, the Committee for the Resumption of International Relations was asphyxiated under the mass of the SFIO centrists who had suddenly become “revolutionaries” after 1917, and who would later found the French Communist Party. There were also leftist tendencies in the Committee for the Third International, however: a proposed motion of the CTI, published in January 1921 in *L’Internationale Communiste* (No. 5), declared support for abstention when there is an offensive movement of the proletariat and a revolutionary situation, but also refused to make this position the grounds for a split.

The Committee for Syndicalist Defense, which also joined the Communist International in May 1919, only gave rise to small groups dominated by the ideological weight of revolutionary syndicalism, which were in turn divided between socialists and anarchists. The “Communist Party”, founded in May 1919, broke apart at the end of the year. It confused party and soviets, calling its sections “soviets”. Its optimism led J. Fabrice to write in September 1919: “The Communist Party has actually been founded in France. The initiative for the founding of the party was primarily due to the efforts of comrade R. Péricat’s syndicalist group. He is of the opinion that France will repeat the stages of the Russian revolution. The moderate socialists will take power first and we must prepare, starting right now, to overthrow them. Towards this end, he wants all revolutionary elements to unite, that is, the left socialists, the syndicalists and the anarchists.”⁵ Some of these revolutionaries were based in quite localized working class sectors (the Seine road workers union, with Lepetit). The defeat of the strikes of 1919 condemned them, as did their own confusion, which led them to confuse the rejection of parliamentarism with the rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat. They did, however, correctly criticize the CTI’s tendency to privilege work in the SFIO. Sigrand wrote in *Le Communisme* of July

⁵ *IC*, No. 5.

1920: “We must expect to see a new party formed at the next socialist congress which will do no less than call itself the ‘Communist Party’ and will include the CTI.” But he would remain faithful to the Communist International, which he considered (as did the KAPD) to be merely ill-informed, until September when he would declare his opposition to the dictatorship. On September 26, he called for joint action with Malatesta’s group, the KAPD, the English Communist Party (the leftist faction: cf. below) and the IWW.

It was not the defeat of the revolutionary movement which caused the Bolshevik “model” to be “transplanted” (Kriegel) in other countries: it was this defeat which transformed their attempts to drive the revolutionary process forward into a neo-reformism which was a continuation of the old reformism. The formation of powerful Communist Parties did not take place strictly where the revolutionary movement had been most active, but where the *old* political and trade union structures had suffered from the most serious crises. In France, the SFIO and the CGT had lost prestige in the eyes of a large part of the workers and *peasants*, whose vote was decisive at Tours.⁶ There would be no “communist left” in France until the end of the 1920s.⁷

Switzerland

The workers’ low standard of living led to a strike by bank employees in September-October 1918.⁸ Militants who had previously been involved with the *Forderung* Group and J. Herzog founded a Communist Party. In November, the labor movement, led by a “committee” set up by Olten and Grimm (centrists), called a general strike merely for the purpose of generating pressure to achieve democratic reforms. The professional employees, who had enjoyed the workers’ help in October, did not take part in the strike. The bourgeoisie, as elsewhere, repressed the strike and granted some concessions. In its Congresses of October 1918 and March 1919, the Communist Party was severely critical of the Socialist Party (Platten). The Communist Party participated in the elections of August 1919. Even so, the “Swiss ultra-leftists” were criticized by the Communist International in September 1919.⁹ The Swiss Socialist Party, having undergone a split, sought extra-parliamentary means of struggle and provided itself with a flexible organizational structure, the Workers Union. During general strikes in Basel and Zurich, on July 31 and August 5, 1919, five workers were killed. The Socialist Party decided to join the Communist International, only to be expelled later, in December 1920, when confronted with the 21 Conditions. A minority within the party (8,000 militants) would eventually, in March 1921, join the “Old Communists” (*Altkommunisten*) with Herzog, “who defended left communist positions (rejection of parliamentarism and participation in elections, propaganda for the formation of soviets)”.¹⁰

According to Humbert-Droz, a French-speaking Swiss communist, before the Second World Congress, the German-speaking Swiss Communist Party “adopted, on the issues of the trade unions and parliamentarism, positions which were quite similar to those of the German KAP”.¹¹ Herzog intervened at the Second Congress against parliamentarism. Later, he subscribed to the Theses of this Congress, in its essential points. In January 1921, he conceded

⁶ Kriegel: pp. 393-395, and the documents collected in *Le congrès de Tours*, Julliard, Archival Collection.

⁷ Cf., for example, *Le Réveil communiste* (1927-1929).

⁸ *Le Mouvement social*, July-September 1973.

⁹ No. 5, article by E. Munch.

¹⁰ *Le Mouvement social*, *Ibid.*, p. 122.

¹¹ *Le Phare*, March 1921.

great importance to the trade unions, future “directing organs of communist production”.¹² He reproached the Russians for remaining “indifferent” in the face of “all the maneuvers of the center”. He accepted revolutionary parliamentarism, with the proviso that he could change his opinion in the event that it should prove to be opposed to revolutionary interests.

Belgium

The revolution proceeded more slowly in this country, although it went deeper, since the “integration” of its workers by capital was similar to degree attained by capital in Germany. Unlike Germany, however, where the party-trade union rivalry reigned, the Belgian socialist and trade union sections, and the cooperatives as well, all nominated delegates to the General Council of the Belgian Workers Party, which more effectively unified the workers movement than any other country’s party.¹³ Belgium, very industrialized, and very “working class”, produced a left which was quite similar to the German Left, and which criticized both parliamentarism and the trade unions, although not as clearly as the German Left.

No Belgian group with a national membership base joined the Communist International in 1919.¹⁴ In the summer of 1919, the Young Socialist Guards (the youth organization of the POB) published the first issue of its journal *Socialism* and announced its support for the Communist International, but did not advocate a split. In November, it refused to help the POB in the elections.¹⁵ In January 1920, sixty of its members, with Van Overstraeten, a factory worker, at their head, held a conference and founded the group known as the Independent Communists of Brussels. Their journal, *The Communist Worker*, sided with the left. It tried to avoid the council fetishism characteristic of the press of other workers organizations (cf. No. 7, June 1, 1920). They sent a delegate to the Amsterdam Conference, for which they provided extensive publicity. They supported the KAPD. This group remained small and was limited to Brussels.

In October 1919, groups from Ambers, Louvaine and Ghent founded a Flemish communist group around *De Internacional*, which never had a national audience. The unification of this group with the Brussels organization mentioned above failed because the Brussels communists demanded that certain Flemish members be excluded. During this period, the POB left, severely criticized by *L’Ouvrier Communiste*, remained in the party under the leadership of Jacquemotte (the future Thorez of Belgium): Humbert-Droz considered him to be a centrist.¹⁶ In May 1920, the ICB held a conference of French-speaking Belgian communists and founded the Walloon Communist Federation. This conference approved a set of “theses on parliamentarism” which opposed the councils to the State.¹⁷ Van Overstraeten attended the Second Con-

¹² IC, No. 15.

¹³ *Le pain et les roses*, p. 160.

¹⁴ Hulse, pp. 167-169.

¹⁵ Overstraeten: *Le Phare*, January-February 1920, “Le congrès du POB”. It is often difficult to ascertain the dates of birth of these organizations, because the facts change according to the use of the term “communist party”. The Belgian Communist Party was officially founded in 1921, but the International Communists of Brussels (cf. below) sometimes called themselves the “Communist Party”. *Mouvement capitaliste et révolution russe. Le procès de dissolution de l’art*, Brussels, 1975, contributes some documents and an historical review of the Belgian Left.

¹⁶ *Le Phare*, March 1921, p. 401.

¹⁷ *Invariance*, No. 7, for comparison with Lukàcs on this topic.

gress of the Communist International. According to Rosmer,¹⁸ he did not criticize the essential points of the Leninist line, but only expressed his fear that this line would favor opportunist tendencies. In any event, the Belgian left communists were more anti-parliamentary than anti-trade union, as subsequent articles in the Red Trade Union International's journal, *La Lutte de classes*, proved. From this perspective, their position was intermediate between the German and the Italian Lefts.

In September 1921, the WCF united with the left wing of the POB, which had just been excluded from the party, and founded the Belgian Communist Party, which had few members. Van Overstraeten would be excluded in 1928 for "Trotskyism". The Communist Party was the heir of the Socialist Party center.

Finland

Part of the Russian empire until its independence in December 1917, Finland was wracked by civil war from January to March of 1918. The revolutionaries organized in the left wing of the Socialist Party, who had taken power in the south, were defeated by the reaction supported by Germany. The communist Finns working in Russia founded the Finnish Communist Party there in August. The following summarizes the lessons which its leader, O. Kuusinen, drew from the failure of the Socialist Republic of Finland, in his work *The Finnish Revolution: an Auto-critique*.¹⁹

"It was utterly typical that, during the meeting of the (socialist) party held in June 1917 where, by the way, we had joined the Zimmerwald International not one voice was heard demanding that we separate ourselves from the government socialists... the road of democracy, it then seemed, was open and offered vast possibilities. We expected that we could avoid the worst outcome by using parliamentary methods. And what has been the result of this historical error? Were we able to avoid an armed conflict? No! Parliamentary action was and can only be a danger to the working class movement. All that it did was to uselessly gather together all the forces which were necessary for the revolutionary struggle. Parliamentary activity has only served to deceive the masses; it was used to conceal from them the preparations of their enemies, the bourgeoisie, when it was the working class which should have been making preparations. It is now seen that the idea of the democratic state... was *historically false*."

"The idea of the democratic state was an attempt to fill a vacuum, to serve the transition from capitalism to socialism. But democracy is incapable of assuming the responsibility for such a mission. It has revealed its historical nature during the course of the revolution. Although no one had declared their opposition to it, it satisfied neither the bourgeoisie nor the workers. Its essential characteristic was, in reality, its lack of cohesion, a weakness which necessarily afflicts democracy throughout all of bourgeois society."

"The Social Democracy claimed it supported the revolution. Yet, what was its rallying cry? Power to the workers? No, its rallying cry was democracy, and respect for democracy. We had not understood that, when the revolution broke out, the workers had violently overthrown the democracy, they had shaken it off as if it were a nuisance."

Kuusinen showed how the socialists used the democracy to consolidate their power. Later, when the workers rejected the democracy, the bourgeoisie rejected the socialists and resorted to terror. It is not enough to evoke the necessity of the illegal and military struggle; it must also be

¹⁸ Page 81.

¹⁹ Published in English in 1919 by the Workers Socialist Federation, London.

understood how democracy is opposed to the revolution. This analysis implicitly criticized positions like those taken by the First Congress of the Communist International in regard to democracy and parliamentarism, as well as, of course, the later tactics of the united front and workers governments. The Communist International admitted that democracy was not revolutionary, but it claimed that one *could make use of it*. The left, on the contrary, said that in order to fight it one had to remain *outside of it*. At first this appeared to be a slight difference, but it soon highlighted the abyss which existed between the left and the majority. The latter thought it could take a *non-neutral* social reality and, with certain precautions, turn it into a useful “tool”.

“Our forces must focus on abolishing the bourgeois state rather than setting up in its place, either before or after the revolution, a democracy.” This was the revolutionary position expressed at that time by the Finnish Communist Party, which had also expressed its reservations, at the First Congress of the Communist International, on the topic of the revolutionary use of the trade unions.²⁰ At its founding Congress in May 1920, the party of the socialist left also interpreted parliamentarism as “a buttress of the bourgeois state”: “The bourgeois government, in order to stay in power, must avail itself of the assistance of the representatives of the workers, in every country, in the legislative assemblies, in municipal governments, and, in certain circumstances, in the national administration itself. However [...] the party must not make a declaration in advance on its future participation in the assembly, since such a decision would be premature without considering each particular situation.”²¹

Kuusinen’s positions are even more relevant insofar as he soon abandoned the left to become a “Leninist” and, later, a “Stalinist”: he was to be one of the signers of the dissolution of the Communist International in 1943. Rather than an organization or organizations, the left was a tendency which was generally stifled by the negative development of the class struggle.

Great Britain

The British revolutionary movement was, like that of other countries, characterized by regionalism. Proletarians in London, Wales and Scotland never managed to unite. Irish communism, for its part, was consumed by nationalism.²² In London,²³ the Workers Socialist Federation originated in radical feminism. S. Pankhurst came to the East End in 1913 to engage in feminist activities and while involved in social work rapidly became interested in the social question, began to participate in rent strikes and workers strikes, and opposed business and state in relation to the war. The Women’s Suffrage Federation became the Women’s Socialist Federation, and then the Workers Socialist Federation, and made contacts with radical workers and shop-stewards, but its membership was still largely restricted to London. Its journal, *The Workers Dreadnought*, is one of the best sources of information on the workers movement of that era: the WSF would remain the organization of a newspaper with correspondents, distributors, etc., and would never advance beyond this stage. It supported the Communist International and published numerous pamphlets by the Bolsheviks and other revolutionaries. The WSF initiated discussions with the other principle groups which would form the British Communist Party: the British Socialist Party and the Socialist Labour Party. The BSP accepted both parlamenta-

²⁰ *La question syndicale...*, p. 50.

²¹ IC, No. 11.

²² *Les Temps Modernes*, June 1972, “La contre-révolution irlandaise”.

²³ W. Kendall: *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-1921*, Weidenfeld-Nicolson, London, 1969.

rism and affiliation with the Labour Party: it was a social democratic remnant which, in England prior to 1914, could produce only a small organization with a few thousand members. The SLP, similar to the American DeLeonist SLP (cf. Chapter 9) was also small but was closer to the working class. It accepted parliamentarism but rejected affiliation with Labour: it would later be split, and the faction still defending this position would leave. After this split, the foundation of the Communist Party became possible. The Communist International made these two points (affiliation and parliamentarism) the criteria for proper tactics in England: the British case is truly a good illustration of its shift towards the right. Lenin, in his letter to Pankhurst²⁴ of August 28, 1919, said that “the question of parliamentarism is actually a particular point of secondary importance”. In 1920, Lenin was in favor of “one party, based on all the decisions of the Third International”, which excluded the left.²⁵

In effect, the WSF rejected both parliamentarism and affiliation, and formed its own Communist Party in May of 1920, but it merged with the official Communist Party of Great Britain, founded a few months later, only to quickly leave it and form an ephemeral “Communist Workers Party”. *The Workers Dreadnought* went into decline in 1922 and 1923, and disappeared in 1924. After 1920, the militant workers who were members of the WSF rapidly left it and ended up accepting more moderate positions, as in the case of H. Pollitt, the future English Thorez. Pankhurst would soon abandon the revolutionary movement. As a communist, she always based herself on experience. Her radical positions were not based on reason, with reference to the movement’s tradition, but referred to the experience which gave rise to it and verified what she said. Insofar as it was by no means a matter of intellectual progress, her evolution is of interest. She moved close to communism under the pressure of events and left it when communism collapsed as a practical movement.²⁶

Meanwhile, the Scottish and Welsh movements were undergoing their own evolution. In Scotland, the Shop-Stewards Movement was born in 1915-1916 among skilled metal workers fighting to preserve the advantages they had gained with the onset of the war and who were therefore compelled by this circumstance to launch actions which were radical in terms of their *form*.²⁷ The Scottish movement, which was very combative, would never manage to go beyond these limits and continued under the leadership of the Shop-Stewards. Comparable to the German revolutionary shop stewards (*Revolutionäre Obleute: RO*), the Shop-Stewards formed a parallel trade unionism²⁸ due to the inability of the trade unions to defend their demands: the SSM would quickly enter the orbit of the CPGB, accepting its ideological control in a National Minority Movement which was formed to conquer the trade unions. Some working class areas in Wales, however, were characterized by their own unique traits. Dominated by one industry

²⁴ *Oeuvres*, Vol. 29, Ed. Sociales, 1962, p. 567.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. 31, pp. 205-206.

²⁶ One can get an impression of Pankhurst by reading her report on her trip to Russia in 1920, *Soviet Russia as I Saw It*, Workers Dreadnought Pub., 1921. Cf. also *La grande conspiration contre le socialisme russe et allemande* (1919), in *Cahiers du communisme de conseils*, No. 9; and Pankhurst’s and Pannekoek’s critiques of the Irish Communist Party, written in 1922, in *Communism vs. Reforms*, Workers’ Voice, Birkenhead, Cheshire, Great Britain, 1972. See also the work by L. Jones on Pankhurst and the London social movement, to be published by Pluto Press, London. It is not true that Pankhurst “abandoned” the communist movement after 1920, as *PC*, No. 58, p. 147, maintains.

²⁷ The articles and the recent book by the historian Hinton complement B. Pribicevic: *The Shop Stewards Movement and Workers Control 1920-1922*, Oxford, 1959.

²⁸ Too often idealized in France, the shop stewards are re-situated within their proper context by the article in *Révolution Internationale*, No. 8.

(mining), they stubbornly rejected traditional politics (hence their rejection of affiliation with Labour) but were unable to advocate anything besides “the mines to the miners”. This led to a most virulent and combative syndicalism, which was not defeated until the failure of the 1926 General Strike. In Scotland and Wales, however, abortive attempts to create Communist Labour Parties, which were against both parliamentarism and affiliation with the Labour Party, did take place in 1920. The CPGB, however, quickly assumed the role of the only national political force of the extreme left, and the SSM that of the only workers group of importance. In contrast, the only current close to the German Left, which had formed around G. Aldred in Glasgow, a Marxist influenced by anarchism, who had been advocating the creation of a new International since 1906 and had criticized Pankhurst for joining the CPGB, supported the left, but would never overcome its status as a small sect.²⁹

The United States

While the Bolsheviks were relatively unknown prior to 1917 in the United States,³⁰ the theoreticians of the Dutch SDP, on the other hand, contributed to the *International Socialist Review* and the *New Review*, where Pannekoek published *The Downfall of the International* in November 1914. Rutgers, having arrived in the U.S. in 1915, extended the SDP’s influence. One of the characteristics of the American revolutionary movement (in the south as well as the north) was the enormous impact of the foreign-born population. The most radical groups were often socialist organizations composed of immigrants, generally from Russia or Central Europe. These immigrants would exercise a considerable influence in the evolution of the two American socialist parties, the reformist Socialist Party, and the smaller DeLeonist Socialist Labor Party. DeLeon died in 1914: his party did not follow the SP’s policy of acquiescing to the sacred union, but was a centrist group quite distant from the Zimmerwaldian Left.

The Latvian Socialist Federation, which had affiliated with the Socialist Party, moved towards the left: in Europe the Latvian Socialist Party was an ally of the Bolsheviks. But the Socialist Propaganda League, created by the left in 1915, did not want a split. Rutgers played a major role within this current, which at that time did not reject either parliamentarism or the idea of the party, but wanted to organize the class on the basis of “industrial unionism”. Industrial unionism was by this definition opposed to trade unionism (unionism organized by trade): the industrial trade unions were to unite all the workers. These were still trade unions, however, since the term ‘union’ was not synonymous with the German *Union*. The SLP supported anti-electoral parliamentary action, and advocated “mass action”. One notes here the influence of Pannekoek.³¹ In 1913, Lewis defined mass action in these terms: “True mass action is situated outside of the sphere of parliamentary action.” On the other hand, Lenin was unknown until

²⁹ Aldred had been in contact with the anarchists (reproaching E. Goldman for her systematic hostility towards Russia), with Prudhommeaux, the Dutch Left, Mattick and even the Italian Left. One may consult *The Spur* (“because the workers need a spur”, 1914-1921), and *The Commune* (1923-1928); *For Communism... With a History of the Anti-Parliamentary Movement 1906-1935*, Glasgow, 1935; J. MacLean and *Studies in Communism*, The Strickland Press, 1940. In July 1935, *International Council Correspondence* quite correctly denounced his “messiah complex”.

On the Socialist Labour Party versus the Communist International, cf. J. Clunie: *The Third (Communist) International*, Socialist Labor Press, Glasgow (1921). For the founding of the Communist Party, cf. *Official Report of the Communist Unity Convention* (August 1920), Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920, reprinted in 1968.

³⁰ T. Draper: *The Roots of American Communism*, Viking Press, New York, 1957.

³¹ Cf. his texts from the prewar period in *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils*.

the war: Russian immigrants (Kollontai, Bukharin, and Trotsky) would later begin to make the Americans aware of Russian debates.

In 1917, the left had coalesced around Fraina's *The New International*, largely financed by Rutgers, and *The Class Struggle*, somewhat less radical, with Boudin and Lore: only Fraina's journal spoke of October 1917, which it characterized as a great movement of "industrial unionism". J. Reed, born in comfortable surroundings, journalist of the Mexican revolution, declared his support for the Bolsheviks. He was sincere: others were not so sincere, like the journalist L. Steffens, who declared: "I have seen the future, and it works." Reactions of this kind, typical of the disillusion suffered in 1914-1918, were frequent: they turned to Russia and, from the communist point of view, its most superficial aspects, such as the soviet democracy, which was later identified by many with the power of the party. These aspects were viewed as a source of vitality, a cure for decadence. Sorel, like Steffens, admired Lenin before admiring Mussolini. Communism was a new adventure. The most solid individuals moved towards the communist left (which is to say, towards Lenin, during this period), but the majority "joined" communism and committed themselves to the cause of the workers. Others would remain faithful to the heroic epoch, without going any further: such as Rosmer (cf. Chapter 11).

The foreign language federations' share of SP membership grew from 35% in 1917 to 53% in 1919. There were three great strikes in 1919. The Seattle General Strike – the first ever in the U.S. – paralyzed the entire city. The miners strike in Butte (Montana) was led by a "council of soldiers, sailors and workers" in which almost all of Butte's trade unions participated. As in Europe, "councils" or "soviets" were being formed at that time as organizations of all the workers, transcending trade union divisions, with a view to a long struggle, but not as insurrectionary organs. Only the 16-week strike by 30,000 textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts ended in victory. In the U.S.A., as elsewhere, communists organized themselves during a moment of intense struggle, and not one of a rising revolutionary movement: September 1919, when the two Communist Parties were founded (cf. below), was also when the great steel strike ended in defeat. With the decapitation of the IWW (cf. Chapter 9), the years 1918-1920 did indeed constitute a phase of class struggle, but one which benefited the bourgeoisie. The "Red Scare" did not signify the existence of a real threat to the bourgeoisie, but revolutionary weakness.

At the beginning of 1919, the left began to coalesce but hesitated at the prospect of a split. Its generally "syndicalist" orientation was attenuated in its officially-approved texts, but remained close to DeLeonism. The majority of its 70,000 members and sympathizers were from the foreign language federations: the Russians were the most numerous, followed by the Latvians. At its June 1919 Conference, the majority of the left refused to break with the party: the minority chose to leave. The Left Wing Conference's Manifesto was still DeLeonist: the AFL must be destroyed, parliamentarism is worthless except in assisting "mass strikes", and the future society was to be organized by the "unions".³²

The Russian Federation, the animating spirit of the left wing minority, attracted part of the majority faction, which then became the minority. On September 1, the supporters of the new organization, together with Fraina, founded the Communist Party of America. On September 2, Reed and his friends, expelled from the Socialist Party, founded the Communist Labor Party of America: after tumultuous debate, it rejected unification with the Communist

³² In the era of the first trade unions, in England, the *trades union* was the association of all trades. Later, defeat led to the appearance of the *trade unions*, associations of workers divided by trades. The regrouping of different categories gave way to separation according to category. Cf. also Fraina's judgment of the IWW, *Invariance*, No. 6, p. 15.

Party. As elsewhere, the social democratic past weighed heavily: Reed’s position, “Fight for the conquest of power”, only won by 46 votes to 22. The Communist Party was divided into three factions: “Russian”, “American” and the “ex-Michigan group”. Scorning “economic” struggles and privileging education and propaganda, the latter tendency was close to the Socialist Party of Great Britain and the Socialist Party of Canada. It also maintained that capitalism had been strengthened by the war, a position contested by the Communist Party majority. More “socialist” than “communist”, this current was the survival of an orthodox social democratic tradition (Kautsky), even if it was closer to reality than the other factions of the Communist Party, precisely on account of its rejection of revolution. Within the Communist Party, the Russians and the ex-Michigan group were against unification with the CLP. Both Communist Parties together had between 25,000 and 40,000 members.³³

They actually had much in common. According to Reed, “the program of the Communist Party is basically theoretical and more general, while that of the CLP adheres to the principles established by the First Congress of the Third International... The CP is more political, while the CLP’s program is more connected with the workers economic struggles.” The two programs admirably complemented one another; it was advisable to elaborate a “workers program”.³⁴ The CLP defended a position close to that of the IWW in relation to the trade unions, while the CP considered the AFL to be a “bastion of capitalism”. “Every strike must be a revolution in miniature...” announced *The Revolutionary Age* (CLP), which criticized the strikers of the steel mills for having allowed the mill owners to collect trade union dues: this is what the AFL was trying to impose upon the workers. This paper asserted, however, that “the revolution is at stake in the steel strike”. For *The Communist* (CP): “trade unionism is the proletariat’s worst enemy. One of the tasks of the CP is to destroy the existing trade union organizations.”

The local and regional labor parties formed during the strike tried to unite in November 1919. This could be viewed as being similar to the efforts of the German *RO* or the shop stewards: tempered in the fights against the trade union apparatus, the militant workers tried to organize themselves *as workers*. According to the CLP (1919) the problem was expressed as follows: “The organization of a Labor Party by the trade unions is an inferior form of proletarian agitation, in order to preserve the advantages the trade unions have acquired as a privileged caste. Laborism represents as great a danger to the proletariat as moderate petty-bourgeois socialism...”

As for parliament, the IWW tradition, as well as the whole radical movement in its early days, supported the boycott: the majority of the members of the foreign language federations were not even American citizens. Even so, some communists had previously participated in elections in opposition to the candidates of the Socialist Party right wing. It was decided that the party would participate in the *campaign* without running any *candidates*. The communist slogan in the 1919 elections was “boycott the elections”. “At a time when the proletariat’s present tendency towards mass action must be reinforced, the elections must be boycotted.”

At the end of 1919 repression, which for two years had been directed at pacifists and anarchists, fell upon the two Communist Parties, already weakened by their divisions. The ex-Michigan group left the Communist Party at the beginning of 1920. In April, another split took place: the majority of the “Americans” and a minority of “foreigners” left the Communist Party and took the name “CCP”, with a party journal of the same name (*The Communist*). Ruthenberg accused the original Communist Party of defending principles which were out of

³³ Cf. the Manifestos of the two parties in *Invariance*, No. 7, pp. 22-32.

³⁴ *IC*, No. 10, May 1920.

touch with reality, and of attempting to be the “party of action”. The original Communist Party responded to his accusations.³⁵

“The exhortation to be in ‘contact with the masses’ contains within it the germs of compromise, of deviations and betrayals in the future. It is the confused and sentimental cry of those who seem to believe that a Communist Party must remain in ‘contact with the masses’ in every stage of its evolution. They ignore the fact that this tenacious attempt to circulate among the masses, at a moment when the masses are not prepared, will reduce communism to a theory and practice in conformity with the approval of politically immature masses...”

“These masses, which will join the party as long as the latter remains silent concerning the necessity of the *use of force* to throw the bourgeois state in the trashcan, will reject this tactic when the hour of revolution arrives. Consequently, these masses, who have not yet cut the Gordian Knot which ties them to the socialist ideology of a ‘peaceful’ revolution, will enter the party, and by their mere numerical weight will oblige the party to change the communist character of its propaganda and agitation, and will oblige it to revise all of its positions until it adapts to their political ideals, which are still in their infancy... Basically, the communist party is not composed of members but of ideas... We must try to make our propaganda penetrate into the workers environment: but we do not expect immediate success. Good luck or bad, we shall continue our agitation, certain that social forces and the disintegration of world capitalism after the war... will compel the masses to heed our message.”

Ruthenberg and the CLP entered into discussions about uniting their organizations. The question of the use of violence was passionately debated, but the most sensitive issue was still *industrial unionism*. Both groups were in agreement about the need to support the IWW and to destroy the AFL. On the parliamentary question, Ruthenberg distinguished between “legislative and executive functions”: one could employ the first (without fighting for any reforms) but not the second. This thesis was supported by the majority by a narrow margin but the boycott was chosen nonetheless for the 1920 elections: “When the revolutionary crisis is undermining the illusions of the masses concerning capitalist democracy, it is superfluous for the communists to direct their agitation towards the destruction of these illusions.” Thus was born the *United Communist Party*, whose principle journal was *The Communist*: it had between 8,000 and 15,000 members, most of whom were foreign-born.

For its part, the composition of the Communist Party did not permit it to take any interest in the trade unions or even the IWW. Its radicalism was in part due to a lack of depth and manifested its lack of social roots in the proletariat. At the same time, however, it maintained a relative distance from day-to-day matters and had a better understanding of certain realities.

The real positions of the Communist International soon became known. Its circular of September 1, 1919 stated that parliamentarism is not a form of revolutionary state organization, but that revolutionaries could use it to prepare for the revolution: this circular became known in the U.S. in January 1920. *Infantile Disorder* arrived in the U.S. one year later. The Communist International encouraged the American communists to unify their forces.

This period has been described as a “crisis of communism”.³⁶ The world revolution could not indefinitely live vicariously through the Russian experiences, which could only be validated by the world revolution. “Because its initial impulse came from the Russian revolution, it rested upon an illusion: the illusion of the immanent collapse of the entire capitalist system.”

³⁵ Draper, pp. 216-217.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Chapter XV, pp. 246, et seq.

A unification conference (May 1921) gave birth to the *Communist Party of America*. The two parties met there with more or less equal but not at all homogeneous forces. The new program followed the Communist International line, at least on paper: “The Communist Party condemns the position of those revolutionaries who abandon the existing unions”: not only did it participate in the elections, but its candidates had to propose demonstration “educational measures”, not so as to win the votes of the bourgeois majority, but to advance the cause of the party’s agitation, propaganda and activities.

Poland

The Polish Communist Party was formed in December 1918 from the Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKPL) led by Luxemburg, Jogisches and Marchlewski, and the Socialist Party of the Polish Left (PPS-L), which had split from Pilsudski’s nationalist PPS.³⁷ Close to the Left Mensheviks, the PPS-L did not gravitate toward the Bolsheviks until October 1917. With its dominant position in the Communist Party, the SDKPL did not officially support either the Bolsheviks or the Mensheviks: their “above all factions” position could be compared to that of Trotsky with whom they disagreed on an essential point: the right of national self-determination, which, in the case of Poland, was a burning issue.

As a whole, the SDKPL openly disagreed with Brest-Litovsk: “It seemed to them that inciting the German soldiers who had invaded Russia in 1918 to revolution was much more important than preventing the military reverses which would be endured by revolutionary Russia.”³⁸ Such criticisms persisted in the SDKPL until the fall of 1918. At that time it did not advocate the defense of the Polish state (which was constituted as a republic in November) but a “merger with revolutionary Russia”. Its national conference of November 1918 defended the view that “the proletariat must be made to see the necessity of distinguishing solely and exclusively the camp of the international bourgeoisie in opposition to the international proletariat”. Poland, thanks to its minorities which *could not be unified*, endlessly resorted to chauvinism and patriotism: 100,000 Lithuanians, 1,000,000 Germans, 1,500,000 Ruthenians, 3,000,000 Jews, and 4,000,000 Ukrainians. The SDKPL, however, shared certain Spartacist errors by saying, for example, in regards to the Ebert government: “Woe to this government, if it has the intention of stopping the revolution!” As if that government could have been revolutionary. The national question alienated the SDKPL from the PPS-L, but they soon came together under the pressure of events. The SDKPL’s anti-national position, and, more generally, its “Luxemburgism”, constituted an important contribution to the communist left, although the Dutch Left had also developed this theme prior to 1914.

In 1919, the Pole Karsky wrote:³⁹ “In England, the revolutionary movement is retarded by the ‘Irish question’... the proletarian revolution tends towards the abolition of the class state and the political proletariat cannot consider creating a political class state: its struggle must tend towards the creation of a new form of organization: the socialist federation of the proletarians of Europe.” Around the same time, the Finn Sirola, without explicitly criticizing Lenin, proved that “autonomy” formed the basis of “imperialism”.⁴⁰ In her posthumously published notes on

³⁷ Besides the works of Netti and C. Weil, cf. I. Deutscher, *La tragédie du PC polaco*, in *Les Temps Modernes*, March 1958; and M. Dziewanowski, *The Communist Party of Poland*, Harvard University Press, 1959.

³⁸ Tych.

³⁹ *IC*, Nos. 6 and 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, No. 9, and *Bulletin Communiste*, August 19, 1920.

The Russian Revolution, Luxemburg also cited the Finnish, Polish and Ukrainian examples. The Leninist position was frequently challenged by revolutionaries from subaltern countries which suffered under the anti-revolutionary weight of the national question.

As Mattick has shown,⁴¹ the Leninist position on this issue is derived from Lenin's position on democracy and democratic rights. Lenin believed in a democratic state in which the workers could carry on their struggle, thus remaining faithful to the Second International. His anti-democratic position in relation to the content of socialism was still quite limited: he showed, especially against Kautsky, that the *dictatorship* of the proletariat realizes the widest *democracy*. For him, the democratic state is necessary for the proletarian struggle: it is the best political form within which the workers can organize themselves (which is true) for the struggle against capital (which is false) (cf. Chapter 3).

Luxemburg's perspective on revolution and liberation from foreign oppression was based on the proletarian movement in Austria, Germany and Russia, and not on the kind of national rebellion characteristic of the 19th century. A national revival would certainly possess a guaranteed force, but if it is crowned with success, the workers movement would be paralyzed, or destroyed, by the nationalist current which it had unleashed. The creation of a Polish national state would not be the solution to the oppression of the minorities of the region, because that state would in turn humiliate the non-Polish minorities, nor would it be a revolutionary factor.

In the workers soviets formed at the end of 1918, the Communist Party was often as strong as the socialists. It even dominated the Dabrova mining region where an ephemeral Red Republic was formed.

Like the KPD during the same period, the Polish Communist Party boycotted the Constituent Assembly (*Sejm*) in February 1919. It would only renounce its abstentionism with difficulty. One of its pamphlets from 1921 would still assert: "the PCP's boycott of the 1919 elections for the *Sejm* was justified because there was a chance of moving directly to the struggle for power... In such conditions, participation in the elections would have been tantamount to a declaration in advance of the result of the struggle..." That same year, two deputies who had previously been members of the PPS and the Radical Peasants Party joined the PCP. When the party debated the "united front" in April of 1922, the left feared that "the tactic of the united front and the formulation of merely partial demands obscures the ultimate goal of the movement and in fact leads to the abandonment of the much more profound goals of the socialist revolution". The left yielded, but even the party's majority did not accept this tactic until after animated debate. It is curious to note how the center opposed the united front with the same arguments (which are utterly non-revolutionary) that were used by the center of the French Communist Party during the same period: since you have fought against the socialists, they said, how can you offer them your hand today? One must distinguish between the radical tendency and the attempt to preserve a trademark image.

The Polish revolutionaries had foreseen that the creation of new states would be used to contain proletarians within national frontiers. It would also isolate Germany from Russia (cf. the previous chapter). The Polish Communist Party was quite firm on this issue at its First Congress:

"... proletarian politics rejects all political solutions which depend upon the development of a capitalist world, such as autonomy, independence and self-determination... For the international camp of the socialist revolution, national questions do not exist." The Silesian revolutionary movement was suffocated by nationalism and confusion as a result of plebiscites. Pilsud-

⁴¹ *Intégration capitaliste et rupture ouvrière*, pp. 3-38.

ski seemed to be a prophet, with his mixture of nationalism and “socialism”. At that time “national bolshevism” was an issue not only in Germany, but in the Ukraine and Hungary as well.⁴²

The Communist International upheld the opposite view. Incapable of truly lifting themselves out of *their* context (destroying the multinational state by availing themselves of the nationalist tendencies opposed to it), the Bolsheviks had a very poor understanding of the ability of national structures (as was the case, in a different framework, with their grasp of the power of democratic structures) to squelch the revolution. They believed that they had correctly assessed the factor of nationalism, and accused their adversaries of “indifference”, and of “imperialism”, without grasping the essential point: a world ruled by capital can only produce *capitalist* national structures.⁴³ They thought they had discovered a weak point in the world system precisely where the latter was demonstrating its power. Quite soon, of course, their position came under the influence of their foreign policy (support for Attaturk’s Turkey and Sun Yat Sen’s China).

Under pressure from the Communist International and above all as a result of its defeat, the Second Congress of the Polish Communist Party (August 1923) evoked the “defense of the interests of the whole nation”, under threat from the “offensive of world capitalism”. Poland, it said, needed an army which could eliminate “non-democratic elements”. Despite the protests of the party’s left, this line destroyed the PCP as a communist organization. It recognized, for example, Poland’s “rights” to Upper Silesia. It is obvious, as Bukharin said (cf. Chapter 3) that in this manner it opened the door, within the very heart of the revolutionary movement, to imperialism. A direct line connects the recognition of the nation to support for its imperialism against other nations.

*Austria-Hungary*⁴⁴

The Austrian Communist Party (KPÖ) was formed in November 1918 from various groups or informal circles, among them the *Linksradikalen* with roots in the working class and influence in the socialist party, anarchists, etc.⁴⁵ The Wertheim group (more or less anarchist) and the *Linksradikalen* did not effectively become incorporated into the Communist Party, however, until February 1919. Between August 1919 and October 1920, the KPÖ confronted the parliamentary question. The majority allowed itself to be convinced by Koritschoner, leader of the former *Linksradikalen*, not to participate in parliament; later, in mid-September, he changed his opinion under the influence of the Communist International. A social democratic left faction then merged with the Communist Party which, with this contribution, had close to 15,000 members.

The founding Congress of the KPÖ had opposed the election of a constituent assembly by shifting parliamentarism from parliament to the *soviets*, which did not resolve the issue.⁴⁶ There was, at that time, a *Volkswehr* formed of workers who had been soldiers in the former Austrian army. At least one battalion was communist. The Red Guard (radical workers organizations) and the soldiers councils formed part of it. But who was in command of this army? Who held

⁴² *Kommunismus*, March 21, 1921.

⁴³ One of the great faults of the Italian Left is that it never overcame the Leninist view on this point despite the richness of some of its contributions. For example, Bordiga: *Facteurs de race et nation*, in *Fil du Temps*, No. 5.

⁴⁴ F. Carsten: *Revolution in Central Europe, 1918-1919*, London, 1972.

⁴⁵ L. Laurat: *Le PC autrichien*, in *Contributions à l'histoire du Comintern*, Droz, 1965.

⁴⁶ *IC*, No. 6, “Le soviet des députés ouvriers in Autriche allemande”, by Koritschoner.

power? An army was maintained (and consequently a State), while the State had not been overthrown. This militia, on the other hand, crushed the riot of April 1919 when the police were incapable of doing so. The KPÖ also accepted the councils and their National Executive Committee as an executive organ. An organization is not revolutionary unless it acts in a revolutionary manner: this was not the case in this instance. The revolutionaries were, therefore, supporting a capitalist state organ, a new sort of capitalist state, but one which was capitalist nonetheless and even more dangerous. At the same time, the KPÖ dedicated itself to a series of putsches, such as the (unsuccessful) putsch of June-July 1919. This behavior was not contradictory: it was because the KPÖ believed that the political regime was undermined by a situation of dual power that it carried out sudden assaults to definitively destroy it. But it was all in vain: *there was no dual power*, such as had indeed existed in Russia. Developments from February to October of 1917 in Russia had accentuated the differences and the confrontation between the soviets and the government, because the latter was unable to satisfy the needs of the masses. This did not happen in Austria: to the contrary, the councils, a parallel power, were progressively institutionalized. The only solution, therefore, would consist in fighting the (official) council system. That is what the KAPD did, but not the KPÖ. The councils cannot be used to exercise the dictatorship of the proletariat unless they break with the bourgeoisie and all its forms.

We shall now address the position adopted by the Austrian communists on the national question. The position on the national question adopted by Koritschoner, one of the leaders of the Austrian Communist Party, can be summarized as follows: in opposition to the various currents of the social democracy of the former Austria-Hungary, he apparently assumed Lenin's slogan: the right of national self-determination. However, as one may note from reading one of his articles published on May 22, 1920 in *Kommunismus*, he gave this slogan a different meaning from that intended by the Bolsheviks, one which was also quite variable in accordance with the situation; in reality, he was opposed to the Leninist idea of the nation which united all classes. For Koritschoner, what was important in considering any national question was the direct interest of the proletariat in the affected regions. He provided as an example the series of watchwords which the Austrian communists had broadcast at various times: when, at the end of 1918, Germany seemed to be on the verge of carrying out the *Anschluss* revolution, it called for the union of the Austrian proletariat with the German proletariat which it seemed might be victorious; when the revolution was crushed in Germany (January 1919): "Independence for Austria". When the council republic ruled in Hungary, there was a German population in the western part of the country. The choice of what stance to take became complicated when the two countries which were parties to a disputed claim to a region were under bourgeois rule. In this case Koritschoner declared that one must decide which country had the best chance for a proletarian revolution, the country where the workers councils were more advanced, or the country where the reaction was strongest. Thus, the Austrian Communist Party opposed the integration of certain Austrian regions into Switzerland, the most stable country in the world. Other Austrian regions would have chosen to merge with Bavaria prior to May 1919, but the Austrian Communist Party defended their retention by Austria when the worst reaction was victorious in Bavaria. When there was an "equilibrium", such as was the case of the region of Carinthia, claimed by Austria and Yugoslavia, where it was difficult to determine which country presented the most favorable situation for the proletariat, the party advocated abstention from the referendum, with the proviso, however, that in such a case what was important was not so much voting for, or against, or abstaining, what was important was not so much the result of the referendum, but that the proletariats of the two countries carry out a common action in accordance with a joint decision.

The Austrian Communist Party was therefore extremely flexible in its attempt to provide an adequate response to the infinite series of national questions which arose in the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. In reality, however, Koritschoner always based his decisions on the interest of the proletariat, and did not recognize the autonomy of the national question in any respect — unlike Lenin. Koritschoner also showed, in respect to western Hungary, for example, that this question did not have any autonomy for the bourgeoisie, either, who emphasized various national claims, only to later abandon them suddenly, depending on which position served the counterrevolution. Lukàcs and Gorter, however (cf. the text reproduced below), the German and Dutch Lefts, and before them, Luxemburg, had a much clearer understanding of the essentially counterrevolutionary character of the newly-created states in the east.

The phenomenon which we find most interesting is the journal *Kommunismus*, and its treatment of the connections between the left in Germany and the countries of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, above all Austria, Hungary and Bulgaria (cf. below). In Chapter 8, we have already seen how official history has over-emphasized the reality of the Hungarian Soviet Republic (March-August 1919), and how it underestimated that republic’s impact on revolutionary strategy. Rakosi’s report at the Second Congress of the Communist International reproached the Hungarian Communist Party for having “from the very beginning, committed the grave error of merging with the social democratic party”.⁴⁷ Like the Finnish “auto-critique” summarized above, this acknowledgement of the failure of socialist-communist collaboration and of the first “workers government” led to the determination to destroy the social democracy. It had been common knowledge since the “Spartacist Week” that the social democracy would not hesitate to call in the army to kill revolutionaries. Now it was known that the German case was not an exception: when social democracy found itself compelled to cooperate with the revolution, it did so only in order to fight it. In brief, it is as or more dangerous, as Marx said of the nationalist leaders of his time (Mazzini, etc.), when it mimics revolution. The revolution must destroy social democracy if it does not want to be destroyed by it. All “means” are to be subordinated to this end. After the revolutionary assault and its defeat, however, the opposite conclusion would be deduced from the same evidence. Since social democracy was the last resort of the counterrevolution, one must not directly confront it but collaborate with it in order to unmask it. This deduction, theorized in *Infantile Disorder*, was directed against the revolutionary movement, but corresponded to a phase of decline and of adaptation to a *non-revolutionary* reality. *Kommunismus*, published in Austria after the Hungarian defeat, illustrated this evolution.

One could consider *Kommunismus* as a kind of “semi-official office” of the Communist International.⁴⁸ Its subtitle presents it as the organ of the Communist International for the countries of southeast Europe. The Balkan Federation had also attempted to create a regional center in Sofia (cf. Chapter 11). The Hungarians (B. Kun, Reval, Lukàcs, and Varga) made extensive contributions to *Kommunismus*. In the spring of 1920 an article by Lukàcs appeared in the journal, on the topic of parliamentarism, which he conceived of as merely a defensive weapon.⁴⁹ His manner of opposing councils and parliament (cf. the KPÖ) was criticized by *Il Soviet* (journal of the Italian abstentionists) in a brief note which accompanied a translation of Lukàcs’s article. Another article by B. Kun advocated an “active boycott” motivated by tactical rather than principled reasons, a distinction rejected by Lukàcs. *Kommunismus* also published texts of

⁴⁷ Lazitch, *Les PC d’Europe 1919-1955*, Les Iles d’Or, p. 86.

⁴⁸ Hulse, pp. 164-167.

⁴⁹ *Invariance*, No. 7.

the Amsterdam Bureau, without ever entirely endorsing the theses of the Left. In June 1920, Lenin discovered “indubitable symptoms”, of infantile disorder in this journal, and defined the “active boycott” as “perfect”.⁵⁰ But the journal was, rather than a doctrinal center, a point of convergence, and rapidly regressed along with the situation in general. The frequently highly abstract character of Lukàcs’s articles testified to the journal’s shallow social penetration (for which we cannot blame him) and revealed that the journal was a theoretical base and not the theoretical expression of an active practical movement. From this perspective, it is not at all comparable to the organs of the German Left. This degree of separation and abstraction soon allowed Lukàcs to identify party and class, and later party-institution and party-program, as his later evolution would demonstrate, especially his work *Lenin* (1924). But in 1920, the debate had not yet been resolved, and the left still exercised some seduction over the journal’s collaborators who oscillated between the Communist International and the German Left, while the journal itself leaned more towards the Communist International. But its most important feature was the fact that its distinctive manner of theoretically comprehending the left did not correspond to a deeply-rooted movement. It was more a reflection rather than the theorization of experience.

The September 1920 issue of *Kommunismus* contained a critique of the KAPD written by A. Maslow (KPD left). On October 26, commenting on the Halle Congress where the USPD majority voted to merge with the KPD, Lukàcs saw this as a “process of sorting-out”. He wanted the USPD left, “and also, very soon (as we hope), the revolutionary elements of the KAPD” to join the KPD. After Wolffheim, Laufenberg and Rühle had been excluded from the KAPD, Lukàcs repeated his appeal to that party’s revolutionaries: Levi was pleased, and wrote Lukàcs expressing his wish to welcome them... “The struggle to win over the mass of the proletariat is far from over, but there is, nonetheless, a mass party of the proletariat”, Lukàcs responded, without taking into account the fact that this method was transforming the party into an entity which was above all real relations.

Roland-Holst, who published a series of articles entitled “The Tasks of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution” in early 1921, represented the tendency which was moving towards the left without truly and thoroughly embracing it: in theoretical form, it was the precise expression of the actual practice of the proletarians. We should not copy the Russian Communist Party: European conditions are different, she explained, explicitly referring to the *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*. The masses/leaders relation is different in Europe. Here, the masses will realize the “dictatorship of the proletariat” or “proletarian democracy” by means of actively involved soviets in order to play the dominant role, while in Russia the party plays the dominant role. The function of the leaders (*Führer*) will be of lesser importance in Europe. Her last article concludes with a quasi-eulogy of the KAPD which she defends (almost in the past tense) as a combative movement. She recalls Luxemburg’s critique of the Bolsheviks and then ends: “They have dared!” But this halfway position is indefensible. It can only be understood from the perspective of a possible recovery in Europe, which would change the balance of forces in the Communist International, whose new position would then constitute a dynamic factor. Roland-Holst’s prudence can be explained by her intention not “to smash this machine to pieces”, referring to the Communist International, which could still be useful.

⁵⁰ *Oeuvres*, Vol. 31, pp. 167-169. Lukàcs would soon directly attack the KAPD: cf. *The Communist Review*, October 1921, “The Problem of Communist Organization”.

Commenting on the consequences of the March Action in an article on communist self-criticism and Levi’s downfall (May 1, 1921), Reval anticipated the Trotsky of 1938:⁵¹ “The crisis of the German party is the crisis of its leadership (*die Krise der Führer*), it is a moral crisis.” He admitted that the KAPD would never even have existed were it not for the opportunism of the KPD, but concluded from this fact that the KAPD would take over the leadership of the German revolution and that “the KAPD’s left radicalism will be definitively liquidated”. On the same topic, Lukàcs established a parallel between the economic crisis affecting the bourgeoisie, and the ideological crisis (a crisis of consciousness and thus of the party) affecting the proletariat. “The mass party is only a precondition for the revolution.” Idealism and reformism would not take long to merge into what would be called “Stalinism”, justified theoretically and then superficially criticized by Lukàcs.

Bulgaria

Founded in 1891, the Bulgarian Socialist Party was split in 1902-1903 between the “narrow” (left) and the “liberals” (right). Until 1914 the two parties together had between 1500 and 2000 members; they were primarily propaganda organizations.⁵² Their split also divided the trade unions. The unions were very weak (their active membership was composed of 70,000 artisans and 93,000 wage workers in 1910). The “liberals” defended Bulgaria’s entry into the war on the side of the central European empires, while the “narrow”, in 1916, advocated a break with the Second International, but did not accept the slogan of turning the war into a civil war until after October 1917. They supported the founding of the Communist International and in May 1919 formed the Bulgarian Communist Party, led by Blagoev, which had more than 20,000 members, of whom 2,200 were industrial workers, and organized 13,000 workers in the trade unions which it controlled.

The war was very unpopular in Bulgaria: ruinous and badly-led, it was accompanied by an influx of Germans and Austrians who treated the country like a semi-colony. A rebellion broke out and a republican army was formed which advanced upon the capital before being defeated in September 1918. The “narrow” faction did not consider this movement to be a proletarian movement and did not participate in it.⁵³ Later, from 1919 to 1923, the country was ruled by the dictatorship of Stamboulisky’s Peasant Party, which organized a peasant militia, and was detested and feared by both the petty-bourgeoisie and the workers. This regime was not conducive to the differentiation of political tendencies, and clandestine conditions often mixed socialists, communists and anarchists together. The anarchists exercised some influence on the left communists. The anarchists were divided into two tendencies: one, peasant and communitarian, close to the views of Makhno and the Andalusian libertarian communists; the other, based in the cities and anarchosyndicalist, whose stronghold was Varna. The first was primarily dedicated to propaganda, the second to organizing the workers. The anarchists were numerous but did not have a national organization. The anarchists who were closer to communism and were calling for both CNT-type organizations and German-style *unions* joined the Communist

⁵¹ *L’agonie du capitalisme et les tâches de la IV^e Internationale*, a 1938 programmatic text of this organization, reduced the “crisis of humanity” to the “crisis of its leadership”.

⁵² J. Rothschild: *The Communist Party of Bulgaria, Origins and Development 1883-1936*, Columbia University Press, 1959. On the anarchists, cf. G. Balkanski: *G. Cheitanov, pages d’histoire du mouvement libertaire bulgare*, Ed. Notre Route, Paris, 1965.

⁵³ Rothschild, pp. 81-83.

Party, from which they would later be excluded or would join the Communist Party Left. The anarchists also had some influence in a few trade unions (longshoremen).

Between December 1919 and February 1920, a great strike of railway workers and postal employees took place, and was defeated by force: several thousand railway workers were dismissed. The Communist Party acted in an excessively prudent manner in the opinion of its left faction: the Communist International, however, encouraged the Communist Party to support Stamboulisky, who was presented as at least leading a popular movement. Under the leadership of I. Ganchev, a party fraction with about 1,000 members was formed, which denounced parliamentarism, blaming it for the Communist Party's accommodationism. Indeed, from 1919 to 1923, the Communist Party had overtaken the socialist party and became the leading opposition party in the Bulgarian parliament.

In May of 1920, without "intending to show any disrespect to this exemplary party", Sidarov tried "to call attention to the deviations in the tactics and principles of the Third International" in an article published by *Kommunismus*.⁵⁴ "Just as in western Europe, the contradictions which are appearing in Bulgaria are the fruit of the old tradition of the leadership of the movement and of the absence of a truly revolutionary tradition. Peaceful evolution within the bourgeois state has left its mark on the psychology and the revolutionary initiatives of the communist leadership in Bulgaria. At the same time, it is generally believed in western Europe that the economic development of Bulgaria is almost insignificant... even if it is true that its development is not progressing on an extensive scale, one must nonetheless point out that it is strong enough for its tendencies to be suitable for the social and economic life of this country as a whole."

This argument constituted a refutation in advance of all the justifications for a non-communist policy due to the backwardness and the specific conditions characteristic of largely unindustrialized regions. Bordiga, prior to 1924, defended an analogous position in respect to southern Italy.⁵⁵

The uprising of a part of the army in September 1918, under the slogan, "Work, Bread and Return Home", was defeated "by the unified power of the bourgeoisie". While enumerating other conflicts, Sidarov asserted that the necessity of struggle "is so strong among the masses that it obliges the communist party to intervene in this struggle, even if this constitutes an exception. We deliberately say that the Communist Party only exceptionally commits itself to this struggle. During the September events, for example, it held a party conference during the course of which, frankly, it never addressed these events." The absence of a united revolutionary leadership favored Stamboulisky's freedom of action.

In January 1921, the minority founded the Communist Workers Party, whose journal, *Rabotnicheska Iskra*, was published in Varna. Attending the Third World Congress, the CWP of Bulgaria, like the KAPD, was not admitted as a member into the Communist International (not even in a consultative role). It established contacts with the KAPD, which supported it. In April 1922 it joined the Communist Workers International (cf. Appendix I). In June of 1921, the official Communist Party asserted that the CWP had been "definitively liquidated"⁵⁶ and that its members had returned to the Communist Party, but this declaration appears to have been

⁵⁴ *Kommunismus*, Nos. 16-17 and 18. The journal appended the following note: "Comrade Sidarov belongs to the anti-parliamentary left wing of the BCP. We shall soon publish a report by a Bulgarian comrade from the right wing."

⁵⁵ A. de Clementi: "La révolution d'octobre et le mouvement ouvrier italien", in *La révolution d'octobre et le mouvement ouvrier européen*, pp. 105-125, as well as *Bordiga et la passion du communisme*, p. 199.

⁵⁶ *IC*, No. 17.

quite exaggerated. The Bulgarian Left was the expression of a tragedy, understanding this term in the sense of a contradiction without a solution (at least one which did not lie in a distant future): it wanted to go on “the offensive”, knowing that parliamentarism would fail, but it remained impotent.

An International Communist Left?

This chapter’s “disjointed” form reflects the absence of relations between the lefts of the various countries; each practically ignored the other. The Italians, for instance, reproduced articles by Pannekoek, Gorter and Pankhurst in *Il Soviet*, but never devoted any space to a common elaboration of activities in Western Europe. One cannot explain this dispersion as being due to a lack of information. This lack of information, the absence of an interest in establishing and maintaining contacts, reflects a situation where the revolutionary movement remained circumscribed within small areas, each of which had its own problems.

There was no international left; there was, at most, a tendency for its future continuation.⁵⁷ The lack of simultaneity of events within national contexts and their respective evolutions impeded the exchange of information. In Germany, certain truths would be revealed sooner than in other countries, but this precocity condemned the German Left to isolation. The full extent of the opportunism of the Communist International had not yet become apparent in the other countries. By the time it was fully displayed, both the German Left as well as the German proletariat had already been defeated, despite a few final outbursts. An article signed “W.M.” which appeared in the *International Youth Correspondence* (June 10, 1921), on “the crisis of the Communist International and the Young Communists”, spoke of expelling the opportunists and sought the “reintegration of those groups which had acted with too much freedom (the KAPD tendencies), who, for that very reason, will be won over for the great revolutionary task”.

The process which led to the successive formation of left fractions also led to their being destroyed one after another, and the KAI (cf. Appendix I) was incapable of playing a coordinating role. The KAI was a site for theoretical encounters and not an organ for coordinating international activity. After 1921, the Italian Left received the same treatment which had been imposed upon the Germans: the Communist International compelled it to mix centrists and communists in the same party. But the Italian Left did not understand this. It would face the same problems as the German Left: anti-fascism, united front, fusion with the centrists, workers government. Except in respect to the trade union and national questions (which were certainly of capital importance), it would basically respond in the same way as the German Left: often with more precision, since the reaction of the German Left was situated on a more practical level, corresponding to the effective experience of the class, and sought, where it could do so, a response in action. The Italian Left had theoretically extended the theoretical-practical critique of the Germans. It was as remote from the Communist International and the Russian Communists as the German Left was. But the opposition of the Italian Communist Party came later, or in any case *appeared* to come later, the Italians not having grasped the immensity of their differences with the Communist International. The Italian Left would misunderstand its relation to the German Left as much as it would misunderstand its relation to Lenin.

⁵⁷ PC, No. 58, pp. 146-157, and *La question syndicale*...., p. 32. Cf., for example, the case of the Danish Left, and the notes at the end of D. Nieuwenhuis.

It is true that some authors, such as A. Kriegel, consider the communist left, which they call the “ultra-left”, as something like a vast current which derived from the anarchists, at a time when the latter were close to the Communist International and even the Italian Communist Party during its early days.⁵⁸ But Kriegel conceals the differences within this current and concludes by totally deforming it to the point of making any differentiations disappear: to include under this rubric the experiences of Munich and Hungary is a monstrous caricature which even a sub-Leninist polemicist would not have considered. To speak of an “international communist left” is not to impose a structure on a multitude of movements which are as varied as they are unlike one another. It is obvious that the revolutionary “solution” for the epoch could not have consisted in a mindless agglomeration of all these tendencies. Only a minority had arrived at a (relatively) correct view and had tried to act on that basis. The “German” and “Italian” communist lefts had in part cleared the way for communist perspectives, while the anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists of all stripes remained trapped in the past, even though a considerable number of them were revolutionaries. Even the German and Italian Lefts were still the prisoners of serious errors. Confusion reigned *everywhere*, but it was not shared *equally*. Spartacism and Bolshevism were both hybrids halfway between the revolution and centrism. This contradiction would be resolved. After the twilight of the movement, their radical aspects (which constituted an always living contribution: internationalism for the former, revolutionary defeatism and the question of the state for the latter) lost their importance to the benefit of positions inherited from their social democratic origins, which can be summarized as follows: win over the majority of the workers. Little by little, most militants turned towards reformism and became integrated into the party apparatus, in the KPD as in the RCP.

The fragmentation of the left reflected the weakness of the proletariat. Depending on the original experiences of the various countries, the revolutionaries managed to clarify some issues and remained confused about others. If the proletariat had manifested proofs of its internationalism and had truly acted on a worldwide scale, the left would have been enriched and would have developed alongside it: but this did not happen. At the time, the only trait common to the proletarians of the different countries was their attachment to *democracy* (cf. Chapter 4). Later, proletarian atomization led to the fragmentation of the left groups and their descent into sectarianism (cf. Appendix I).

One of the criteria which differentiated the German Left from the other manifestations of the communist left is undoubtedly the trade union question. Only the Dutch-German Left understood that it was impossible for the workers to ever again create permanent revolutionary workers organizations. Many left communists were supporters of “industrial unions” but did not see the connection linking classical and industrial trade unions, and even expected that the former would be transformed into the latter, and defended systematic activity within the trade unions.⁵⁹ Even though DeLeon worked in the old trade unions, he wanted to create new workers organizations.⁶⁰ The national question is the other differentiating criterion. At that time the German Left groups devoted little attention to the national question, but they conceived of it in essentially the same terms as the SDKPL, although Pannekoek opposed Luxemburg’s position

⁵⁸ Kriegel: *Aux origines du communisme français*, as well as her thesis, Imprimerie Nationale, 1964.

⁵⁹ Compare, for example, the Dreadnought Publishers preface to Zinoviev: *The Communist Party and Industrial Unionism*, with Bergmann’s intervention at the Third World Congress. The latter may be viewed at the website *Wage Slave X’s Revolutionary Anti-Capitalist Homepage*, “Discussion of Zinoviev’s Report on the Trade Union Question”.

⁶⁰ The German Left severely criticized DeLeonism: cf. *International Council Correspondence*, March 1935.

on imperialism (cf. Chapter 3).⁶¹ Today the national and trade union questions are two crucial criteria to determine whether an orientation is clinging to the bygone past or preparing for the revolution.

In retrospect, the Italian Left is considered by the German Left as one more variant of the much-detested Leninism. Reciprocally, the Italian Left considers the German Left as a variety of anarchosyndicalism. These conflicting interpretations allow the representatives, either official or unofficial, of these traditions to avoid the question of their *common origin*. Where a double supersession was necessary, the defenders of each current instead became addicted to their own particular special characteristics.

What is extraordinary about these polemics is the mutual ignorance of the real nature of the objects of their attacks. Bordiga, in articles from 1955-1957, compared the KAPD to the revolutionary syndicalists.⁶² In his texts he frequently compared the German Left to the Gramscian current. In fact, Gramsci distinguished between “industrial power” and “political power”. In its worst formulations, the KAPD did consider that taking power in the workplace *precedes* taking political power. In other formulations, it presents the matter as two parallel moments. But the ambiguity persisted. In its weakest and most dangerous form, this conception leads to making the struggle against the state equivalent to the action of the economic organizations: the rank and file workers organizations would be strong enough to “make the exercise of counter-violence superfluous or at least secondary”, DeLeon thought.⁶³ The texts and above all the practice of the German Left prove, however, that it never reduced “political” to “economic”. There are, of course, traces of revolutionary syndicalism in Bergmann’s intervention at the Third World Congress, for example,⁶⁴ but they always recalled the danger of losing the *global* perspective. The same delegate criticized the IWW and the factory occupations in Italy in 1920. It would be *absurd* to base one’s opinion on the *texts* without explaining them within the context of the effective practice of the German proletarians,⁶⁵ with which, however, the Italian Left was indeed familiar and could explain quite well when it wanted to.⁶⁶ Revolutionary journalism and other works are not a “photographic” reflection of a movement: they always present a distorted expression, especially since the proletariat is not manifested in its *entirety*, and remains separated without any real international action. The sense of the totality was therefore easily lost. The German Left had committed far fewer “errors” than the Communist International, and no more than the Italian Left. Despite its apparent rigor, the Communist International had provided no solutions for the problems faced by the world proletariat. The communist left, both German and Italian, tried to do so, and was at least partly successful.

The Italian Left, like the groups comprising the German Left, opposed, for example, the English communists’ affiliation with the Labour Party,⁶⁷ but insisted on showing that its disagreement with Lenin on this point was of secondary importance, since his position contained the *principled theses* which far transcended this particular issue.⁶⁸ Lenin’s position in this case

⁶¹ Cf. Mattick’s article cited in footnote No. 41 above, and *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils*, Part 3, Chapter 2. Compare with Bordiga, *Prometeo*, No. 4 (1924), “Le communisme et la question national”.

⁶² *Structure économique et sociale de la Russie...*, pp. 66-67.

⁶³ Cf. DeLeon, quoted in *Le Proletaire*, No. 145.

⁶⁴ Bergmann: in *La gauche allemande...*; for English translation, see footnote 59 above.

⁶⁵ Cf. the example of the trade union question, in *PC*, No. 56, p. 44.

⁶⁶ *PC*, No. 58, p. 104.

⁶⁷ *La question syndicale...*, p. 51.

⁶⁸ *PC*, No. 60, pp. 35-39.

rests on the idea (justly refuted by the Italian Communist Party) that social democracy was the right wing of the workers movement, rather than one of the forms assumed by capital. The Italian Left likewise insisted on the masses-leaders opposition, so beloved by the German Left.⁶⁹ The KAPD attempted, above all, to promote the most wide-ranging proletarian action possible. Its activity was not, in any event, any more *unilateral* than constantly repeating the necessity of the *party*. The German and Italian Lefts did not possess a correct representation of what they were doing, since each interpreted its own practice with the aid of partially false theories. The Germans were prone to democratism, the Italians to the metaphysics of the party, although neither could be reduced to either one of these “deviations”. The organizational question inevitably acquires excessive importance when proletarian action is lacking. The masses-leaders distinction (cf. Chapter 14), a preoccupation also shared by the Italian Communist Party, while so poorly expressed by the Germans, was addressed in just as unsatisfactory a way by the Italians with their theorization of the party. This emphasis on the masses-leaders opposition was not so much an attempt to guarantee a democratic organization, as an effort to prevent the formation of a VKPD-type group or the kind of organization the Communist International wanted to impose upon the Italian Communist Party. It was this rejection of the masses-leaders perspective, despite what he himself thought, which inspired Gorter to write:

“Leadership politics is not the politics of leaders and centralization without which nothing can be obtained, any more than in the absence of a party but the politics which... holds that the leaders can be victorious if they at least have a large numbers of people behind them.”⁷⁰

One could say much the same of the Left’s educationalism:

“The real mysticism is... that of revolutionary parliamentarism, which thinks it can educate the working class voters (and in Lenin’s vision even the peasants and the ‘functionaries’) and lead them to believe in the need for revolution by means of a well-organized presence in bourgeois institutions.”⁷¹ One could quote innumerable Leninist declarations totally within the “culturalist” orientation denounced by Bordiga after 1912.⁷² A text from 1919 has achieved classic status:⁷³

“Only parliamentarism, thanks to civilized culture, has allowed the oppressed class of the proletarians to become conscious of itself and to create a worldwide workers movement. Without parliamentarism, without the electoral principle, this evolution of the working class would have been impossible.” This combines a partial, Russian point of view with the western social democratic deviation in regards to consciousness, education and organization as *preconditions* for action. He would therefore incite the western revolutionaries to rejuvenate the trade union movement⁷⁴ in order to provide the “Communist Party” with a mass trade union⁷⁵ and electoral base.

The Italian Left’s organizational fetishism concerning the Communist International and its centralized “discipline” would continue to unfold.⁷⁶ So as not to have to situate itself within the trend towards an international left, the Italian Left gave itself adversaries which were no

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, No. 53-54, pp. 75-76.

⁷⁰ *Réponse à Lénine*, Librairie Ouvrière, 1931, reprinted in 1969, pp. 47-48.

⁷¹ *La question syndicale...*, p. 39.

⁷² *Bordiga et la passion...*, p. 198, and *PC* No. 56, pp. 80-82.

⁷³ *De l’État*, *Oeuvres*, Vol. 29, p. 491.

⁷⁴ *La question syndicale...*, p. 46.

⁷⁵ A. Borcsuk: *Contribution à l’étude des grèves de 1919 et de 1920 en France*

⁷⁶ *PC*, No. 75, p. 71.

match for it, Trotsky and Luxemburg,⁷⁷ in order to avoid confronting the only interlocutor of its own stature: the German Left. Such a confrontation did not take place at the time. But defeat had such an impact upon a revolutionary of Bordiga’s temperament that he forgot what he had written about the KAPD in 1920.⁷⁸ Although he did not take the side of the party of the German Left against the official KPD, Bordiga did not reject it either and considered it to be the most vigorous aspect of the movement in Germany. He judged that it would evolve by eliminating its non-Marxist aspects: he did not, therefore, situate it *outside* of the “Marxist” camp, as if its positions rested upon other *principles*. The Italian Left did not identify itself with the German Left, but did consider the latter to inhabit a framework of Marxist principles identical to its own, and not an anarcho-communist mixture. Urquidi, author of a study of the origins of the Italian Communist Party, wrote that⁷⁹ “A. Pannekoek is the only foreign author whose name is frequently repeated in the columns of *Il Soviet*. One could also read various articles by H. Gorter and H. Roland-Holst in that journal. It is even more surprising that, from 1918 to 1921, one does not find even one article by Lenin. The most *Il Soviet* offers in this respect are short extracts from Bukharin and Kollontai, and these are the only Russians published in Bordiga’s journal.”⁸⁰ We will recall that in April 1920 *Il Soviet* described Pannekoek as an “excellent theoretician of Marxism” and the KPN as a “very good communist party.”⁸¹

Upon issuing a *Manifesto* to rectify the situation within the Communist International and the Italian Communist Party, Bordiga would judge in 1923 that “one might think that it would have been better to issue this warning sooner. But, as we have said in relation to the matter of tactics, the disagreement was imperceptible for quite some time: the Communist International’s method consisted in presenting its own slogans one by one.”⁸² The Italian Communist Party began to fall victim (in this case, as well, due to the weakness of the revolution)⁸³ to what it had imputed to the German communists. But the communist left, in Italy, was the Italian Communist Party. The Communist International was confronted by strong resistance from those communists who rejected fusion with the centrists (Serrati). But it stubbornly persisted. The Italian Socialist Party and the Italian Communist Party were *both* invited to send delegates to the Third World Congress.

Depending on the environment where they are encountered, one faction or party is often “anarchist” or “Leninist” to the other. In early 1920, Lenin stated that the Marxist-anarchist opposition had been superseded.⁸⁴ Later, in 1921, he definitively catalogued the German Left

⁷⁷ “Luxemburg was only the most brilliant and undoubtedly the most important spokesperson of an international revolutionary current...”, *ibid.*, p. 48. The PCI also devoted an entire issue of its journal to a refutation of Trotskyism (No. 57).

⁷⁸ *Il Soviet*, July 11, 1920. Cf. *Invariance*, No. 7, and *PC*, No. 58.

⁷⁹ Cf. Chapter 11, No. 6, and also, concerning the Third Congress, *Rassegna Comunista*, Nos. 8 to 13, 1921, International Reprint, Savona, 1970. For a bibliography, cf. *Invariance*, No. 8, pp. 58-60, and *Sociologie du communisme en Italie*, Plon, 1974.

⁸⁰ The left regularly collaborated with the Communist International press from its beginnings, and the Communist International’s leadership did not try to keep its distance from this current by demanding different “principles”. This was true of Nos. 2 (Pannekoek and Pankhurst), 3 (Pankhurst), etc., of the *IC*. The French *Bulletin Communiste* behaved the same way.

⁸¹ April 25, 1920.

⁸² *Invariance*, No. 7, pp. 106-107, and Gruber, p. 378.

⁸³ *PC*, Nos. 45 to 50.

⁸⁴ *Oeuvres*, Vol. 30, p. 432.

under the rubric of “anarchism”.⁸⁵ If by “anarchism” one means the rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat and all that implies, then the KAPD was no more “anarchist” than Bordiga, about whom Lenin said at the Third Congress: “He has most loyally declared... that he has renounced all anarchism and all anti-parliamentarism.”⁸⁶ The Italian Left would later be known not for its orthodoxy (compared to the German Left, with its occasional syndicalist and federalist *appearances*) but for its doctrinal adherence to and faith in the Communist International. Bordiga’s position is somewhat reminiscent of that of Roland-Holst (cf. above). The Communist International was still a potentially communist force, it had to be preserved.

The Italian Left was moving in the direction of collaboration with the German Left in 1917-1921, but the question was never really posed because the proletariat did not transcend the national framework. The position which maintains that the Italian Left was not part of the communist left, or that other position which holds that it was the only communist left, are both founded upon a false criterion: the Leninist/non-Leninist opposition. As a “Leninist”, Bordiga would be totally distinct from the German Left. It is the very idea of this “Leninism” as a reference point for the history of the revolutionary movement of that epoch, which must again be challenged. One cannot study history from the vantage point of a time after the period in question. It was only after 1923⁸⁷ that “Leninism” became an ideological reference point. In the sense in which the term is ordinarily used, Leninism has never existed. It is an invention and a distortion of reality. “Leninism” and “Trotskyism” are products of the defeat, not its cause or its remedy. It is absurd to use Bolshevism as an object lesson as Rühle did in 1939, especially when Stalin was at that time liquidating all that remained of it.⁸⁸

It would be vain to develop this or that partial aspect by considering it as the whole. Thus, in 1917-1921, no one had a global vision, and various degrees of confusion reigned everywhere. The “German Left” is itself a convenient formula which conceals quite different realities. Rühle was much more lucid about the real policy of the Communist International and the need to break with it, but succumbed to certain federalist and educationalist illusions. Gorter had too much faith in the Communist International and deluded himself about the possibility of building a leftist current within it, but had a better understanding of the need to unify the movement and to strengthen its organization. He was mistaken about March 1921, which Rühle assessed more correctly. Bordiga overestimated the prospects offered by the Communist International, without seeing that the failure of the world revolutionary movement would bring in its wake a *regression* on the part of the Russians and an initially ambiguous policy which would become reactionary later. We have shown how both the KAPD of 1920 and the Italian Communist Party insisted on *discipline*, the need for an organizing framework to prepare for the movement’s reactivation.⁸⁹ Their shared organizational fetishism was not catastrophic, however, since all activity brings deviation with it (by transforming a means to an end), which is often corrected by the unfolding of the action itself (but not always).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol. 32, pp. 547-548.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 495-496.

⁸⁷ Cf., in particular, the work of Zinoviev bearing this title, which he defines as “the Marxism of the age of imperialism”. The Italian Left rejected this definition, and understood that Lenin did not represent an instance of “progress” in relation to Marx, but did not correctly situate Lenin. Lenin both went *beyond and fell short of* Marx at the same time. Cf. Bordiga’s lecture, “Lenine sur le chemin de la révolution” (1924).

⁸⁸ *La lutte contre fascisme commence par la lutte contre le bolchevisme*, in *La contre-révolution bureaucratique*. In English: *The Struggle against Fascism begins with the Struggle against Bolshevism*, Bratach Dubh Editions, London, 1981. Originally published in *Living Marxism*, Vol. 4, No. 8, 1939.

⁸⁹ *Le Fil du Temps*, No. 8 (texts of the left, 1917-1925).

The Left (German and Italian) confronted the same problems in different countries, and tried to respond to these problems. In Italy, Bordiga made concessions at the Bologna Congress (October 1919) and at Livorno (January 1921).⁹⁰ Damen (who broke with the “Bordigist” ICP during the early 1950s) would write that the abstentionist fraction should have brought about the schism sooner: in 1919 rather than in 1921.⁹¹ The left was diverted from the theme of its international convergence at the Second World Congress in 1920. Rühle had contributed to this, by refusing to represent the KAPD at the Congress, but it was primarily due to the Bolsheviks who arranged everything in order to prevent the various lefts from approaching one another. “The need to seriously consider international relations never arose, however, for the German Left. Perhaps this was the clearest indication of its insignificance.”⁹² Considered as a whole, the course of the revolutionary movement did not depend on the Left, but on the extent and depth of the social crisis, including the greater or lesser capacity of the proletarians to organize themselves with a view to destroying capitalist society.

⁹⁰ *Bordiga et la passion....*, pp. 206-209.

⁹¹ *A. Bordiga: validità e limite d'una esperienza*, PCI (Battaglia Comunista), 1970.

⁹² Mattick: “Otto Rühle and the German Labour Movement”, in *Anti-Bolshevik Communism*, M.E. Sharpe, White Plains, 1978, p. 94.

Conclusion

A historian of ideas, tying up loose ends and going over the themes of his research, could establish a series of correspondences between the German and Italian Lefts, Luxemburgism and the German Left, the Italian Left and Leninism, and Leninism and the German Left. This complexity testifies to the fact that there can be no theoretical synthesis without a practical synthesis through proletarian action. The German Left was influenced by the SPD left, the SDKPL and Bolshevism (united in the personality of Radek prior to 1914), the IWW, the wartime mass workers organizations, and revolutionary syndicalism. Only by virtue of being linked to an active movement could theory reform itself by avoiding the double pitfalls of eclecticism and sectarianism. The least that can be done now is to examine problems on the basis of their real contradictions, and not of their secondary effects. In conditions which were characterized by both class struggle as well as revolutionary weakness, as in 1917-1921, one cannot speak of a “correct” line unfortunately defended by a small minority, whose more generalized application would have prevented the disaster which befell it. Conversely, even within currents which were as much the prisoners of the old movement as was Spartacism, there were tendencies toward clarification.

The communist left was not the brain of a movement, but the highest expression of its contradictions and, not manifesting a comprehensive vision, was itself contradictory. It was much more the product of a situation which was a revolutionary dead end, than the most advanced element of a generally revolutionary movement which was defeated. In reality, only a fraction of the proletarians had entered the fray. What J. Andrieu had feared after the Commune had come to pass:

“The proletariat has always been beaten because it has drawn back in fear from silent challenges. It has given the impression that it would attack... Later it has fought without order or preparation. These are the facts! Neither time nor means allow us to be defeated again... The struggle for power is nothing but a pretext for the next day’s throat-cutting.”¹

The new movements will not be like 1919 writ large. It is criminal to idealize this period, from which the movement must above all retain the clearest example of categorical and democratic evisceration, on a continental scale, in the history of the proletariat. It is not in order to reject the past in its totality that revolutionaries point out some of the defeats of the proletariat (which are also *their own defeats, since they form an integral part of the proletariat*), but in order, by every possible means, to avoid them in the future. To conceive of the extent of the counter-revolution is not to pass from one extreme to another, and to completely transform the classic leftist outlook in order to suddenly discover that... nothing at all had taken place. Interpreting the period as a simple adaptation on the part of capital to its problems would mean abandoning one naïve stance for another. This point of view is as “undialectical” as the concept of the “heroic period” of the “first four congresses” of the Communist International. Nothing justifies the assertion that the German proletariat was condemned in advance. The *a posteriori* judgment which attributes its defeat to “objective conditions” forgets to situate itself and to re-situate action in relation to those conditions: revolutionary action does not *create* these conditions, but *modifies* them. Absolute determinism is nothing but an inverted voluntarism, which explains everything by the absence of the “party”.

¹ *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de la Commune de Paris de 1871*, Payot, 1971, p. 185.

“The outcome is not always the same victory frustrated, one must not always attribute it to the same causes, and it is always difficult to affirm that a different line of conduct on the part of the revolutionaries would have altered the result.”²

In considering the confrontation between the German Left and the rest of the revolutionary movement, or what is taken to be such a confrontation, it would be tempting to quote Engels’ commentary on the Gotha Congress:³ “On the theoretical level we are a hundred times superior to the Lassallians, but we are far from being their equals in political skill.” Once again, “honest folk” have been cheated by slick politicians. To leave it at that, however, would amount to making this a political history. The class struggle in Russia assumed more acute and violent, but less profound forms: hence the *contradictory* re-activation of communist theory in its social democratic version by the Russians. Although more effective, the Russian theory is at the same time ill-adapted for European revolutionary problems. With regression (which the Bolsheviks did not themselves cause, although they did contribute to it), this lack of adaptability became an adaptation to the counterrevolution (return to trade unionism, mass parties, parliamentarism, nationalism in the name of the “right to self-determination”). The texts and the deeds of the Communist International translated an over-optimistic assessment of the situation⁴ linked to the will to advance matters by gathering together large numbers of people. The formation of the Italian Communist Party offers the clearest example of incoherence: the Communist International’s emissaries were in favor of a split by the left, which the Executive would always deplore. Even assuming that the Communist International had at any time effectively directed its sections, something which remains to be proven, it was only able to do so after the revolutionary reflux. Centralization, advocated by the Russians and the Italian Communist Party, among others, would not be employed until it had lost its usefulness in playing any kind of subversive role.

Both Lenin’s *Infantile Disorder* and Gorter’s *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin* are equally incapable of defining a strategy for victory. The former submerges the proletariat into the old ruts. The latter does not indicate the revolution’s means of social transformation: by the time it was written, the forms of organization which it advocated were without content and were collapsing. After having witnessed the difficulties encountered in the transition from one world to another in the revolutionary movements of that era, Mattick concluded: “The lesson learned was how not to proceed.”⁵ Paraphrasing Lenin on the Commune, we could say about Germany in 1917-1921: it is a movement which *must not be* ours.⁶ If one compares the insurrection of January 1919, the red army of the Ruhr and the March Action, the characteristic which all three of these uprisings have in common is that they always evolved within a social framework which, at bottom, remained the same. The sailors who arrived in Berlin from Kiel were roused to revolt by not being paid. The armed revolutionaries of Munich got their pay. Hölz *distributed trade union funds* to the unemployed. The Italian workers who occupied the factories in 1920 did not put anything essential into question. Prudhommeaux put it this way: military

² Bordiga: *De la Commune à la III^e Internationale*, in *La question syndicale...*, p. 52.

³ *Selected Writings*, Penguin, 1967, pp. 133-134.

⁴ “Comrade Hungarian workers, you have provided a better example to the world than soviet Russia, because you knew how to win over all the socialists at one stroke on the basis of a program of true proletarian dictatorship.” Message from Lenin, May 27 1919, Vol. 28, p. 396.

⁵ “Otto Rühle and the German Labour Movement”, p. 95.

⁶ Cf. Chapter 3, Note 34.

struggle and complete transformation of social relations, neither the *one* nor the *other* are possible unless they are both carried out simultaneously.⁷ For the KAPD: “The proletarian revolution is an economic process and a political process at the same time.” This assertion could be interpreted in a reformist sense (conquest of power in the economy without seizing political power).⁸ But the thought and activity of the KAPD are proofs to the contrary: there is a great difference between organization born of reformist demands (in one factory, or anywhere else) without going beyond that stage, and *territorial* organization (such as, for example, the AAU’s “economic regions”) which breaks out of the framework of the workplace or the terrain of particular reformist demands, in order to confront society as a whole, beginning with the State. But it is not enough to *invert* Gramscist and DeLeonist gradualism by advocating the seizure of “political power” *before* carrying out social transformations. The Communist International only distinguished *successive* stages.⁹ In its own way, and within a context in which the proletariat did not practically go on the offensive against the very essence of capital, the German Left had distinguished the revolutionary mechanism which was both “political” and “economic”, military and social. In 1919, military forces had moved from one region to another in order to crush the revolution. Today, capital is much more socialized and ubiquitous, but will still have to be dealt with militarily. As Gorter said, revolutionaries cannot act without a party,¹⁰ giving this word the meaning of an *organization* of the communist movement. But this organization can only be constructed within the process of a complete transformation of capitalist social relations, the formation of the human community and the destruction of the world where “life itself appears as a simple means to living”.¹¹

The German Left anticipated certain aspects of the “modern” revolutionary critique: its analysis of parliamentarism as a spectacle (“theater”, “stage”, etc.), for example. But its defeat can also be measured by the fact that it, too, suffered from a gap between its *movement* and the *organizations* which it had provided itself. The 1921 March Action is testimony to how the KAPD, too, acted like “a party in the traditional sense”, exhorting the workers to make the revolution, despite its rank and file’s “break with the leader/follower tradition”.

It is strange to see how Gorter, in his *Last Letter to Lenin*, denies the divisions on the left. By way of a revolutionary, yet numerically small movement, the activity of the German Left was also one of the last mass attempts undertaken to “provide an organization” to the proletariat, within the midst of the bourgeois democratic revolution faced with the problem of creating *representative institutions*. But this attempt took place at a time when it was no longer possible. In this sense the German Left was undoubtedly the expression of the first great proletarian assault, but one which was still carried out within an *organizational* perspective whose debates before and after the war (party/class, leaders/masses, centralism/federalism) led to a conception which was partly false. The war of 1914, by allowing capital to really penetrate all of society, obliged the communist revolution to situate itself on the same terrain or be defeated, as in Germany after 1917. After that time and outside of any revolutionary period, no permanent workers organization independent of capital, or any radical group which is part of the working class environment, has existed.

⁷ *La tragedie de Spartacus*, in *Spartacus et la Commune de Berlin*.

⁸ PC, Nos. 53-54, p. 78

⁹ The IC, No. 12, p. 246.

¹⁰ *Réponse à Lénine*, p. 47.

¹¹ *Manuscrits de 1844*, Oeuvres, Gallimard, II, p. 63.

Afterwards, some people made a total ideological about-face: “All the objective conditions were present. Only one detail was lacking, but this was a detail which, in reality, vulgar Marxism had never taken into account: the subjective will, self-confidence, the value of moving towards what is new. And this detail was everything.”¹² But this was because the previous struggles had not led to a new movement (by integrating the workers struggles into capital) and because the disturbances were too feeble to break with that past (the democratic political revolution of November 1918).¹³

The communist left was the expression of the *crisis* of the proletariat. The communist movement was in a state of crisis at every crucial moment, because it had left capitalist society behind and was building another society at the same time. Some lost hope; others transformed secondary forms into fetishes. But the sign of the subversive power of the German Left is undoubtedly that it prevents us from falling into revolutionary complacency, the idolatry of the proletariat and the anti-materialist belief in the inevitability of communism. Because the defeat of the most combative proletarians affects us so profoundly, it helps us in our efforts to avoid being defeated next time.¹⁴

¹² *Brauner und roter Faschismus*.

¹³ This regression allowed the official Communist Party, in 1958, to detect in this “a bourgeois democratic revolution...realized to a certain degree by proletarian means and methods”. (Ulbricht, quoted by Badia, p. 136).

¹⁴ All theoretical work is a *reaction* against other theoretical works and tends to exaggerate certain aspects. In general, this study should be read in conjunction with *Pannekoek and the Workers Councils* and *La gauche allemande*....

Appendix I

The Groupuscular Phase

Sectarianism

The disagreements between the KAPD and Rühle and between the AAUD and the AAUD-E, Mattick writes, “had no practical meaning... The more one thought in collective terms, the more isolated one became. Capitalism, in its fascistic form, appeared as the only real collectivism...”¹

The reduction of the great organizations of the German Left to the status of *sects* was the consequence of both the end of the revolution in 1921 and of the willingness of a certain number of German Left Communists to preserve their organizations during a period when they no longer played any real role at all in the practical struggles of a working class which had turned in its entirety towards reformist action. Their activity, however, was not reproduced or permanently revived by the real movement. The groups ossified, and nothing was left of them except a skeletal apparatus composed for the most part of old leaders from an intellectual or petty bourgeois background. The mass of workers who had joined these organizations oriented towards revolutionary action returned to “normal life”, since, for the proletariat, the revolution is a moment of “normal life” which arises when this “life” becomes too intolerable, and when the capitalist mode of production, which assures the conditions of this life, itself enters into crisis. The revolution is not a myth, an ideal which must become reality. The revolution is not “made” by “making it”, even when everyone enjoys making it.

In the *Communist Workers International* (1923), Gorter expounds the idea that the revolution’s worst enemies (for a limited, but extensive period) are *all the workers* of all countries. Despite his own inclinations, this recognition obliges him not only to reject the willingness to attach oneself “to the masses” in such a period, but also to reexamine traditional revolutionary activity (“agitation”, “propaganda”) among the workers. On the one hand, the understanding of this point undermines the workerist tendency present in the German Left. On the other hand, it prohibits trying to exhort the workers to make the revolution. This is what Marx thought after 1850, and Bordiga after 1945: but a good part of the left did not take this into account and persisted in its activism.

To speak of *sects* is not merely to indicate the small size of organizations such as the KAPD after 1923, or the fact that all of the left groups taken together, which counted hundreds of thousands of members between 1920 and 1921, and 20,000 in 1923, had only a few hundred members when Hitler seized power. The word *sect* also characterizes a whole range of political practices.² People get together, for example, “on the basis of certain ideas” and work to spread them (in this case the idea of the councils, the idea of the self-activity of the masses, the idea of unitary organization, etc.). Sects have a whole organizational ritual, congresses where speeches

¹ “Otto Rühle and the German Labour Movement”, pp. 107-108.

² Cf. Marx’s letter of October 13, 1868. Cf. also Chapter 14, Note 9.

are made, resolutions adopted, schisms of historical importance take place, etc. After its decline in the early 1920s, the left did “practically” nothing, that is, its impact on immediate reality was null. Its theoretical activity primarily consisted of *repeating* some ideas which had been *produced* by the German revolution; Pannekoek and the Group of International Communists of Holland (GIKH), however, did undertake some theoretical elaboration of these basic themes.

The KAI and the Schism in the KAPD

The birth of the KAI coincided with the decomposition of the KAPD and the AAUD. In reality, it was still-born. Trotsky was unaware of just how correct he was by prophesying at the Third Congress: “The danger that it would grow larger is the least of the problems which would confront a Fourth International, should the latter ever be founded.”³

On July 31, the Central Committee of the KAPD appointed a committee to prepare the foundation of a new international by establishing contacts with various leftist groups in other countries. Two tendencies soon confronted one another over this issue, to which was added the question of participation in wage struggles. The first conflict was between the political and ideological leaders in Berlin (Schröder, Goldstein, Sachs) and the KAPD “administrative committee” (*Geschäftsführender Hauptschuss*), also in Berlin. In effect, in order to “assure democracy within the organization”, two party leaderships overlapped with one another: the administrative committee and the *Zentrale* or central committee. The administrative committee was elected by the party congress in order to attend to day-to-day affairs between congresses. The central committee included, in addition to the administrative committee, one delegate from each party district, and met whenever a political problem arose which had not been addressed by the preceding party congress. The administrative committee was elected by a simple majority of the congress: since the Berlin district represented the majority of the KAPD’s membership, only Berliners were elected to this committee, especially since the great majority of the party’s vital centers were in Berlin. This arsenal of statutes would allow the “intellectuals” room to maneuver in order to get their viewpoints accepted in the party, since the majority of the administrative committee did not necessarily agree with the central committee: this would lead to a split.

The group centered around Schröder, who was the leading spirit behind an “international office of information and organization for the KAI”, came into conflict with the party majority, who judged the construction of an international to be inopportune before the establishment of the KAPD on a more solid footing, whose cadres and general capabilities had been steadily diminishing since the 1921 defeat. This anti-KAI majority also wanted the party, as such, to participate in wage struggles and economic struggles in general, which had, with the ebb of the revolution, come to occupy a preferential place. The minority, known as the “intellectuals”, rejected this kind of compromise. While they were maneuvering to get their line adopted at the March 1922 session of the central committee, they were excluded by the Berlin district. The former leaders of the party then moved their office to Essen.

After this, there were two KAPDs, two *Communist Workers Newspapers*, two AAUDs and two *Kampfrufe* (Call to Struggle), which was the organ of the AAUD. The Essen faction regrouped the old leadership and a few small districts. The Berlin tendency represented the majority of the KAPD and the Berlin district in particular: the latter would survive longer than any other district. Its membership was also much more working class than the other districts.

³ *La nouvelle étape*, pp. 113-114.

For the Essen tendency, building the KAI was its only activity. Having become ill during the time of the factional struggles, Gorter then supported the KAI in his pamphlet, *The Necessity of Reunifying the KAPD*. Once the theoretician of the SDP, then of the KAPD, he became the theoretician of the KAI, together with Schröder. At an April 1922 conference attended only by the KAPD and the Dutch Left, the KAI was founded. This conference adopted the KAI “Guidelines”.⁴ The Bulgarian Communist Workers Party, a representative of the Russian left communists, a delegate from the KAPD youth group, a representative of the Amsterdam group and a delegate from the AAUD also attended the second conference (October 1922). Contacts were also established with Pankhurst’s party.

After September 1921, the Dutch Left formed the Communist Workers Party of the Netherlands, but neither Pannekoek, nor Gorter, nor Roland-Holst was among its members. When the KAPD split took place in Germany, the Dutch party’s majority opted for the Essen tendency. Its August 1922 Congress voted to join the KAI. The Bulgarian party, with its 1,000 members, was undoubtedly the strongest party in the KAI. It was linked to AAU districts in four cities. Strongly influenced by the KAPD schism, it also split into a Varna tendency (analogous to the Berlin tendency) and a Sophia tendency (analogous to that of Essen). The latter rapidly broke up, and, paradoxically, it was the Varna tendency which attended the Second Congress of the KAI. In Russia, the KAI was represented by a much-reduced group, the Revolutionary Workers Opposition, which was illegal and distributed KAPD propaganda. Despite the hopes of the Germans, the Bulgarian Communist Workers Party did not thrive, and soon disappeared. Pankhurst had to content herself with sending greetings to the Second Congress. After the Third and last Congress (November 1924), the KAI existed merely as an idea periodically propagated by an office staff.⁵⁻⁶

The AAUD-E

The AAUD-E spawned numerous factions. Until 1925, its leadership was in the hands of Rühle, Pfempfert and J. Broh (who had left the USPD). There were many expressionist artists on the editorial committees of *Die Aktion* and *Die Einheitsfront* (the United Front), the main journal of the AAUD-E. One tendency wanted to unite with the FAUD. Another wanted to participate in wage struggles and the elections for the legal works councils – this faction was excluded. Another tendency, the so-called Heidenau or “smokestack autonomy” tendency, defended absolute autonomy. Finally, the “council communist” or “centralist” tendency fought to make the resolutions approved by the AAUD-E’s Congress compulsory for all the organization’s members.

The latter tendency emerged victorious and made the AAUD-E into an organization which was no longer opposed to the KAPD and the AAUD on the issue of “organizational principles”. The efforts of the Berlin KAPD to achieve reunification were rejected until 1925. The Heidenau tendency moved in 1923 towards resolutely anti-organizational positions of principle, mixed with anti-intellectualism: it dissolved itself in December 1923.

⁴ *La gauche allemande...*

⁵ Between 1925 and 1927, one finds, for example, the bulletin *Vulcan*, “Organ of the KAI”, published by a second KAI which was a rival of the first. The bulletin proclaimed “the death crisis” and called upon the proletarians to join the KAI. It also outlined an analysis of the development of society towards a pyramidal structure which would fuse the classes, anticipating the theses of *S ou B* during the 1960s, and of *Invariance* during the 1970s. It took into account the contacts made in the east.

⁶ Compare with the first issue of *Bilan* (Brussels, 1933), at that time the organ of the PCI left, pp. 2-3.

“All organizations pursue their own survival. The united front of all the creators cannot be realized in the factories and in the countryside unless the organizations rid themselves of all their defining characteristics, since they smuggle the bacillus of schism and therefore the absence of unity into the workers movement with their programs, their leaders and their factory walls. They constitute an obstacle to progress. The comrades of Heidenau have arrived at the necessary conclusions and, first of all, destroy their own organization.”⁷

K. Guttman, a member of the AAUD-E, declared: “In the German proletariat, whatever does not teach organization is not revolutionary” (*Los von Moskau!*, published by the AAUD-E of Hamburg).⁸

In 1925, Rühle, judging that the reaction was too powerful to justify the continuation of revolutionary activity, resigned from the AAUD-E. According to the historians of the GDR,⁹ he rejoined the SPD. This seems quite improbable, especially since these *Documents* from East Germany do not document Rühle’s departure from the AAUD-E. In addition, he was to continue to make theoretical contributions within the left tradition.

The AAUD-E joined two other groups in 1926 to form the Spartacus League of Left Communist Organizations (or “Spartacus No. 2”) under the patronage of Pfempfert and *Die Aktion*. The other two groups in this organization were the Industrial Union of Transport Workers and Ivan Katz’s group, which had recently been excluded from the KPD for “Trotskyism”. This fusion earned the ridicule of the KAPD, but the Berlin tendency would do the same thing a few months later (cf. below). Despite this cartel of organizations, the AAUD-E’s membership was falling towards zero, and had no more than 31 members when it fused with the AAUD in 1931 to rejoin the KAPD.

The KAPD (Essen tendency)

The Essen tendency was at first the weakest of the KAPD organizations. In 1923, a tendency concentrated in Leipzig, the Council Communist League, broke with the Essen tendency, and also moved towards anti-organizational and anti-leadership positions of principle. It moved closer to the Heidenau tendency of the AAUD-E. J. Borchardt (cf. Chapter 4) had already arrived at such a position at the war’s end. Such attitudes were also to be encountered in the FAUD’s *Die Schöpfung* tendency; the FAUD’s anarchosyndicalist leadership reproached this tendency for its “individualism”. It was an important current within the German Left. These groups and individuals felt the need to theorize their withdrawal from the “life of the militant”, which the working class base of the leftist organizations had accomplished without having posed any philosophical problems. Principled anti-intellectualism is a problem for intellectuals. Similarly, the principled rejection of any organization is also the inverted expression of what Luxemburg called “organizational cretinism” (yet without understanding it: cf. Chapter 4). It was Schröder, himself a lawyer and a KAPD leader, who set the tone at the August 1920 KAPD Conference: “Something very important has come up in the debate: the proletarian instinct to feel that it is necessary to free ourselves from the intellectuals.” (This may be an allusion to Rühle, whom the Congress had decided, however, not to exclude). It is this instinct which issues the warning: “Don’t take advantage of us! Think of the millions of dead sacrificed for the

⁷ Quoted by Bock, p. 322.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

⁹ *Dokumente und Materialien zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, Institute of Marxism-Leninism of the Central Committee of the SED, 1957 and 1966.

slogans of the leaders! And under no circumstance are you to take advantage of us in the interests of any kind of theory!”

Two years later, these statements would return to haunt Schröder and his comrades: they would be accused of playing a role within the revolutionary organizations which could not even be attempted within the bourgeois parties.

“The idea that knowledge is superior to all the other manifestations and functions of human life has a basis which is easily explained by historical materialism: the development of mechanical thinking within the capitalist economic form. Accounting and calculation, which only present knowledge, have become vital laws for the capitalist economic form, which are reflected in the spiritual life of bourgeois society through the glorification of the intellect, of knowledge” (*Die Revolution*, journal of the Heidenau tendency, No. 20, 1922).

It was the rejection of scientism, of the dictatorship of theoretical knowledge and “consciousness” (preceding action) which is brought by knowledge and science, as this latter trend was manifested in the socialist movement (Kautsky): but this rejection would in effect be based upon the framework of a false opposition between intellect and spontaneity.

In 1925, the principle leaders of the Essen tendency (Schröder, Reichenbach, and Goldstein) returned to the SPD. Others, like Sachs, abandoned all political activity. The timing of this exodus, which coincided with Rühle’s departure from the AAUD-E, can be explained by the repression of leftist organizations and the KPD after the conclusion of the 1923 crisis, from which neither the KAPD nor the AAUD would recover. Furthermore, for all those who still wanted to “be political”, the KPD, in the midst of “Bolshevization”, was not the ideal location. The Red Combatants group (*Die Roten Kämpfer*) carried out agitation within the SPD: after 1923, it went underground and undertook resistance activities. Its members were arrested and imprisoned in 1936. After the war, Schröder unsuccessfully attempted to form a leftist group. We should also note that at the same time that Schröder and his friends returned to the SPD, the SPD (which was in power in Prussia) forced the AAUD and the KAPD into a long-anticipated clandestinity. Gorter, meanwhile, died in 1927. The *Communist Workers Newspaper* (Essen tendency) appeared regularly until 1929, and was largely dedicated to a critique of the reformism of its fraternal groups on the left.

The KAPD (Berlin tendency)

Together with the Berlin AAUD, the Berlin KAPD was the most working-class of all the surviving left groups. Its leadership was for the most part anonymous. It was, in brief, more activist than the other groups, launching numerous calls for insurrection in 1923, but it was also non-existent outside Berlin.

The Fifth Congress of the KAPD (Berlin tendency) elaborated a Second Program which was more detailed than the first. It attempted, in particular, to provide more depth to the idea of the “death crisis” of capitalism, which had until then remained more or less just a slogan. During the groupuscular phase, this idea was converted into a pseudo-theory to justify the organizations’ continued existence, since the “death crisis” was linked to the immanent resumption of the movement. This notion, however, had remained relatively unchanged since the war. In their attempt to theorize a bold new formulation of the death crisis, the Berlin KAPists relied on Luxemburg. They conceived of the crisis as a crisis of the market, which found all the outlets it needed in neither wars, nor in growing state demand. This conception was shared by all the left currents during this period, with the exception of a small minority which formed in 1924 within the Berlin group, as well as a few Dutch leftists close to Pannekoek, *who had already*

attacked this thesis prior to the war (cf. Chapter 3). These elements were to comprise the nucleus of the future Dutch GIKH and of the KAU in Germany.

In 1926, the “grenade affair” took place, as well as the schism of the Berlin KAPD. The English press had revealed that the Russians were contributing to German rearmament, offering Germany the use of training camps on Russian soil. The SPD took advantage of the scandal to attack the KPD. The KAPD called attention to the affair by publishing *From Revolution to Counterrevolution: Russia Arms the Reichswehr* (Berlin, 1927). The KAPD found itself in agreement with a recently-excluded KPD faction (E. Schwach and K. Korsch).¹⁰ Schwach, who was a parliamentary deputy, participated in the campaign by denouncing the collusion between the “Soviet” and German governments. He formed the group called the “Determined Left” (*Entschiedene Linke*), which eventually fused with the KAPD-Berlin, after having lost most of its members. This merger posed some delicate problems, because Schwach did not want to resign his seat in parliament.¹¹ The KAPD rank and file, who had not been consulted throughout this affair, underwent a schism, which led to the creation of two new press organs: *Kommunistische Arbeiter* (the Communist Worker), *Organ der KAPD-Opposition*, and *Klassenfront, Organ der AAUD-Opposition*. They denounced the opportunist parliamentarism of the leadership, which accused the opposition of being manipulated by the Dutch (a small group which split from the Dutch Communist Party and whose theses had some influence on part of the Berlin KAPD; see below).

Although part of this opposition returned to the party in 1928, the wound was healed only by means of an extreme weakening of the organization, since their return coincided with the departure of the AAUD-Opposition tendency. After 1928, this KAPD tendency was no longer any more important than its Essen counterpart. One of its members, Weiland, was arrested in 1933 for having been in contact with Marinus Van der Lubbe, the Reichstag arsonist (cf. below). Other members of the KAPD formed clandestine resistance groups after 1933, the “Revolutionary Shop Stewards” and the “Group of International Socialists”, which still existed in Berlin after 1945. They published the journal *Neues Beginn* (New Beginning) in Berlin from 1945 to 1950. They were involved with the journal *Funken* during the 1950s, and published *From the Bottom Up, Pages for Direct Democracy* in Berlin.

The AAUD (Berlin tendency) and the KAU

The AAUD-Berlin underwent a schism at its Seventh Conference in 1927, when the majority declared their support for participation in the partial struggles of the working class, the sole proviso being that the workers themselves must conduct the struggles. The AAUD urged its members to form “action committees” in the factories to prepare wildcat strikes. For the first time in its history it would therefore conduct an economic struggle: the struggle of the North Sea fisherman in 1927. The theses of the Eighth Conference also no longer spoke of the need for a separate party, and consequently for the KAPD, undoubtedly as a result of the Schwach affair. A little later the AAUD declared that it would henceforth assume the tasks of the KAPD. Thus, there was no longer any principled opposition to the vestiges of the AAUD-E, which led

¹⁰ For this period, cf. S. Bahne, *Cahiers de l'ISEA*, December 1972, “Entre le ‘Luxembourgeoisisme’ et le ‘Stalinisme’: l’opposition d’ ‘ultra-gauche’ dans le KPD”; R. Fischer’s (extremely biased) book; and S. Bricianer’s Introduction to Korsch, *Marxisme et contre-révolution*.

¹¹ The Italian Left would also renounce its anti-parliamentarism for several years, claiming that it was not a question “of principle”. Cf. the documents collected in the *Bulletin d’Étude et de Discussion of Révolution Internationale*, June 1974, No. 7; and *Bordiga et la passion*...., pp. 223-224.

to the creation of the KAUD, into which the two organizations fused: at the moment of its founding (Christmas 1931), the KAUD had 343 members. This unification took place, in part, on the advice of the GIKH, with which the AAUD had been in close contact since 1927. The acronym itself, KAU (Communist Workers Union), contrasted with the old name (General Workers Union), indicating that the Germans for their part accepted one of the principle conceptions of the GIKH: the working class must organize itself, no one can attempt to be the pole of this process of self-organization:¹² after 1933 the KAU clandestinely distributed the bulletin *Rätekorrespondenz*, printed with the help of the GIKH in Holland, calling upon the radical workers to form communist workers groups and to carry on the struggle independently of democratic anti-Nazism.

During the crucial years 1920-1930, the Netherlands took up the torch of council communism. After 1945, however, the remnants of this current were relatively strong in central Germany (which became *East Germany*). All the leftists who resumed their activity or who were recognized by the KPD, a total of several hundred, were arrested.¹³ The 1953 workers uprisings in this part of Germany assumed the forms of the council movement, in consonance with the relative backwardness of East German capital during that era.¹⁴

Council Communism in the Netherlands

The Dutch Communist Workers Party subsisted until the 1930s, holding fast to the positions of the KAPD-Essen. A small minority, however, including H. Canne Meijer (with whom Pannekoek sympathized) broke with the party due to the issues of the death crisis and day-to-day practice. This group, which represented only a few individuals, established contacts with some members of the Berlin tendencies of the KAPD and AAUD. In 1927 it set up a Press Service of the International Communists. In 1930 the AAUD published a text composed by the GIKH: *The Fundamentals of Communist Production and Distribution*,¹⁵ one of the basic texts of the councilist left.

The essential idea of the text is that the “communist economy”, like any other, needs an accounting unit to respond to society’s needs without resorting to commercial accounting and economic regulation by way of the law of value. This unit is social average labor time. This thesis takes it for granted that communism will still have an *economy*, and that average social labor time would be a measure on a par with the liter or the kilogram. The theory has the merit of posing the question of *communism*; but, by introducing the general accounting unit – a unit of average labor time not determined by the market – it preserves the value relation, the general equivalent, even though it destroys its apparent forms: money, etc. Communism, however, as Bordiga was alone in repeating for many years, is the supersession of all kinds of commercial value; if this kind of value must be counted, it is in physical quantities, but not in order to quantify and regulate an exchange which no longer exists.¹⁶

¹² C. Meijer: *Le mouvement des conseils en Allemagne*, ICO, supplement to No. 101, p. 18.

¹³ Bock, p. 348.

¹⁴ B. Sarel: *La classe ouvrière d’Allemagne orientale*, ed. Ouvrières, 1958.

¹⁵ *Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution*, English translation available online at www.geocities.com/Athens/Aegean/6579/.

¹⁶ *Structure économique et sociale de la Russie...*, pp. 191 et seq., p. 205, *passim*.

The Dutch leftists, however, had reinvented a thesis which had already been criticized by Marx in his critique of Proudhon.¹⁷ The idea of a conscious and *direct* calculation of abstract average labor time, without passing through the mediation of money, is foreign to the communist perspective, which eventually only counts in physical quantities (in the fullest sense of the term).¹⁸

The GIKH was quite consistent and became very influential, since it had the merit, in comparison to the remnants of the KAPD, of not wanting to “make the revolution”, and devoted its efforts to small tasks imposed by reality. Just as the Dutch Left had initially possessed a more accurate perception of reality than the Germans, who were attached to the illusion of action (SPD, etc.), the Dutch councilists, after 1930, also had a more realistic and, ultimately, more effective vision than the vestiges of the movement in Germany itself. The GIKH would publish pamphlets by Pannekoek (*Lenin as Philosopher*, for example), a German language journal (*Rätekorrespondenz*) with contributions from people outside its group (Korsch, Mattick a former KAPist Wagner). Its Press Service, in Dutch and German, was replaced in 1938 by *Raden Kommunisme*. There was also an organ published in Esperanto: *Klas Batalo*. All of these journals hosted numerous political and theoretical debates (cf. Appendix II). In addition, the GIKH “intervened without intervening” in everyday struggles, somewhat like the ICO in France after the war (cf. below).

The Reichstag Fire

There was also a much more workerist group in Holland during this period: the *Linkse Arbeideroppositie*, which had been excluded from Sneevliet’s semi-Trotskyist Revolutionary Socialist Party, whose organ was the journal *Spartacus*. This group, in the person of one of its members, Van der Lubbe, seems to have had to its credit the burning of the Reichstag in February of 1933. In any event, the group applauded this action and claimed Van der Lubbe as one of its own. Under the name of the International Van der Lubbe Committee,¹⁹ the group published a *Red Book* (in response to the *Brown Book* published in Basel by “fellow-travelers” of the USSR in 1933). This book explains that this symbolic critique of parliamentarism (which was actually a symbol of such a critique, however powerful the act) was intended to make an impression on the German workers, and to convince them that the struggle against National Socialism would never succeed on the terrain of parliament. The GIKH energetically rejected all such methods.²⁰ The *Linkse Arbeideroppositie* later published the journal *De Arbeidersraad*.

The numerous small councilist groups of the 1930s went into hiding at the time of the German invasion. In 1940, however, Sneevliet created the Marx-Lenin-Luxemburg Front, with the journal *Spartacus*, “Organ of the Third Front”, which was joined by many former members of the GIKH. When Germany attacked the USSR in June of 1941, the MLL Front majority rejected “any defense of the USSR”. When the leaders of the Front were arrested in 1942, and

¹⁷ *Fondements de la critique de l'économie politique*, Anthropos, Vol. I, 1967, Part I.

¹⁸ On the “estimation of costs” in communism, cf. *Un monde sans argent*, OJTR, 1975, Vol. II.

¹⁹ This committee published *M. Van der Lubbe: prolétaire ou provocateur?*, 1934, reprinted by La Veille Taupe, 1972. Tried by the Nazis at the same time, one of the leaders of the Communist International, Dimitrov, denounced Van der Lubbe as a “provocateur”, and asked “that he be condemned for having acted against the proletariat”. Dimitrov’s wish was granted: Van der Lubbe was executed.... Cf. *Bilan*, No. 3 (January 1934), pp. 81-87.

²⁰ Kool: p. 530.

eight of them were executed, the council communists abandoned this organization and joined the *Communistenbond Spartacus*, rejecting any kind of collaboration with either side in the conflict, since both merely represented different forms of the rule of capital. This group still contained ex-trotskyists who had not freed themselves from the virus of activism, which led to a new split in 1947, when the leadership decided to create a new version of the AAU, at a time when no revolutionary factory organizations actually existed. What remained of the Spartacus *Bond* experienced the same phenomenon in 1964: the anti-activist minority founded the journal *Daad en Gedachte* (Action and Thought), to which C. Brendel contributed.²¹

Developments in Bulgaria

Although there is a paucity of information on the subject, it was in this country that the leftist movement (of the German type) was actually strongest. In June of 1923, Stamboulisky (cf. Chapter 17) was overthrown by a military coup d'état. The Bulgarian Communist Party assessed the situation in accordance with the Russian experience of February-October 1917, and fully assimilated this military coup with the Kornilov affair. Rejecting the united front "from above" with the Peasants Union, it remained neutral in the face of what it assessed to be two equally bourgeois camps. The Communist International was aware of this and urged the Bulgarians to change course, and not to follow this "leftist" orientation but to launch an insurrection, which failed, in September. In this instance the anarchists played an important role. In the end, the cities had been less involved than the countryside. Considering the army's weakness (reduced to 20,000 men by the postwar treaties), the Bulgarian Communist Party's strategy was by no means absurd: to strike a hard blow in Sofia after having dispersed the forces of the State by means of a generalized agitation. But this "offensive" was also just a putsch like the one in Hamburg the following month, although the social base was much more extensive in Bulgaria.²²

The evolution of the Bulgarian groups and tendencies then became extremely complicated, but was nonetheless of some significance. N. Sakarov, who had abandoned the "narrows" in 1908, and was a patriot during the war, led the socialists who joined the Communist Party in 1920, presided over the parliamentary group of eight Communist Party deputies elected in November of 1923, and announced at the end of December in parliament that he condemned the Communist Party's insurrection, and that he was committed to legality.²³ He was also against the alliance with the peasants which the Communist Party was then implementing. The exiled Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party then excluded him. Nonetheless, Sakarov himself published, in November of 1924, the first issue of *Proletarii* as the *organ of the Bulgarian section of the KAI*. According to Rothschild, this journal, which defended Marxist principles against the two Internationals, viewed Russia as "a second variant of capitalism" and insisted upon the opposition between the interests of workers, peasants and artisans, and that it would be vain to try to create a united front.

Meanwhile, Ganchev, leader of the Bulgarian Communist Workers Party in 1920, who had nevertheless returned to the official Communist Party after June of 1923 with a small group of followers, published, with the approval of the Communist Party's Central Committee, the journal *Lach* (Starlight: always the proletarian *Aufklärung*) in October 1923. Ganchev

²¹ For a critique of certain aspects of this group, cf. the *Revue théorique* of the International Communist Current, No. 2.

²² Rothschild: p. 143, et seq

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

wanted to facilitate a Sakarov-CP rapprochement and opened the columns of *Lach* to the two currents without initially favoring one or the other. He later grew increasingly critical of the Central Committee, without entirely taking Sakarov's side. He was eventually excluded, and would fall victim to the white terror in 1925. The Central Committee emerged victorious, and Sakarov was reduced to the leader of a small sect. Some of his supporters, as elsewhere, became "Trotskyists" (S. Zadgorski, who started in the Bulgarian Communist Workers Party and later returned to the Communist Party). The Communist Party would have great difficulty in controlling the unexpected adventurist tendencies of some of its members, and would not achieve complete control over its organization until the mid-1930s.

Ambiguity and confusion were so characteristic of the Left that one cannot easily oppose a "communist left" to a degenerate Communist Party. Sakarov's position (as well as Ganchev's to some extent), rejecting a compromise with non-working class elements, was, on the one hand, a distorted proletarian demand (Gorter had correctly written that the workers stand alone, but he was talking about Western Europe). But it was also a direct defense of the interests of the working class *qua* socio-professional category. This position could lend itself to integration within a reformism which would pit workers and capital against the other social groups.

Other Countries

We shall only deal briefly with some offshoots of the German Left. Issue No. 101 of *ICO* mentions the existence of groups in Greece, Romania, Yugoslavia, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Denmark. In Belgium, prior to World War Two, one group published the *Bulletin de la Ligue des Communistes Internationalistes*.²⁴ There was a Flemish group in Ambers after the war.²⁵ In the United States, Mattick published the journals *Council Correspondence*, *Living Marxism* and *New Essays*²⁶ between 1934 and 1943. Other German immigrants in Melbourne (Australia) published the *Southern Advocate for Workers Councils* and reprinted Pannekoek's postwar book *Workers Councils*.

In France, a group linked to the GIKH published *L'Internationale*.²⁷ A "Spartacus Group" was formed in Paris in 1931, composed of German émigrés (A. Heinrich) and A. Prudhommeaux. This group published several issues of *L'Ouvrier Communiste* and, later, the journal *Spartacus*, propagandizing for the councils and presenting the first description of the German council movement to a French audience. This group also published the *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin*, both in its journal as well as in pamphlet form.²⁸

²⁴ On Belgium, cf. also Chapter 16, Note 1.

²⁵ According to Kool.

²⁶ The entire collection of these three journals (1934-1943) was published as a reprint by Greenwood Corp., Westport, Connecticut, 1970. Cf. the anthology, *La contre-révolution bureaucratique*, which places too much emphasis, as its title indicates, on the "anti-bureaucratic" aspect.

²⁷ Extracts from this group's text, in French, can be found in *La légende de la gauche au pouvoir. Le Front populaire*, Le Tête de Feuilles, 1973.

²⁸ A selection of texts from *Bilan* on the Spanish Revolution is available in *Bilan: Contre-révolution en Espagne, 1936-39*, 10/18, 1979.

The group which founded the ICO at the end of the 1950s came, in part, from *L'Internationale*.²⁹ Another, much smaller, group, founded in 1959 and still in existence, published the bulletin *Lutte de classes*, which is quite workerist but offers profound analyses of capitalism and workers struggles.³⁰ In this sense it recalls the GIKH. The journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, born of a split in the Fourth (Trotskyist) International, which rediscovered or re-employed old formulations of the German Left, without vindicating themselves by ever clearly mentioning their affiliation with that current, succumbed to council fetishism, only to end, in the 1960s, with self-management, democracy and group dynamics.³¹ For all of these groups,³² “the councils are the parliaments of the working class”, in accordance with the definition provided by Karl Roche, one of the founders of the AAUD in 1919.³³

²⁹ The ICO disappeared in 1973, but now exists in the form of *Echanges et Mouvement*. For a critique of this current and of certain aspects of the German Left, see *Leninism and the Ultra-Left in Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement*, Antagonism, 1998.

³⁰ Cf. also its collection *Contre le courant*

³¹ *S ou B*'s error was rooted from the very beginning in its definition of capital as a system of management: cf. *Communisme et “question russe”*, pp. 15-20, and P. Guillaume's postscript to *Rapports de production en Russie*.

³² We will not deal here with the currents which, among other things, have tried to “synthesize”, if one can speak in this manner, the German and Italian Lefts. Particularly, after 1945: *Internationalisme* (later *Révolution Internationale*), and then *Invariance*.

³³ *Was wollen die Syndikalisten?*, p. 6.

Appendix II

Bibliography of Topics Addressed by the German Left during the 1930s

The Russian Question

During the 1920s, the dominant conception was that the peasants were the ruling class in Russia. Later, approximately in the mid-1930s, the thesis of "State Capitalism", originally conceived by Rühle in 1920 (cf. Chapter 16), prevailed within the GIKH. The *Theses on Bolshevism* (1934) analyzed the entire process which resulted in Stalinist Russia: it was, more or less, similar to the idea expressed in our introduction to Trotsky's *Report of the Siberian Delegation*. Pannekoek was the first to bring this conception to Northwest Europe, with his article "De Arbeiders het Parlement en het Communisme" (*Rätekorrespondenz*). He applied it in his *Lenin and Philosophy*.

Another group, which was close to Mattick, and which published *De Arbeidersraad*, did not want to hear anything of "State Capitalism" and "State Socialism", and still considered the Bolshevik Party to be a "peasant party", even after collectivization: cf. Volume II, No. 2, February 1936.

A text written by a French worker who had worked in Russia had a great deal of influence on the Dutch Left in relation to this particular issue: *Ce qu'est devenue la Révolution russe*, by Yvon, published in Paris in 1937.

Nazism and Fascism

Like the Italian Left, the German Left of that time had the merit of having denounced democratic anti-fascism and anti-Nazism as the "worst products of fascism" (Bordiga), as well as of never having resorted to using the political arguments of Nazism as the KPD had in the early 1930s, and of never having offered its collaboration to Mussolini as the Italian Communist Party had at the end of the 1930s.

Under Nazism, the position of the German Left was to contribute to the formation of communist workers groups on the same basis as in the early 1920s, but under conditions of clandestinity: "No 'special' communist program for Germany" (cf. *Masses*, No. 1). Its ideological position would evolve. Until 1933 it did not believe that Nazism would be successful. When Hitler took power, the small publications which were still being published predicted his rapid downfall: the policy of setting the unemployed to work on various "unproductive" projects would not prevent a new round of inflation and the aggravation of the deteriorating living conditions of the working class, which would go on the offensive. They also criticized the false democratic alternatives. When, after the passage of a few years, Nazism was well-established, and the situation of the workers had improved, making Hitler as popular among them as among the other social classes, the leftists were the first to admit this fact and to try to explain it. They interpreted the behavior of the German proletarians as the result of what they had been taught in the old workers movement (Lassalle and social democracy) which had always said that the State is the providence of all of society: one must expect everything from State measures and nothing from spontaneous actions (cf. *Spartacus*, published by a working group of revolutionary

workers in Amsterdam, No. 3, 1936 or 1937). Pannekoek would add his critique of the Bolshevism cult of the party and its leaders: cf. *The Workers Councils*, quoted by F. Kool, p. 570.

At this stage, the result was an attitude of non-participation, of choosing neither side; in the Second World War, Rühle declared in 1939, fascism-nazism-stalinism would be victorious because they corresponded to the general tendency of capitalism towards State Capitalism. It was useless to defend the democracies; the only real alternative to fascism was the proletarian revolution. “The struggle against fascism begins with the struggle against Bolshevism”: this thesis was also shared by Mattick and, in general, by all the leftists (cf. our commentary, Chapter 17).

On the origins of Nazism:

“Fascismus, Parlamentarismus und Proletariat”, *Kampfruf*, Vol. II, No. 9, 1923.

“Der Weg ins Nichts”, “Radauantisemitismus”, *Kampfruf*, Vol. IV, Nos. 29 and 32, 1923.¹

“Die Triebkräfte des Antisemitismus”, *Proletarier*, Berlin, Vol. V, No. 6, 1924.²

“Der Hitlerprozess der Prozess Republik”, *KAZ* Essen, Vol. III, 1924.³

A. Lehmann, “The Economic, Political and Social Causes of Fascism”, *Masses*, November 25, 1933.

On Italian fascism: “Violence reigns in Italy”, “The road to fascism passes through democracy”, *KAZ* Berlin, Vol. VI, No. 92, and Vol. VIII, No. 35, 1937.

On the eve of Hitler’s seizure of power in 1933:

“Hitler’s victory opens the door to civil war”, “Heinrich Laufenberg”, “Proletarians: Listen for the Signal!”, “Mass mobilization”, “The roots of national-socialism”, *Kampfruf* organ of the KAU after 1931 Vol. XI, No. 38, 1930; Vol. XIII, Nos. 1, 5 and 6, 1932.

“Das tote Rennen”, special edition of *KAZ*, Vol. II, No. 2, 1932.⁴

“The rolling stone”, “Domestic political struggles”, *KAZ* Berlin, Vol. XIII, No. 10, 1932. *Massenaktion*, Berlin, 1933 (KAU pamphlet).

Kritik an den Waffen!, AAU pamphlet, Leipzig-Chemnitz district, 1931.⁵

After Hitler’s seizure of power:

“Diktaturkabinett Hitler”, “You must still vote!” “Der Bankrott des National-Sozialismus”, *Kampfruf*, Vol. XIV, Nos. 3 and 3-4, February 1933.

“Die proletarische Front”, “The ‘redemption of the nation’ begins”, special edition of *KAZ*, Year 3, No. 2, February 1933.

After the stabilization of the regime (in addition to the *Spartacus* article cited above):

“To the groups of the GIKH”, *Rätekorrespondenz*, No. 16-17, May 1936.

“Is Nazi-Duitsland Kapitalistische?”, *Radencommunisme*, Year 1, No. 8, 1939.⁶

¹ “The Road to Nothingness”, “The Anti-Semitism of the Sewers”.

² “The Motives of Anti-Semitism”.

³ “The Hitler-Trial — The Trial of the German Republic”.

⁴ “The Death Race”.

⁵ “The Critique of Arms”.

⁶ “Nazi Germany: Is It Capitalist?”

There is little material concerning World War Two (in comparison with the Italian Left), and nothing we are aware of, except the articles by Korsch reproduced in *Marxism and Counter-revolution*, Chapter XII.

The “Death Crisis”

It would be impossible to *summarize* the theses and debates on this issue. For the supporters of the death crisis thesis, we cite: “Wereldcrisis, wereldrevolutie”,⁷ *De Arbeidersraad*, Year 1, No. 8, August 1935, and an article by Mattick in *Rätekorrespondenz*, No. 4, 1934, a response to a previous article by Pannekoek. This tendency, after having returned to Luxemburg’s conceptions in the 1920s, saw its concept of the death crisis confirmed by the social democratic economist H. Grossmann, who published *Das Akkumulations und zusammenbruchs gesetz des Kapitalistischen systems* in 1929 (reprinted by Verlag Neue Kritik, Frankfurt, 1967). Pannekoek criticized Grossmann in the article we reproduce below (cf. Chapter XII of C. Brendel’s book on Pannekoek).⁸

Fundamentals and Content of Communism

The supplement to the first issue of *ICO* published the translation of a text from 1935 (*Rätekorrespondenz*, Nos. 10-11): “Average social labor time, basis for communist production and distribution”, which summarizes the *Grundprinzipien des Kommunistischen Produktion und Verteilung*, reprinted by Rüdiger-Blankertz Verlag, West Berlin. All subsequent texts on this subject (Mattick, Pannekoek’s *Workers Councils*) would accept this idea as their basis.

Various texts show that the left (after the 1930s) did not theorize its break with democracy, “freedom”, etc., and that its rejection of the dictatorship of the proletariat was not just a matter of words: “Communism and Intellectual Freedom”, *Radencommunisme*, Year 1, No. 12, August 1939, and “Arbeiders-demokratie in de bedrijven” by C. Meijer, in the same journal, in 1944 or 1945. This culminated in *The Workers Councils*.

Most of the texts mentioned in this bibliography cannot be found “for sale”, but can be consulted or photocopied at the International Institute for Social History, 262-266 Herengracht, Amsterdam.

⁷ “World Crisis, World Revolution”.

⁸ “Workers Democracy as a Political Position”.

Appendix III

*Note on “National Bolshevism”**

* [See, also, the author’s new updated comments on “The National-Bolshevik Aberration and its Meaning”, included in the “Epilogue” to this revised English language edition. (Translator’s note).]

The clarification of what is known as National Bolshevism does not serve merely a tactical or polemical purpose, in opposition to those who, since Lenin, have utilized this current to discredit the left. National Bolshevism also exhibited some of the ambiguities which have afflicted communism since the time of Marx and Engels: the revolutionary position to be adopted in regards to war once again posed a mass of problems.

The communist movement was effectively absorbed by the democratic and nationalist movement of 1848. This development had already been of considerable significance even before 1848. The movement in England had been submerged within Chartism, and then, after the 1840s, in its defeat. What the Communist League had gained in terms of theoretical precision in regard to the analysis of capitalism and the means for revolution (dictatorship of the proletariat), in comparison to its predecessors, the League of the Exiles and the League of the Just, it lost in regard to the depth of its affirmation of the content of *communism*.¹ Unlike Engels’ initial project, the *Manifesto* does not mention the suppression of exchange. This development was a complex movement, and was simultaneously a process of the breakdown of social bonds as well as a manifestation of progress. The communitarian perspective was best rooted in the analysis of capital and was at the same time conceived of primarily within the context of its political dimension (the problem of power, relations with the bourgeois revolution). The course of events caused this contradiction to grow more acute. In 1848-1849, the League did not intervene in the revolutions under its own banners: it judged that it was more realistic to advise its members to act individually within the democratic organizations born of the bourgeois revolution.² In France, the “neo-Babouvists” or “materialist communists”, like D ezamy, who were active before 1848, disappeared in the turmoil and were unable to assert themselves as such.³ *The New Rhineland Gazette*, led by Marx, became the “Organ of democracy”. It would be useless to try to explain this strategy, which has been justified countless times. It was not the unavoidable compromise with the still-ascendant capitalism which was in question, but the conditions under which this compromise was made. One cannot deny the objective effect of the

¹ Cf. *Un monde sans argent: le communisme*, Part 2.

² Cf. Marx-Engels, *Correspondance*,  d. Sociales, Vol. I, 1971, p. 539, Note I.

³ *Le n o-babouvisme d’apr s la presse (1837-48)*, in *Babeuf et les probl mes du babouvisme*,  d. Sociales, 1960, pp. 247-276. See also: A. Maillard, *La Communaut  des Egaux*, Ed. Kim , 1999.

pressure of circumstances on the communist movement. The reformist compromises made by Marx and Engels, as well as by other revolutionaries, predated the era of the IWA. The weakness of the movement led it to seek external factors which could revive the struggle, to replace the flagging proletariat. In 1848, Marx advocated a revolutionary war by a united Germany against Russia, just as he would, in 1870, consider a Prussian victory over France as favorable, since such a victory would unify the German revolutionary movement and undermine France enough to liquidate the Proudhonists. Marx continued to hope that the wars of his time would reactivate the revolutionary movement.

It is not enough to claim that, during Marx’s time, national wars could still play a subversive role, which role would terminate with the end of capital’s ascendant phase: the “national bolshevism” of 1919 would thus make no sense from the revolutionary point of view. We must also ask ourselves about the strength (and the possible influence) of the communist movement in the epoch in question: if it was as weak as it was in 1848-1849, then how would it have been possible to hope for an eventual German victory over Russia when such an outcome would exclusively strengthen the German *bourgeoisie* rather than the proletariat? It is surprising that Marx underestimated the counterrevolutionary force of nationalism. From this perspective, the “error” of Wolffheim and Laufenberg reproduced Marx’s error in an absurd form.

The idea of using such a war to reactivate the revolutionary movement, which is in itself insufficient, is inscribed within a much broader illusion, that of a “strategy” which would allow the supersession of the objective limitations of circumstances by means of ingenious alliances on a planetary scale. The notion of such a total strategy belongs to anti-materialist scientism. It presupposes the understanding of rational laws whose rule would provide the key and the means to action. Often practiced by Marx, and theorized in numerous works by Bordiga, it became a systematic pathology in the journal *Le fil du Temps* and in R. Dangeville, whose introductions and notes to his translations of Marx describe a Marx who was always right and who had foreseen everything: even when he was wrong, his error was still more profound than the apparent truth... But it is not a question of counting errors, or of reconstructing an allegedly coherent system which revolutionaries do not need. Others, in an opposite sense, enjoy celebrating proletarian initiative and will to struggle, or theorizing irrationalism, which is only the symmetrical and worst product of bourgeois rationalism. To speak of “revolutionary reformism”⁴ is to take it for granted that Marx understood that the communist revolution was not the order of the day, and that he had limited himself to inciting capital to the next stage of capitalist development. Marx’s reformism is therefore justified in the name of the immaturity of the preconditions for revolution. This position is characterized by the intervention of *hindsight*. It projects the analysis of the causes of the defeats of bygone days (which is only possible today) upon the past, as if it would have been possible *in that epoch* to be certain that any revolution was condemned to defeat. This conception does not analyze the facts on the basis of their dynamic, and, as Marx said concerning the Historical School of Law, history can only be seen “*a posteriori*”.

Faced with the war, Lenin only saw a change at the level of political structures and the failure of a particular orientation, but not the failure of a whole type of workers activity and organization. In his text published in 1915, Gorter discerned the end of an epoch in 1914, which also implied, he said, the death of art. He considered 1914 to be a profound, crushing defeat for proletarians. Without being able to explicitly express it, he had intuited capital’s power, its expansion over the previous few years, which was only disrupted by the war of 1914-1918. Characterized by the introduction of the assembly line, the scientific organization of

⁴ A topic discussed in several issues of *Invariance*.

labor, rationalization, mass consumption, the “commodification” of social life and large-scale mechanized industry, this dynamism suffocated the proletariat: the very strict integration of the workers organizations was only one of its consequences.⁵ Gorter thus proved to be relatively pessimistic concerning the revolutionary dawning of the postwar years.

From the beginning, the position of Laufenberg and Wolffheim was different. Laufenberg, originally from the Rhineland, was at first a militant of the SPD center. He came to Hamburg in 1907 on Mehring’s recommendation to write a history of the workers movement. An anti-reformist, he was deprived of all party employment in 1912, and met Wolffheim, a Jewish journalist who had recently returned from the United States. Their hostility to the sacred union (*Burgfrieden*) during the war presaged their later evolution. *Democracy and Organization*, which they published in 1915, emphasized the bourgeoisie’s inability to solve the national and democratic questions: “Germany has by no means become an authentic national state. It is proletarian politics which will assume the task of achieving national unity.” But they pronounced themselves in favor of the abolition of national borders. In this connection, L. Dupeux speaks of a mixture of “scientism”, “spontaneism” and Lassallian reminiscences. They advocated a multi-stage movement: the dictatorship of the proletariat could not be installed “at one blow”. Combining Kautsky-style determinism with the Luxemburgist idea of the mass strike, they conceived of a cautious policy on the economic and social plane, since holding on to political power was of the essence. We have seen at the end of Chapter 6 that Luxemburg was to develop a similar position in November-December 1918.

It is likely that Wolffheim and Laufenberg were to adopt the councilist thesis because the councils could progressively integrate the whole population. The trade unions and the parties would be superseded. The particular organizations of distinct social groups must give way to mass organizations which transcend divisive class lines.

While admitting that the aggressor-victim distinction had lost its meaning within the context of imperialism, they accepted national defense in some cases, when a war threatened “the social economy” as an expression and precondition of the life of the people. Other revolutionaries did not notice, at that time, these aspects which anticipated their later evolution.

Even so, these aspects had no practical application at all during the first six months following November 1918. As related above, Laufenberg, at the head of the Hamburg Council, demonstrated great prudence, even trying to enlist the help of the bourgeoisie: “we are the only ones who can guarantee a peaceful transition”, he declared in a speech on November 30. Judging that the Russian revolution had little chance of success, he made everything depend on Germany, where he intended because the proletariat had already demonstrated its weakness to avoid a civil war and, consequently, to not proceed too hastily, to nationalize, of course, but to limit instances of socialization. He did not, therefore, advocate abstentionism and even desired, in addition to the councils, an assembly elected by universal suffrage, in which the bourgeoisie could express itself and “exercise an influence on the course of events in proportion to its economic position”. Laufenberg, a member of the KPD Central Committee until August 1919, thus appeared as the defender of factory organizations, alongside the rest of the left, although he supported them for *different* reasons.⁶

⁵ Cf. the upcoming issue of *Lutte de classe* devoted to this theme.

⁶ *Stratégie communiste et dynamique conservatrice...*, p. 86. Chapter V (pp. 84-144) is devoted to “A communist nationalism”, the would-be “Hamburg national-bolshevism”. The author is correct to emphasize the importance of the middle classes, whose national-bolshevism he takes into account in trying to define a strategy, wanting to utilize the advancing proletarianization (when it actually derived from the communist parties). He fits perfectly into a wide range of such phenomena as the Popular Fronts, Popular Unions of France, Popular Unities, States

On October 25, 1919, Wolffheim and Laufenberg held a conference in Hamburg to create a new party. It was only at this time, and thus after the Heidelberg schism, that Radek discovered (“with surprise”, according to Dupeux⁷) their nationalist positions. He attacked them and called them “nationalist Bolsheviks” (the term “national-bolshevik” would not make its appearance until the spring of 1920).

Stress on the nationalist aspect became more acute, but coexisted for a long time with a class analysis. In June of 1919, the Hamburg *KAZ* asserted that the community of language, culture and nationality must be taken into account, especially in a time of proletarianization. It was not therefore a matter of either absorbing the workers into the people, or of describing Germany as a “proletarian nation”⁸ in the sense of the Italian use of the term, but, on the contrary, of adding the majority of the non-working layers to the proletariat. Ultimately, only the big bourgeoisie was excluded. In 1863, Lassalle had already opposed between 89% and 96.25% of the population to the bourgeoisie. It was *workerism* which was behind this nationalist concept. The “working masses” of the large factories would dominate the dictatorship of the proletariat. Where such factories did not exist, the councils were to have a territorial structure.

“The councils system groups together all the workers... behind the class interests which are the interests of socialism and the nation. The factory councils will become an element of national unity, of national organization, of national fusion, because they comprise the basic element and original cell of socialism.”

One week later, another editorial called for a “proletarian *Wehrmacht*”, formed by a workers militia and a Red Army under the command of the councils, in order to “continue” the war. But the *KAZ* was against any national bolshevism on the part of the army high command. It reproached Spartacism for its putschism: “the revolution will break out like a natural phenomenon”, “not by means of rebellions and putsches”. It expected that, in the context of the second revolution and the continuation of the war, there would not be a social peace (*Burgfrieden*), as in 1914, but a revolutionary union, this time to the benefit of the proletariat and the whole people, rather than the bourgeoisie. In effect, the war was necessary because Versailles prevented the development of the German economy (hence the conflict with France and England) as well as union with Russia (hence the conflict with Poland). Although Wolffheim and Laufenberg did not hesitate to expound their thesis to soldiers, they made no contacts at all with the right-wing press. At the end of 1919, they began distance themselves from the Russian revolution which, they wrote, was not a “universal model”.

The official history of the KPD, published in 1929, did not include the accusation that Laufenberg and Wolffheim carried out “negotiations” with the military. According to this history, several thousand Hamburg workers initially supported Wolffheim and Laufenberg as opposed to a few hundred who backed the KPD. The Sailor’s Union’s politics was at once “national” and working class (defense of the instruments of labor); it refused to staff the ships which Germany was obliged by the terms of the Versailles treaty to surrender to England. Wolffheim and Laufenberg also enjoyed solid support among the Berlin communists who were associated with Wendel.

Their *Appeal to Proletarians*, published in May of 1920, was issued in the name of the Central Committee of the KAPD, which immediately declared that it had not been consulted

of the whole people and other historical compromises. But the national-bolshevism of Hamburg also was just one of the “deviations” of the international “revolutionary” movement and is hardly any more aberrant than many others.

⁷ Dupeux, p. 98

⁸ As Broué does, p. 317

regarding the publication of this pamphlet. The ship hijacked by Jung for his journey to Russia in 1920 was re-christened the *Laufenberg* (it had previously been known as the *Senator Schröder*). Until early in 1920, despite the crucial divergence over the national question, it seems that the majority of the KAPD's members still considered the Wolffheim-Laufenberg tendency to be a current within the communist left. Despite the scandal which broke out in April of 1920 around a "National Bolshevik" plot, no member of the KAPD was implicated. Wolffheim and Laufenberg were excluded from the KAPD at the end of May and then, in August, by the full KAPD Congress, but they participated alongside the KAPD in the actions in support of Russia in its war against Poland (July-August). National Bolshevism subsequently disappeared as a revolutionary tendency after the summer of 1920. It is significant, however, that Rühle's Dresden journal, *Der Kommunist*, still included, in the fall of 1920, Wolffheim and Laufenberg's *Appeal to the German Proletariat* among the books and pamphlets which were being read by militants.

In *Moscow and the German Revolution, a Critical Refutation of Bolshevik Methods*, Wolffheim and Laufenberg for the first time directly attacked Lenin and the Bolsheviks: "State capitalism" reigns in Russia. At the end of July, they founded the Communist League, which rejected any kind of party and considered itself to be a "propaganda association". "The League regrouped most of the KAPD's northwest district, its two strongholds being Hamburg, with its shipyards, and Wendel's group in Berlin..."⁹ The rightist tendency gained ground. A Free Association for the Study of German Communism was founded, concerning which Laufenberg would say that it fought for a *Volksgemeinschaft* (a term used by the Nazis to designate the community of the people). One of its members wrote a pamphlet supporting the policy of the conservatives who favored an alliance with Russia: *Communism: A National Necessity*. Henceforth, the accent would be put on nationalism rather than socialism. Communism, this pamphlet asserted, is not social democratic reformism: the critique of social democracy is utilized to reject socialism. The social base shifts: Wolffheim and Laufenberg cultivate their connections with the officers of the Hamburg merchant marine, who embrace national-communism. They maintain numerous contacts in Hamburg and Berlin, but reject joint action with the most reactionary publications (such as the *Orgesch*) as well as with the Spartacists. The movement stagnated after 1921. Laufenberg became ill and withdrew from political activity. Wolffheim was active in "national bolshevik" groupuscules and died in a concentration camp.

From a nationalist perspective, National Bolshevism represented a process of becoming conscious of the capitalist tendency to dissolve the middle classes and the proletariat into a mass of wage "workers" (which, in a way, achieves the abolition of the bourgeoisie-proletariat distinction).

From a workerist perspective, National Bolshevism is also a process of becoming conscious of the revolution as a fusion and transcendence of classes and categories. Any ruling class, Laufenberg wrote in April 1920, tries to present its interests as common interests, and this applies to the proletariat as much as to the bourgeoisie, but the former is much more justified in doing so, since it represents the "majority of society". This is why he did not hesitate to invoke the "whole people" and the "whole nation". Once again we encounter the workerism and the preoccupation with the criterion of majority rule which were at the core of the German revolutionary movement. This formalism manifests the weakness of the communist perspective: that the latter should take refuge in art (Die Aktion) or in various marginal social experiments (communes, etc.: cf. Appendix I) is significant.

⁹ Dupeux, p. 136

TEXTS

Foreword

Any pretense to having collected the “best” of the German Left in the following section would be vain. One would also have to consider previously available texts, above all Bricianer’s book on Pannekoek and the volume entitled *La Gauche allemande. Textes*. [Four of the texts featured in the latter volume, *The Program of the AAUD*, *The Guidelines of the AAU-E*, extracts from *The Guidelines of the AAUD* and *The Leading Principles of the KAI*, are included below, along with several other recently-translated texts of the German Left [translator’s note.] All three of these quite dissimilar works, when taken together, present a complex picture of the Left. Our selection does not place particular emphasis upon “councilism” and workers self-organization (except for the Wolffheim text), which occupy ample space in Bricianer’s book. Nor does it privilege, as do the documents in *La Gauche allemande. Textes*, the role of the organization (especially that of the KAPD). Fully intending that this work should complement the two others mentioned above, we did not want to restrict ourselves to just picking out the most important aspects of the Left for the revolutionary movement, but also wanted to highlight the Left’s context and the actual extent of its impact on its epoch. Laufenberg’s text, for example, is of great interest insofar as it shows exactly what did and what did not take place. Likewise, Gorter provides a quite accurate if somewhat limited notion of how most communists experienced and viewed the events of their time. His “Last Letter to Lenin” also reveals a certain tendency on the part of the KAPD, as well, to present itself as a “party in the traditional sense”, as the March Action demonstrates.

This book, as well as the Left itself, could be superficially criticized for having overemphasized the *organizational* aspect of the revolution. This is true, but what we need to know is precisely why this is so. There are no “subversive social movements” or “communist movements” which are not embodied in one or another organizational form. Every content implies a form. The weakness of the communist organizational structures in Germany between 1914 and 1921 was the result of the veritable contradiction of the epoch’s revolutionary movement, which was unleashed by the political and social crisis just when capital was undergoing a new, long-lasting phase of expansion (cf. Appendix III).

The critique of organizational formalism is revolutionary to the extent that it discovers within this formalism the organization of the absence of the revolution and consequently the organization of non-revolutionaries; but it does not by any means rule out the necessity of organizing and, if necessary, organizing in the most monolithic manner, when facing the tasks of the revolution. Otherwise, “the communist movement” becomes just as vacuous a formula as the intellectuals’ concept of “the revolution”. We have not, in any case, written a history of the communist movement or of the movement of the proletariat in Germany, but have instead studied a practical and theoretical current which, although not the only such current, constituted a very rich and profound aspect of those movements. The texts collected below present the different components which nourished this current, and with it, its weak points.

For reasons beyond our control having to do with “intellectual property” rights, we were unable to reproduce Lukàcs’s *Organizational Questions of the Third International*, originally published in *Kommunismus* (March 15, 1920). We have already discussed (cf. Chapter 17) what distinguished this journal, and Lukàcs in particular, from the communist left. The radicalism of *Kommunismus* possessed only a surface resemblance to that of the left. For example, the “active boycott” advocated by B. Kun, which consisted of taking advantage of the occasion of elections

in order to carry out as much propaganda and to get as much publicity as possible, without running any candidates, leads to conferring upon electoral campaigns an importance which they lack and which democracy is always trying to impose. It is curious, however, to see Lukàcs developing in this article a theory of organization for the Communist Parties, and above all of collaboration between them, which reproduces to some degree, on an international scale, what the KAPD had in fact realized within its own ranks. We have seen how the KAPD insisted on a multiplicity of contacts and initiatives on all levels, establishing links directly between its various groups as well as in conformance with its formal organizational pyramid.

The KAPD was founded upon the necessity for unifying the proletariat, in opposition to its division into categories, strata, etc., maintained by the trade unions. Like many other revolutionaries in Central Europe, Lukàcs was primarily concerned with cutting the umbilical cord to the nation. The unity of the Third International, he said, would never be a situation finally attained, but is rather a tendency. The Second International was based upon an association of separate parties, as they were organized upon national foundations, and were only *afterwards* united on an international level for joint action, which was revealed to be impossible, of course, because each party had formed itself with reference to the specific problems faced in each country: "The Second International viewed itself as a *reality*, while the Third International views itself as a guiding idea for proletarian actions."

A serial accumulation of national parties leads to nationalism. Internationalism must also be manifested by its own kind of structures.

The correctness of Lukàcs's position is proven in a negative sense by the evolution of such parties as the Polish Communist Party (cf. Chapter 17). Each Communist Party based its growth as a political (and preferably parliamentary) force within the framework of its particular State, and thus re-invented nationalism. In the regions where capital was relatively weak and was hardly capable of spawning viable nation states, any construction of Communist Parties upon the exclusive basis of such States was contrary to communism. Lukàcs referred to "the mining region shared by Poland, Czechoslovakia and German Austria, which all depend on this region for their coal supplies; the Ruthenian northeast of Hungary was divided between that country, Czechoslovakia, Poland and the Ukraine, etc. These issues demand a permanent tactical collaboration among the proletarians involved; they can neither be abandoned to the isolated actions of the various parties, nor can they be made to depend upon the decisions of distant central committees..."

For such regions, Lukàcs proposes a flexible organization which groups the communists of the various States who reside in the same region within a relatively autonomous structure. Instead of just adding distinct Communist Parties together, they mutually interpenetrate one another: "One and the same party must be represented on various central committees." Therefore: "The structure of the International... *must never place obstacles in the way of the establishment of relations directly between the parties themselves...* The Second International only admitted national movements grouped within the apparent unity of the International: the Third International is made up of living groupings, based on movements which have overcome the narrow-mindedness of the 'national' point of view." To despise this position today, however, by charging that it did not go far enough, would be historically false. One cannot judge this position without taking into account the concerns which animated it. Compared to the extremely rapid transformation of the Communist Parties, not to speak of the current situation where even the leftists do not directly attack the concept of national defense, such a stance allows us to measure the weight of 50 years of counterrevolution.

As our final text, we reproduce an essay by Pannekoek written after the period dealt with in this book, because it addresses an important debate within the left, but also, and most impor-

tantly, because it goes beyond the reformist and radical versions of crisis automatism. The recently-published French translations of the works of Mattick and Grossmann provide a new impetus to this debate. We must also mention that during the period when he wrote this text on the crisis debate, Pannekoek still retained a “materialist” point of view: his conclusion does not substitute proletarian action for the “crisis”. Later, and especially after 1945, he would make consciousness and consciousness-raising the motor force of the proletarian movement. [For reasons of space, the Pannekoek essay has been omitted from this new revised edition in order to make room for other texts which have not yet appeared in English translation. An English translation of Pannekoek’s *The Theory of the Collapse of Capitalism*, which was originally published in *Rätekorrespondenz* in June of 1934, and was later published in English translation in *Capital and Class* (Spring 1977, tr. by Adam Buick) can now be viewed at the Marxists.org website translator’s note.]

The Hamburg Revolution

Heinrich Laufenberg¹

Preface

This small volume owes its existence to the editorial committee of the *Archive of Social Sciences and Social Legislation*, who invited me to explain the role and importance of the council system. I have restricted myself to a historically faithful account, based on the proceedings and policies of the Hamburg Council and, given its general interest, I publish this work without any substantial modifications in order to make it accessible to a wider public.

What follows includes that part of the events in question in which I was personally involved. The events of the days between November 6 and 11 are therefore not treated here. The uprising of the Kiel sailors only acquired importance as a result of the rebellion in Hamburg on the 6th, which was itself made possible by the fact that a massive peaceful demonstration, organized by the USPD on the Heiligengeist fields, was joined by the insurrection of revolutionary troops under a radical leftist leadership. The fact that the military power completely collapsed within the region of the Ninth Army Corps, which was the only military formation which could have opposed the revolt, was the signal for revolution throughout the empire. Since I lack their source documentation, these events, which occurred under the leadership of the radical left, can only be explained in their full significance by the participants themselves. My comrade Wolffheim, who played an outstanding role in the revolutionary uprising as well as in its preparation, will also have his say on the matter.

H. Laufenberg, *Hamburg-Altrahlstedt, July 26, 1919.*

The council movement, which in Germany as elsewhere originated in the revolution, has not yet been appreciated in all of its details, nor has its development reached a conclusion, by any means. The council movement is at the very heart of the struggles between parties, and is simultaneously the goal and the means in these struggles. Faced with the current impossibility of subjecting this vast historical process to critical judgment, only one way now lies open for scientific and political orientation: the description of the historical events, in particularly important locations, and the exposition of the principle positions which distinguished the permutations of *political* practice. Given the importance of the urban region of the lower Elbe for all of Germany, the delineation of the experiences and peculiarities of the council systems in Hamburg, Altona and their environs will permit us to draw a series of conclusions concerning the general course of events and the basic outlines of the German council system.

A few days after the victory of the sailors' revolt in Kiel, the revolutionary movement arose in Hamburg, giving the signal for revolution in the rest of Germany. The struggle in Hamburg itself was brief. While the military was withdrawing in a none-too-glorious manner, a provi-

¹ Heinrich Laufenberg: *Die Hamburger Revolution*, Hamburg, n.d.

sional council of workers and soldiers was formed, which distributed a manifesto to the population on November 7. The manifesto began with the declaration that the council had taken “the greater part of political power” into its hands, and warned that the highest degree of unity would be required to fulfill the great tasks of the future. A series of political measures was then decreed, such as the release of all political prisoners, freedom of the press and of speech, and the abolition of the censorship of the mail. The essential part of the manifesto was the elimination of the old military discipline and of the power of the military command structure, which passed into the hands of the Soldiers’ Council. Decent treatment of the troops by their superiors, and their personal freedom while off-duty, were to be considered by everyone in the military as the standing order of the Soldiers’ Councils. In addition, private property was protected and the security of the food supply was guaranteed.

At the beginning of the revolution, a popular assembly gathered on the Heiligengeist fields decided to confiscate the old newspaper of the Hamburg workers, the *Hamburger Echo*, and, under the new name of the *Rote Fahne*, to put it at the service of the revolution. But this decision was soon annulled. After a few days, the old newspaper once again appeared, alongside the *Rote Fahne*, just as the seizure of political power had not been completed, which eventually by one means or another fell back into the hands of the old authorities. Thanks to the revolution, the Workers and Soldiers Council had become the real government in Hamburg, but the old Senate continued to function after its own fashion right alongside the Council.

An agreement was reached between the various socialist parties, which called for the formation of a General Workers Council with approximately 500 members representing the factories, and, as an executive committee for this General Council, a new Workers Council to replace the provisional one, which would consist of three delegates each from the old party, the trade unions, the USPD and the Party of the Radical Left, respectively, as well as 18 representatives from the factories. This executive committee’s presidium, referred to as the Workers Council, would be formed by one representative from each party mentioned above and the trade unions, and three representatives from the factories. The election of the president of this body was carried out like a political election. A representative of the radical left group, which would later become the communist group, was elected President of the Workers Council; this, as well as the general political composition of the Executive Committee, was a reflection of the role played by the communist and independent fractions in the events of November 6.

The Executive Committee of the Soldiers Councils, the Commission of Fifteen, which later became the Commission of Thirty, formed a consultative body together with the Workers Council, with the proviso that only the soldiers would be involved in resolving purely military issues. This Commission soon created a Commission of Seven as a High Command. The personnel of the Soldiers Council had already changed in the first few days. Its composition presented a wide range of political views. Bourgeois-democratic ideas prevailed among the majority, and some of its members were sympathetic to socialism, but ignorant of socialist ideology; only a few were convinced socialists; the only issue that concerned all the soldiers was their next military assignment. If the Workers Council, with its diversity of parties, had a common basis in the working class, such a common foundation did not exist among the representatives of the Soldiers Council. This meant that, the more clearly the class position of the Workers Council’s policy was manifested, and the more that different opinions became evident, the more the majority of the Soldiers Councils, for the moment, fell under the influence of the Workers Council and its communist-independent leadership; this became obvious as soon as the Council proceeded to clearly and firmly set out its position in respect to the old political powers.

Hamburg is a city-state. Political power was exercised by its Senate. Alongside this Senate, and delimited in its activity by the particular rights and prerogatives of the Senate, the *Bürger-*

schaft (City Council) existed as a legislative assembly. If the Workers and Soldiers Council wanted to pass binding resolutions, it had to replace the Senate and firmly impose its legislative power and function on the *Bürgerschaft*. Both tasks were accomplished by means of a manifesto issued on November 12. Based on the fact that the revolution had, by establishing a new division of powers, created the basis for a new constitution, and therefore a new legal situation, it began with the statement that the Workers and Soldiers Council had assumed the exercise of political power in the state of Hamburg, and that the Senate and the *Bürgerschaft* had ceased to exist; the state of Hamburg would in the future form part of the German Peoples' Republic. Legislative bodies which would be created in the near future would decide upon the arrangement of the new relations. Peace and order were guaranteed, the functionaries would remain at their posts and would continue to be paid, and the assurance was again made that private property would be protected.

The debates which took place in the Council prior to the publication of the manifesto were heated and somewhat turbulent, since all the representatives of the old party defended a position which was profoundly opposed to the new principles set out in the manifesto. Against the idea of working class rule, upon which the manifesto was based, they supported the demand for popular sovereignty, and proposed a motion to that effect, tailored for the *Bürgerschaft* by the social democratic faction. The motion called for the immediate recognition of universal suffrage, with an equal, direct and secret vote for the elections to the *Bürgerschaft* and the other municipal governments of the *Land*, on the basis of a proportional system of representation, for all the adult citizens of both sexes; that all special elections for privileged status should be abolished, such as those which had hitherto been held for the nobility and landowners; that the Senate should be elected by the *Bürgerschaft* for a limited term, and that its membership should no longer be restricted to certain professions; and that the city administration should be democratized. Immediately after the introduction of the new electoral law, elections for the *Bürgerschaft* should take place, in order to deliberate on the new constitution and the new organization of the city administration. The Workers and Soldiers Council deliberately and as a matter of principle went beyond the motion of the social democratic fraction, in order to express, in the most unequivocal manner, the fact that a power shift had taken place. The manifesto declared: the Senate and the *Bürgerschaft* no longer exist, the *Land* of Hamburg will in the future form part of the German Peoples' Republic; but the leadership of the Council was aware of the fact that, as they acknowledged during the debate, the communal functions previously exercised by the Senate and the *Bürgerschaft* as community institutions still had to be carried out, and that, furthermore, the last word on the future of each *Land* would depend upon the course of events in the Empire as a whole, and that in the meantime a declaration concerning the nature of the Hamburg *Land* was necessary. The Council took action on these two matters shortly afterwards, as the indisputable voice of the complete sovereignty which had passed into the hands of the institutions of the working class; by precisely assigning particular tasks, clearly defined and fundamentally distinct from their former prerogatives, to the old powers, the new regime showed that it was master of the situation and the old powers. Even during the late hours of the night, the proclamation was delivered to the newspapers, and was also publicized by means of wall posters.

The first task was to secure the Senate. Since it constituted the apex of the administrative apparatus, whose uninterrupted functioning was of great interest to the Workers and Soldiers Council, above all so as to prevent any problems with the circulation of money, and thus with the payment of family subsidies and the wages of workers and government employees. The Council pursued the goal of not destroying this apparatus, but of transforming the bureaucracy into a popular institution, and securing political control in all of its decisive aspects. The transi-

tion to the new situation was achieved without any friction. In memorable negotiations, the Senate submitted without resistance to the existing situation and also declared its willingness to cooperate on the basis of the new state of affairs. The Council issued a decree assuring the continuity of all administrative authorities and commissions, to which the public was to bring its appeals as in the past. A declaration of the manifesto of November 12 stated that Hamburg would still exist as a *Land* and as a bearer of financial rights and obligations, until such a time as there should be a decision on the scale of the Empire concerning the German constitution. For relations between Hamburg and the other German states, with the sole responsibility of contracting its obligations and issuing provisional currency, the Finance Department would continue to exist in conformity with the laws. Four representatives of the Workers and Soldiers Council were incorporated into the Senate, and one into the Finance Department, the Council reserving to itself the unconditional right to veto any Senate decision. This made the position of the Council perfectly clear to the Senate, which in essence preserved only the role of a municipal council.

In parallel with the negotiations with the Senate, negotiations took place with representatives of the bourgeois industrialists and the retailers, wholesalers and industrial chambers of commerce, as well as the banks, which led to the formation of an economic council. These representatives of the bourgeoisie also resigned themselves to the *fait accompli* of the shift in political power. Renouncing their demand that the *Bürgerschaft* should be re-established with its old prerogatives, they proposed the establishment of a system of local representation. A debate was held in the Council on the question of whether the municipal parliament should be composed of representatives of the Workers and Soldiers Council, of the councils of white collar employees, civil servants, teachers and other professionals, or whether the old *Bürgerschaft* should be provisionally reinstated as a representative municipal body. While the representatives of the old party without exception wanted to maintain the old institution of the *Bürgerschaft* and to have it meet as a constituent assembly in the near future, the representatives of the independent fraction agreed that the old *Bürgerschaft* should be convened, but were opposed to holding elections in the near future, since no one could foresee what the next few weeks would bring. The representatives of the left radicals, however, proposed that the *Bürgerschaft* should be treated in exactly the same way as the Senate. Since it was at that time impossible to completely eliminate the *Bürgerschaft* and to replace it with the General Workers Council due to the danger of international repercussions, the Council, by virtue of its revolutionary powers, had to provisionally convoke the old *Bürgerschaft*, within the framework of and in accordance with the tasks of municipal representation. The proclamation was issued from the very beginning that the universal, equal, direct and secret right to vote was established for all representative bodies in the state territory of Hamburg. In any event, the Council had to hold elections as soon as possible. At this juncture it had the power to determine the character of the municipal parliament, and to assign it a set of clearly-defined rights and duties, and to prevent political power from falling into the hands of the Senate and the *Bürgerschaft*. The Workers and Soldiers Council assented to this proposal, also agreeing, however, with the representatives of the independent fraction in regard to holding elections for a constituent municipal assembly. While not setting a date for these elections, the Council did agree that they should be prepared for as soon as possible. In the exercise of its political power, the Council also reserved the right of unconditional veto power over the decisions of the *Bürgerschaft*.

To assure its effectiveness, the Council had to create its own logistical apparatus. Needless to say, from the very first moments of its existence, it had at its disposal a well-organized office, and also created a press department in order to present its policies outside of Hamburg, which at first caused some problems, since this department, although in the hands of the Workers and

Soldiers Council, was staffed by men of a bourgeois-democratic cast of mind, and expressed political views which by no means accorded with those of the Council. It took several weeks to remedy this situation, when the Council closed this office and formed another with a totally different staff. At its first session, the Council had already created three committees: for social policy, medicine and transportation. To these, others were soon added: committees on external relations and the press, food supply, justice and prisons, security and police, public health, construction and housing, education, trade, shipping and industry, finance, military affairs and indemnifications.

The most important departments were those which dealt with justice, education, trade and industry, social policies and security. The justice committee had the job of solving problems which resulted from the Council's edicts, or their interpretation. It also had to elaborate new norms for the penal system and the regulation of administrative justice and, in general, was responsible for changing the practice of penal law and eliminating reactionary laws. The security committee was in charge of adapting the police apparatus to the new situation, as well as creating the basis for the total liquidation of the old army apparatus and the introduction of a peoples' militia, composed essentially of members of the three socialist organizations. The education committee's mission was to transform the entire school system, from elementary to secondary levels, with the goal of establishing a unified school system. The committee on trade, shipping and industry was in charge of reincorporating Hamburg's economic life into German production, and above all of refitting the metallurgical industry, especially the shipyards, for the repair and production of materiel for the railroads. The department of social policy had an almost decisive importance for the Council. It had to introduce the council system into the factories, so as to prepare for their socialization. In addition, this committee also functioned as a high court in case of conflicts between workers and owners. It did not replace the industrial tribunals, but in all important cases which would establish a precedent for the industry or economic life in general, after having heard the petitions of the two parties, it issued a binding decision; in this way all relations in the factories were definitively in the hands of this institution of the revolutionary Council. The results obtained by this committee fell short of what was desired, since in no field did it attain its initial objectives; the fault lay as much in its own deficiencies as in the resistance of the old authorities and the business class. This was also true of the committee on trade, shipping and industry and its attempt to reorganize the economy of the Hamburg area and to reintegrate it into German production. As difficult as this task was, it could have been carried out with even a minimum of collaboration on the part of the Prussian authorities.

Among the first measures of the Council, the implementation of the fundamental economic requirements of its labor policy stands out. At its second session it decreed the eight hour day, with the provision that, should the owners close their businesses in protest against this decree, the factories and workshops would be reopened by force. According to its manifesto, the whole sum of wages previously paid was to still be paid on a weekly basis, including payment for days not worked. From then on, the eight hour day or, where this was not practicable, as in the cases of food supply and transport, the working week of 48 hours, was set as the maximum. The wages to be paid were to be at least the same amount as had been paid for the previous regular day's work. Consequently, hourly wages and piecework rates had to be raised until they reached the old daily wage, with the obligation to completely eliminate piecework as soon as possible. Overtime, where necessary, had to be paid with an extra premium, as stipulated for each case. These rules had to be rigorously obeyed and enacted without delay. Any infractions were to be severely punished, with the provision that the offending business could be expropriated by the Workers and Soldiers Council. The terms of this manifesto were not uniformly

implemented, since the regulation of piecework was in the hands of the trade unions, and the resolution of complaints was under the control of the department of social policy, with the bulk of responsibility for such matters, which was at first the within the jurisdiction of that department, being later transferred to the trade unions. Nonetheless, the rules providing that the wages for the reduced work week had to be “at least” equal to the previous weekly wage, and that piecework had to be eliminated “completely and as quickly as possible” naturally stimulated more demands along the same lines. Nor was the situation to change much when, some time later, certain aspects of the manifesto were more clearly formulated, in order to regulate the situation in those enterprises where the reduction of the working week could not be immediately and completely enacted. The workers’ attitude would continue to be largely determined by the initial proclamations.

Already, among its first acts, the Council addressed the problem of unemployment, since the number of unemployed soon surpassed 70,000, while those who could only find part-time work numbered over 100,000. The Senate and the *Bürgerschaft* had previously, prior to the revolution, decided to create a labor office, responsible for job placement, assisting demobilized soldiers, and organizing unemployment benefits; the latter consisted of 6 marks for a married couple without children, 1 ½ marks for each child up to a maximum of three, and 4 marks for single persons, which would cost the *Land* of Hamburg three million marks each month. Since this labor office had not yet been established, and the Council faced many problems on all fronts, the resolution of the matter had to be postponed until mid-December. This delay led to vast demonstrations of the unemployed, but the Council eventually managed to achieve a satisfactory settlement of the problem. It proposed to the unemployed that a permanent commission be established, elected by the unemployed with the widest possible representation of professions and industries, which would be in permanent contact with the Council, with representatives in the labor office and its various delegations, to maintain oversight of its operations. While military field kitchens supplied food at very low prices to the unemployed, and jobless people became involved in running these services, the Council ordered an increase in unemployment benefits: one mark extra for single persons and two more for couples. An attempt on the part of the Senate and the labor office to reduce these increases was vetoed by the Council. Only later was it decided that the total subsidy for each family could not surpass 7 ½ marks per week.

The Council’s activity, especially in the economic domain, encouraged the creation of new councils. The latter were formed among every category of civil servants, teachers, police, firemen, railroad workers, etc., as well as councils of white collar employees of every kind. The demand, often expressed by such councils, to be directly represented on the Workers and Soldiers Council, was not granted, since the number of members of the Executive Committee and the respective proportions of representatives of the parties and the factories had already been fixed, but direct and permanent liaisons were nonetheless established between the different councils and the corresponding committees of the Workers and Soldiers Council, in most cases with the department of social policy.

As soon as its working departments had been created, the Council began to organize the political control of the administrative apparatus. This control was exercised by means of the activity of those institutions (the committees) mentioned above, as well as by means of commissars who were dispatched to the most important departments. However, as was the case with the activity of the Council itself, there was a lack of trained personnel, as well as resistance from the higher functionaries, which had been a problem since the first day of the new regime and which had only grown stronger since then. Political control of the administrative apparatus could only be achieved by integrating it into the social democracy and thus reducing it, once it

is free of any bureaucratic constraints and formalities, to its basic tasks, in other words, leaving it in the hands of the population itself and basing the municipal organization on the council system. But these difficulties did not prevent the Council from purging the administration of its most pernicious elements by means of a simple decree, as in the case of the high-level Prussian functionaries in the suburbs of Hamburg who were expelled from their posts, although against the protests of the governments of Schleswig and Berlin. The same thing happened to a district president, whose work was controlled and then partially taken over by a delegate of the Council. But problems arose even with the Council's supporters. The workers and soldiers councils in the towns in the Hamburg region had eliminated their municipal councils and, in one town, had introduced the six-hour working day, and in another had revised the pay rates of all the government employees and white collar workers and deposed the landlords' representative. These events, which took place with the consent of the councils in these two towns, provided a reason to clearly delineate the responsibilities of the Workers Council, which was responsible not only for Hamburg, but also for Altona, Ottensen, Wandsbeck, and the whole area around the four cities in the neighboring territories.

According to the resulting decree, all the councils of the *Land* of Hamburg were subordinated to the Hamburg Council as the bearer of political power in that state, and the local councils were to be only institutions for the control of their local administrations. They were forbidden to become involved in administrative activities at the level of the *Land*. In the region which was part of Prussia, the Council's domain included the organizations and military units which sent representatives to the Council. In these cases, however, the Council could only operate as a control office for the local administrations, in accordance with the rules established by the Prussian government, and, in principle the actual practice often varied was not authorized to become involved in state administrative activities. The local councils in these outlying areas were recognized by the Hamburg Council; the latter provided them with protection and assistance and, in matters which affected all of them as a result of the economic interdependence of the region, they took joint action. Where no workers and soldiers council existed, the Hamburg Council was authorized to exercise the right to control the local administration through elected councilors.

Organizational measures and managerial tasks, of course, embraced the most diverse matters. The provisional Workers and Soldiers Council had formed a food supply committee, and its permission was required for the export of foodstuffs. Until then, such regulation had been in the hands of the War Supply Office and, in order to improve the system of food supply, it was demanded that this Office's administrative district be extended from Hamburg to the surrounding urban and rural areas. The new Council also appointed a committee of five members to supervise the entire food supply system. This committee decided to assume the functions of the Office of War Supply and the Altona municipal council, in regard to their responsibilities for food supplies, a decision which, given the complexity of the apparatus of the Hamburg Office of War Supply, could not have been implemented without serious prejudice to the continuity of the food supply, and was also in contradiction of the ruling that the Hamburg state authorities were to remain in office for the time being. The Council therefore cancelled this decision. It later stipulated essential changes in food distribution, in the reduction of prices for rationed goods, and in those prices which could not be set without its consultation and consent. In the interest of the population, and to its benefit, the Council repeatedly intervened, both in regard to prices as well as the quantities of distributed goods.

The fact that the farmers did not deliver the prescribed quantities of food led to serious problems. Already in its first session the Council had discussed how to establish good communications between the city and the countryside, as well as a system of organized collaboration. It

called for, among other things, the formation of peasants' councils, and carried out an extensive propaganda campaign on their behalf. These proposals, however, never came to a vote and were never implemented. Nor, after petitioning the imperial government and the Armistice Commission, were the Council's efforts to reopen the offshore fisheries successful.

An economic council was formed under the auspices of the Council and representatives of industry, the banks and import-export firms, whose mission was to stimulate the resumption of trade, especially foreign trade. This collaborative effort did not, however, prove to be fruitful, since the divergence of opinions concerning the resumption of production and distribution was quite profound, and immediately became apparent. While its collaborators considered capitalist practices as natural, the Council was aiming for socialization. Consequently, only a few sessions of this economic council were held, with no practical results. The Workers and Soldiers Council naturally did not agree with the economic council's demand that wages be reduced, although the trade union representatives readily showed some good will in that respect, which entailed no minor problems from the workers point of view. Since all socialist production is production in the interests of the consumer, the Council proposed that consumer prices be reduced, and that the first steps should be taken towards the reorganization of the distribution process. It proposed that the materiel stockpiled in the shipyards for the construction of submarines be used instead for the construction of rolling stock for the railroads. Recognizing that production is the basis of social life, it sought to fundamentally transform the role of the working class in production, putting the factories under its control, both socially and technically. The possibility of socializing the bakeries was debated. Since the twelve largest bakeries were capable of producing enough bread for the whole urban area, the elimination of the small and medium-size enterprises and their transformation into mere distribution centers would have implied important savings in industrial resources and raw materials, which would then have become available for other uses. The socialization of the fishing industry was also discussed with representatives of the fishermen, as its transfer to the control of the Hamburg *Land* was a relatively simple matter; such measures, so important for feeding the entire population, would have rendered socialization in other fields unavoidable. The Council also insisted that it not be excluded from the negotiations between the economic council and the imperial government concerning the supply of raw materials, guided by the idea that whoever directed the reorganization of economic life would also tighten their grip on political power. In the end, these projects soon became a dead letter because the Berlin government, handcuffed by its compromise and coalition with the big bourgeoisie, was neither willing nor able to undertake socialization. Disagreements within the Council itself were also becoming more acute, as well.

For these reasons, the Council sought to create fixed rules for the consolidation of the council system, while simultaneously maintaining the economic council in a certain relation of dependence. Towards this end it presented a series of regulations. These decreed that the economic council was an institution created as a consequence of the revolution, and that it had to present its proposals to the economic and industrial committee of the Workers and Soldiers Council, which would examine and approve them, prior to taking the necessary steps for their implementation. It mandated a workers council for each enterprise with more than twenty workers; enterprises with fewer than twenty workers were to join others of the same kind in order to elect factory councils; casual laborers were to unite according to their job categories in order to elect workers councils. All workers over the age of sixteen, according to this proposal, were granted the right to vote, and all those over the age of 20 would be eligible for office. The workers council was responsible for the orderly operation of the enterprise, as well as the control of its administration in its social, technical and commercial aspects, and the regulation, together with its owners, and in collaboration with the organizations of workers and white collar em-

ployees, of working conditions and wages. Where agreement on such issues could not be achieved, an appeal would have to be brought before the committee on social policy of the Workers and Soldiers Council, which would issue its ruling, with assistance from experts from both parties to the dispute. In general, the factory councils were to exercise the functions which had been delegated to them by the General Workers Council, without being prevented from doing so by either the factory owners or the old authorities. The General Workers Council set the rules for and established the framework of its field of action and the extent of its prerogatives, a resolution which would have enabled it, and, according to the intention of the authors of its proposals, had to enable it, to assume at any moment and to their full extent, all the political functions of the executive. The deliberations on this matter continued, and finally, when the Council's power dissolved, and it no longer had the power to implement its proposals, they were liquidated on their own.

The workers in the urban area also naturally took advantage of the revolution to improve their standard of living, and to attempt to restore its pre-war level. Assisted in their efforts by the manifesto on the eight hour day and the rapid phase-out of piecework, the shipyard workers, for whom the latter stipulation was of the greatest concern, managed to practically eliminate piecework, despite the attempts of the owners to reintroduce it. In order to compel the payment of wages for the days when workers had attended the mass demonstrations, the Council closed one factory, arrested its owner, and confiscated his bank account. The Council repeatedly intervened on behalf of the seamen, in order to secure higher wages than had been granted to them by the sailors union and the ship-owners' association. In the plumbers strike the Council exerted pressure on the employers and imposed the recognition of the demands of the workers. In short, it supported wage demands with all of its political and moral prestige. In negotiations with the shipyard owners, the Council's department of social policy reminded the owners that they had previously used political power to their own economic advantage, and tersely declared that the working class would henceforth do the same; it applied its own legal principles without any concern over the prospect that the big capitalists, who had never concerned themselves with the workers' sense of justice, might consider this to be an injustice. These acts profoundly changed the relation of forces between the workers and the owners. The department of social policy went far beyond the means which had until then been decisive in relations with the owners, whether it was the strike or negotiations between one organization and another, replacing them with completely new methods, trials before the Council, organ of political power of the whole working class, organized or not. Without being in a position to exercise a dictatorship in the strict sense of the word, wielding merely a subsidiary power in the apparatus of the bourgeois state, the Council largely eliminated, in the decisive political arenas, the old organs of negotiation and struggle, and transformed them into organs of the Council's policy. In a later stage, during the city transport workers strike which lasted more than a week, it clearly proved to the whole world the importance of an energetic display of political power for the satisfaction of the demands of the working class; the Council was not, however, capable of rapidly ending this public calamity, nor could it meet all the workers' demands, or protect the public from a steep fare increase.

One of the Council's most important tasks was the regulation of public security. It turned to the troops in the barracks and formed police patrols with some of them, while those not suited for such duties were transferred to honor guards, work details or other already-existing detachments. Besides their food and military pay they received a premium of three marks per day, as had those soldiers who were already assigned to police duties. Their maximum number was set at 2,400. At first the situation gave cause for concern: the police commissioners retained their seats on the *Bürgerschaft*, frustrated with waiting for their new orders and the satisfaction

of their complaints. Order was reestablished by means of prompt dismissals. Enlistments for the *Freikorps* were also banned by the Council, which also ordered the dissolution of the youth militias.

In its socialization policy, the Council was aware of the need to restructure Hamburg's position within the empire by considerably expanding its territory. Completely surrounded by Prussian territory, the city not only lacked the space to extend its industry and undertake a generous plan of construction, it did not even have enough territory to expand its port facilities, since the administrative rights to control the banks of the river were indispensable for this purpose and the city only had the responsibility to regulate the Elbe itself. The administrative division of the region between Hamburg, Altona and Wandsbeck resulted in short-sighted and parochial policies in all important projects, such as urban railways, construction, canals and lighting, and made the old system's unprofitable nature evident, as well as the vast obstacles standing in the way of the extension of "municipal socialism". The dominant opinion on the Council was, therefore, that Hamburg's territory had to be enlarged. For the realization of this project, it was of the utmost importance that Germany should become a unified republic rather than continuing to be a federation of states. When Hamburg's representatives at the Berlin conference of German states, which took place at the end of November, frankly expressed their "annexationist designs", they triggered a great uproar, and the Prussian minister Hirsch was especially vehement in protesting this presumption of dismembering Prussian territories. The delegates nonetheless remained convinced that Hamburg would soon and without great difficulties, and with the assistance of the imperial institutions, achieve the indispensable expansion of its territory, a hope which would not be fulfilled.

At the beginning of December, the Hamburg Council convoked an assembly of delegates from all the region's workers and soldiers councils in order to consider the proposal to create a unitary economic region on the lower Elbe, with its center in Hamburg, which would be called Greater Hamburg. The fears that Hamburg would endanger the unity of the empire were energetically denied; a forced annexation was out of the question. If, on occasion, in sessions of the Hamburg Council, the desire to extend the Council's political power to Altona and Wandsbeck and to control these cities through commissars had been expressed, these opinions garnered no support. As for the borders of this future economic region, no proposals or decisions were made at this conference. It appeared, however, that a large majority of the delegates were in favor of incorporating a substantial strip of the Elbe valley, between Hamburg and the mouth of the river, into the territory of Hamburg. The conference declared its support for the creation of a Greater Hamburg administrative district, and delegated to the Hamburg Council the task of taking the necessary steps for its establishment, in cooperation with the local authorities and the neighboring workers and soldiers councils. In any event, the Hamburg Council did have the merit of taking the first steps to bring the matter to fruition and preparing negotiations with the imperial government. The subsequent eclipse of its power left the continuation of these negotiations in the hands of the Senate.

The Council was more successful in the field of education. It brought proposals before a series of professors, in order to settle the question of the university and to make the University of Hamburg a reality. But the project never advanced beyond the first stages of planning. The Council did, however, aggressively implement the law on secondary education, with essential improvements, which had been in abeyance for five years, and whose previous implementation had been postponed by the war and the lack of teachers. The education committee held discussions with the teachers council about reorganizing the entire Hamburg school system in order to create a unified school district. It eliminated religious instruction from all public schools and institutions and, as of January 1, 1919, nullified all the laws and decrees of the Senate concern-

ing the parochial levy, which thus passed into the jurisdiction of the religious communities themselves. It also made it much easier to renounce religion, decreeing that it was sufficient for the individual to declare that he or she was fourteen years old and to make a written or oral declaration before the civil registry.

The Council also promptly addressed the issue of housing and construction. It recommended that the State buy all available building construction materials, and proposed special measures to prevent real estate speculation.

The Council's sovereign exercise of its rights was indisputable. The Council, rather than the Senate, reduced a murderer's sentence to life in prison. Upon their return from the front, it was the Council, as representative of the state, which welcomed the troops, while the Senate, as representative of the city, addressed them afterwards. It decreed that, at official events, the flags of Hamburg and the revolution should be displayed, rather than the old imperial banners. It repeatedly exercised its right to veto resolutions of the Senate and the *Bürgerschaft*. As the representative of the state it dispatched its representatives to the Conference of German States convened by the imperial government in late November. In the deliberations concerning this delegation's mandate, the divisions within the Council could already be seen, which would later undermine its political power.

Since it was foreseen that the Conference of German States would also discuss the question of a constituent assembly, a debate took place in the Council concerning the position its representatives would defend in relation to this question. The right wing socialists rejected a council regime and demanded a prompt convocation of a constituent assembly. The USPD delegates supported this position in principle but wanted to delay the convocation of the constituent assembly for as long as possible, in order to allow the returning soldiers to participate, to prepare women for the electoral process, and to first secure the achievements of the revolution by initiating socialization. A USPD speaker said that the days of the soviet government were numbered, and that it would not be favorable for the compromise reached in the interest of the revolution by the three factions, if one of them were to declare itself against the constituent assembly. The representative of the communist wing of the movement, however, emphasized that political power had fallen into the hands of the working class, although the latter was not presently capable of exercising its dictatorship: this was prevented by the fact that the revolution had been for the most part the achievement of the army, and even then with the decisive support of bourgeois elements. If the revolution was to continue in a *smooth and orderly* manner, and, at the same time, the political power of the working class was to be secured, if a sharpening of class contradictions and even a civil war were to be prevented, then only one road remained. There was danger from both the right and the left. From the left, because, as attempts were being made to prevent the installation of a soviet system and to reinstate the capitalist order, the influence of syndicalist and anarchist elements would grow, and with it the danger of armed insurrections. From the right, because the restoration of capitalism would be accompanied by the rearming of the bourgeoisie. To prevent these two possibilities, and the consequent civil war, from taking place, the total political power of the working class must be maintained in order to assure socialization; the bourgeoisie, however, had to be offered the chance to influence the course, the form and the manner of socialization, in accordance with its numerical importance in society. The convocation of a constituent assembly meant the demise of the workers' power: the political power of the bourgeoisie would not be questioned, if the workers did not enter the electoral struggle as a united class. Whoever wanted to preserve the political power of the working class could not therefore support the convocation of a constituent assembly, which the bourgeoisie was loudly demanding. However, alongside the organ of the rule of the working class, the Central Council, a parliament could be created, elected by a

general vote, which, under the control of the workers government, and with clearly-defined responsibilities, would provide a certain margin of maneuver for the bourgeoisie, so they could defend their interests during the course of socialization. This argument, which was also schematically outlined during the Conference of German States, since it was not possible to present it in all of its details, had practically no support on the Council. On the contrary, the positions of the various party factions were directly opposed to one another on a question which was not merely a simple matter of the division between the working class and the bourgeoisie, but revolved around the question of power as it affected the working class itself: the power structures of the old organizations transformed the struggle for the leadership of the class into a struggle over the position and identity of the personnel of its leadership.

The course of events in the Empire thus had to have negative consequences for the political position of the Hamburg Council. On the question of the legal foundations of the State, upon which the reorganization of the Empire had to be based, there were serious differences of opinion between the two leftist factions. Each had essentially distinct assessments of the national assembly. The attempt of the communist council delegates to get the Council, and particularly its left wing, to accept a common line did not prosper. For this reason, on the important question of Hamburg's external policies, many said: concerning the domestic policy of the Empire, the influence which the left factions exercised over the Soldiers Council in other matters failed from the first moment, and the bourgeois component of the Soldiers Council was able to prevail, which led to a situation where the Hamburg Council's external policies were harmed by what appeared to be its strong points in Hamburg itself. On the other hand, the exclusive political rule of the working class was more accentuated in Hamburg than anywhere else, and much more so than in the imperial government, which from the very beginning had insisted upon a coalition with the bourgeoisie. If the Empire would not follow Hamburg, if the revolution were to recede rather than advance, the foundations of the Hamburg Council's policies would dissolve. And this is precisely what happened. In a short time, and especially after the First Congress of the Councils, a fierce struggle erupted among the Council's factions for its leadership and power base. As in the empire, so too in Hamburg, the leaders of the socialist right wing led a turn towards the past.

While it was the Council's policy to try to exercise an increasingly more strict control over the bourgeois administration, organically integrating itself into its highest offices, the old party, in contradiction to this policy, appointed four senators in Altona. In the trade unions, a vigorous attack was launched regarding the composition of the Council; its dissolution and immediate elections were energetically demanded, which would have endangered everything which had been achieved, with the obvious intention of negating the Council's policy and carrying out a total about-face, an attack which curiously took place at the same time as the first session of the *Bürgerschaft*. Already, at this first session, the president was going to present a motion, supported by all the factions, to grant Hamburg an electoral law, as the Hamburg Council had decreed, but assigning the drafting of this electoral law to the Senate and the *Bürgerschaft*. This maneuver was an attempt to restore their former legislative powers to these institutions, and thus their former political powers as well. The Senate's representative admitted during the deliberations on this matter that it was basically an attempt to force a confrontation on the question of power, and that he considered this initiative to be premature. But the old party continued to pursue the matter, only introducing a small amendment to the motion which would eliminate the *Bürgerschaft* as a political factor, yet fully reinstating the Senate in its old status. The struggle quickly ended in an unequivocal defeat of the *Bürgerschaft*, and the Council's sovereignty was clearly emphasized when, at the first session, the Council president laconically declared in the name of the Council that as a consequence of the revolution political power had

passed into the hands of the Workers and Soldiers Council and that the Senate and the *Bürgerschaft* had been eliminated as political entities, which would only continue to exist as communal and administrative institutions, and that the Council had also, of course, made it known that the jurisdictional arrangements thus established would be acknowledged by the *Bürgerschaft* just as the Senate had previously done.

Meanwhile, fundamental transformations had also taken place in the Soldiers Council. In order to establish parity with the Workers Council it had, without consulting anyone, increased its membership from 15 to 30, and the representatives of the old party and the trade unions were well-prepared to easily take advantage of this change and the consequent increase of the bourgeois element, in order to set down roots in the Soldiers Council and to convert it into their own secure fortress. How much the situation had changed could clearly be seen when the Soldiers Council addressed the issue of the popular militia. The committee responsible for implementing this measure set forth rules which dictated that the militia would be composed of dedicated militants from the three socialist groups: regardless of individual political convictions, it must not be the instrument of any one socialist faction or its policies. As an organization independent of the security service, which it had to assist in certain circumstances, its members would keep weapons in their homes, and would in principle be economically dependent upon only their day jobs. The militia depended upon the central government, although the day-to-day command functions necessary to fulfill the militia's specific task remained in the hands of the territorial government: this task was to safeguard the revolution. The motion was defeated due to the resistance of the representatives of the old party and the leaders of the Soldiers Council, and these two groups managed to table the discussion and leave its future in the hands of the Soldiers Council. This signified the elimination of the popular militia as far as Hamburg was concerned, which was clearly stated in a protest of the communist wing of the Council and the representatives of the Independent Social Democratic Party.

This was the situation when the First Congress of Workers and Soldiers Councils convened in Berlin. The attempt to keep the Hamburg delegation united as the sole representative body of the Council failed; some of the representatives of the Soldiers Council along with the representatives of the old party separated from the rest of the delegates. Since there was no communist fraction at the Congress, and the Council's radical wing did not want to join either of the other two socialist groups, and faced with the obligation of belonging to a fraction, which was a condition indirectly imposed by the rules of the Congress, it formed an independent fraction of United Revolutionary Workers and Soldiers, which had the promising number of 24 members. The motion presented to the Congress by the communist wing, which was consonant with the policy of the Hamburg Council, stated: "The revolutionary proletariat, together with the revolutionary army, have overthrown the old powers. With the victorious conclusion of the uprising, supreme power has fallen into the hands of the workers and soldiers councils. As representative of the workers and soldiers councils throughout all of Germany, the Congress takes possession of political power and the responsibility for exercising that power. As bearer of the sovereignty of the empire it has the right to control, to nominate or to depose any member of the executive. The Congress demands the immediate departure from the government of its bourgeois members. It shall elect a commission which will present proposals concerning the situation of the former members of the government." As a result of this motion's status under the Congress's rules of order, it was debated only on the last day of the Congress, by which time the Congress had already voted in favor of the well-known and quite different motion presented by Lüdemann, thus rendering the revolutionaries' motion null and void.

Faced with the divergent tendencies which wracked the Council, the Council's leadership called for the unity of the whole working class, in order to secure and to extend the revolution

and its conquests. This goal was not hindered by an attempted coup against the Council which involved various former members of the Council and its press office, together with bourgeois editors, financial circles and politicians. Several editors of the *Echo* were also in on the plot, as they had to confess in writing while under interrogation. The plotters wanted to arrest fourteen members of the Council to hold as hostages, in order to execute them in case of a revolutionary counter-action, as they said in a leaflet. On the basis of a proposal which had previously been prepared by the Council, in assemblies convoked for this purpose, it was ruled and decided that, in order to prevent the recovery of the forces of reaction, the security forces must be composed exclusively of dedicated revolutionaries, and that all the stores of arms and ammunition should be under the exclusive control of faithful troops, and also that the Committee of Seven of the Supreme Soldiers Council, which was in command of the troops, should be composed solely of determined revolutionaries. Officers' military insignia and uniforms were also prohibited, all officers were required to disarm, and the soldiers councils were made responsible for the loyalty of the various military units. Officers were allowed to be members of the councils if they were elected by a majority of their detachments and were known to be convinced supporters of the revolution, demands which, in a more detailed and somewhat modified form, were approved by the First Council Congress, where they became famous under the name of the Hamburg Seven Points. In order to help bring about the political unity of the workers and to provide more publicity for the Council's policies, it was demanded, recalling the revolution's first measures, that the *Hamburger Echo* should be placed at the disposal of the Council. When the Hamburg troops extended the ruling against officers' insignia to all military insignia, opposition arose, particularly from the lower non-commissioned ranks.

The watchword of unity heightened the workers' consciousness of belonging to one class, and its most profound significance was that under no circumstances whatsoever, and under no political pretext, should the members of the working class ever take up arms against one another. It also helped members of the old party and independent social democrats to move towards the left, and, furthermore, if this watchword of unity did not prevail, the structure of the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD) would have been compromised, since this party contained two distinct factions. In general, however, the negotiations concerning a unitary organization, then taking place in Hamburg, could only construct the basic framework for the future, while the general direction of events could clearly be seen in the fact that the basis which had been established for a fusion of the organizations was undoubtedly favorable for the communists: the revolution had created new conditions which made the unification of the revolutionary working masses possible. In the future, the politics, tactics and organization of the working class had to be oriented within the framework of the revolution. The Würzburg program had lost all meaning after the revolution. The Erfurt program must henceforth be the point of departure, with its principles of socialization of the means of production and the class struggle, taking into account, of course, that in regard to many other issues this program was not in the forefront of the movement. Since the old organizational apparatus corresponded to neither the level of social development, nor to the political and tactical needs of the working class, a new program and a new organization became necessary, which would be more suited to the conditions of the revolution, and which could guarantee that in the future the will of the organized militants would not only be expressed by the leadership, but would really determine the movement's policies and tactics.

But it was precisely the considerable success of this call for unity which exacerbated the differences of opinion among the Council's leaders and, after the First Congress of Councils, the attacks commenced against the power of command exercised by the soldiers councils, the representatives of the Berlin government and the trade unions no longer concealed their aversion for

the workers councils, and doubts arose concerning their sincerity in proposing to undertake socialization. When the situation in Berlin subsequently rapidly deteriorated, revolutionary delegates from the factories of Hamburg issued a call for a solidarity strike, which led to a demonstration against the leaders of the socialist right and the trade unions. These delegates demanded socialization, especially of the large factories, the guarantee of an eight hour working day, and decent wages, as well as the total elimination of piecework and price gouging. A delegation sent to the Council brought news that strikers had occupied the trade union offices in order to shut them down. It demanded that the Council ratify and implement these measures. In order to guarantee the safety of buildings and property, the president of the Council declared, in the presence of a small proportion of the Council's membership as many as were necessary for a quorum since, faced with the urgency of the situation, not all of them could be gathered together in such a short time that the strikers' delegation's desires were to be provisionally satisfied, and ordered that the necessary measures be taken. The trade union offices were therefore closed, and the Council guaranteed their security. But this measure led to the most violent confrontations within the Council. The right wing passionately rejected it, and the Soldiers Council's Committee of Seven decided to evacuate the trade union offices with three companies of infantry, but, after considering the possible grave consequences of such an employment of armed force, did not dare to carry out its own decree.

Despite the tumultuous proceedings, the debate in the Council crystallized around the question of the relations between the council system and the trade unions. The right wing socialists, who insisted upon the preservation of the old organizational jurisdictions and relations, were told that the revolution was not over, and that its basic effectiveness resided in the consolidation of the council system. Since it was primarily an organization of the factories, which places the latter under the control of the workers, the council system was also a new way to conceive of the construction of the economy and society, and was at the same time the culmination of the organization of the working class, embracing both its political and its economic aspects; it expressed the unity of the class and was, furthermore, incompatible with separate political and economic organizations, which the working class had created within the framework of capitalist society for its fight against that society. In principle and in practice, the council system therefore superseded the political and trade union apparatuses of the pre-revolutionary era. The demonstration which was taking place at that time, whose purpose was to bring awareness of the council system's new tasks to the masses, was, despite the circumstances which accompanied it, the beginning of a new era in the struggle in Hamburg as well. The Council finally passed a resolution which, in consideration of the ambivalence of the government's policies, demanded the resignation of the Ebert-Scheidemann-Noske government, called for the consolidation of the council system in the factories, and defined the Council as the decision-making power in all industrial affairs. In order to make this last point of the resolution an effective reality, a revolutionary tribunal had to be created. The Council, the resolution also proclaimed, was the supreme and highest power of the Hamburg workers, to which the trade union organizations had to be subordinated. The detailed exposition of these principles was to be elaborated by a committee whose composition would be determined at a later time.

Since on that same evening excesses had been committed at the *Hamburger Echo*, with much destruction on the ground floor, the Council president, taking action to pacify the crowd, decreed that the building should be closed, provisionally prohibiting the publication of the newspaper to prevent new incidents, and above all because numerous provocateurs had infiltrated the crowd. This measure was also applied, for reasons of fairness, to the second socialist newspaper published in the city, that of the independent social democrats, and this edict was later ratified by the Council. A committee was formed to deliberate upon the question of what

concrete conditions would have to be met for the *Echo* to be reopened. It ruled that the measure which had been proposed after the coup attempt, and which had been approved by acclamation in popular assemblies, must be implemented immediately, and that the newspaper, by means of an equal allotment of editorial positions, must be transformed into an organ of the Council. The committee understood, of course, that it would naturally have to simultaneously suspend the publication of the newspaper of the Independent Social Democratic Party, thus assuring unity on the terrain of the press, and in the future, the unity of the political organization as well. However, before the Council could implement these measures, it was prevented from doing so by the arrest of the Council's president, who was seized in the meeting hall, with threats and by force, by security troops; at the same time, the Soldiers Council occupied the *Echo* with a strong contingent of soldiers, to protect it against the Council's ruling.

As a result of these events, the old party organized a large demonstration which took place on January 11, 1919. The implementation of a Council edict had been prevented by the intervention of armed force in the interest of one party. But the president had to be released a few hours later, by order of the Council. Only one road remained if the dictatorship of the Soldiers Council over the Workers Council was not to be openly proclaimed, thereby setting a precedent for the future: the Workers Council had to be deposed, and its membership re-elected upon a foundation which would guarantee a better composition, as understood by the right wing socialists. Consequently, they wanted to compel the Workers Council to resign. As representatives of a crowd which filled the entire plaza assembled before the *Bürgerschaft* building large businesses had closed and sometimes even compelled their employees to participate in the demonstration a delegation appeared in the Council's meeting chamber, and posed the question of whether the Workers Council was ready to resign. The delegation was informed that, in principle, the Council was ready to resign at any moment, but that its resignation was itself exclusively the decision of the General Workers Council, and that it would not take place without the latter's intervention; there remained the possibility of resorting, with the assent of the Soldiers Council, to the use of force against the whole Workers Council, as had occurred a few days earlier in the case of the Council's president. Even when the dismissal of the Workers Council was proposed to the crowd waiting outside, and the crowd supported the proposal, the radical majority of the Workers Council was no more compliant. After another round of heated debate, the delegation contented itself with a declaration in which it recognized the need for the council system and its consolidation its attack had been basically directed against this position while the Council agreed to bring a proposal before the General Workers Council concerning the re-election of the executive committee on the basis of a system of proportional representation by party instead of the system of representation by factory regardless of party affiliation. As had been foreseen, the General Workers Council refused to consider the proposal. The proportional system was eventually imposed in Hamburg by the German Central Council immediately prior to the elections for the Second Council Congress, by which time the political power of the working class had long since expired.

A phase of dictatorship by the Soldiers Council began. Not only did it spread the idea among the security troops and soldiers that the left wing and the Workers Councils were planning a putsch, but a long and bizarre series of arrests of alleged Spartacists took place, among people who, while not always totally inoffensive, had nothing at all to do with the Spartacus League. The Committee of Seven even ordered the arrest of the leader of the delegation of the shipyard workers which had demanded the closure of the trade union offices, charging him with the completely baseless accusation that he, a Russian, had called for armed resistance and the occupation of the trade union offices, and that his identification papers were forged. Upon the

request of the Foreign Minister, and against the will of the judge presiding over the case in Hamburg, who had expressly refused to authorize his arrest, the accountant of the Russian Consulate was arrested and brought to Berlin. Various people working in the municipal administration were arrested, accused of having provided the spokesmen of the delegation from the shipyard with his supposedly false identification papers, in the form of a travel pass with a false name. Since they did not want to assume any more responsibility for this arbitrary regime, which had not consulted the Council's justice committee about any of these matters, the justice committee's president, along with the president of the Council, resigned, and issued a public declaration. Afterwards, events took their inevitable course, which can be summarized as follows: the opposition in the Council, when the elections for Council president were held, submitted blank ballots. A representative of the right wing socialists was elected. The growing strength of reaction in Germany, assisted by the newly-formed white guards, and the government policy of progressively eliminating the power of the councils and revoking their rulings and decrees, rendered the continuation of the Council's policies, as they had been originally conceived, impossible.

The new leadership began to systematically curtail the Council's political power. It proposed immediate elections for the *Bürgerschaft*. The communist group, of course, had not only never opposed the election of a communal representative body, but had recommended it from the early days of the Council. But the old party had a much more ambitious goal, that is, to reinstate the *Bürgerschaft* in its old position and with its old rights. The Council, which due to personnel changes in the Soldiers Council, was increasingly dominated by right wing socialists, decided, after extensive negotiations, that it would elect a new municipal parliament, which would have the old name of the *Bürgerschaft*, and that all those who had voted for the national assembly would have the right to vote in this election, if the date set for the elections in Hamburg came within six months. Another ruling followed this one which went much further, according to which the *Bürgerschaft* would be a legislative body, with political power. According to the decisive first article of the ruling decreed by the Council on the elections for the *Bürgerschaft*, its tasks, besides the management of day-to-day affairs, consisted in debating and approving a new constitution, and formulating and passing the laws required to complement the new constitution. A motion to the effect that the ruling must be in accord with the manifesto of November 12, 1918, in other words, that the Council had veto power over any decisions concerning the constitution, which was a prerequisite of political power prior to the accession to power of the Council, was rejected. An attempt to at least assure a reorganization of the Senate, adapting it to the new times, also failed, and its opponents explained that it was not the Council's job to decree such decisive rulings and that the new *Bürgerschaft* should regulate such matters. These decisions basically corresponded to the stance of the imperial government, which no longer recognized the Council as the bearer of political power in Hamburg. When a delegation from Hamburg had to be selected for the new Chamber of States, the national government turned to the Senate, despite the Council's protests, in this case curiously joined by the representatives of the old party, which were of no avail; this is how the government's policy, which, under pressure from a succession of revolutionary strikes, was forced to allow the continued existence of workers councils in the factories, managed to eliminate the councils wherever they had political power, as it had already eliminated the soldiers councils' power of command.

The factional disputes in Hamburg also facilitated the advance of the reactionary forces. The new leadership allowed the enlistment of volunteer units without any restrictions. Council decisions encountered the open resistance of the authorities – not least of all from the police and the various branches of the soldiers councils – or were sometimes contested by the sudden rebellion of the employers. This situation had the greatest impact on the rulings of the department

of social policy. In part, the employers no longer paid it any heed, and in other cases its legal jurisdiction was denied, with the support of decrees by the imperial government, since it was once again possible, by citing these decrees, to carry out the most reactionary judicial initiatives, even against the trade unions. The textile workers union, for example, had decided to shut down a firm, and the department of social policy had ruled in the union's favor. The firm presented a demand to withdraw this ruling, and also demanded a declaration that the reasons for the closing of its plant proffered by the union were not true: a counterrevolutionary act which was no longer content with attacking the Council, but openly took on the trade unions. Considering the great importance of the case, the Council pondered the option of intervening outside of its jurisdiction and prohibiting the court from ruling on the appeal. A motion to do so was approved, and it was also decided that a delegation should be sent to Berlin. The Council's initiative came to nothing, because the end of the Council was immanent.

Particularly during the Council's last days one could note that various attempts to create a special tribunal with jurisdiction over all questions involving the revolution and the power of the Council, which could not be judged by reference to the existing laws, had not borne fruit, thus rendering the Council's rulings unenforceable. Whenever business owners appealed the rulings of the department of social policy before the courts, the latter ruled that the department's decrees were not legal. And everything remained as before. Although a proposal to create a special tribunal was submitted to the justice committee for debate and elaboration, no definitive decision was reached, and when a tribunal was nevertheless created, its president, a high court judge, resigned because the tribunal was not compatible with judicial procedure.

When Liebknecht was buried in Berlin, the Council only sent a delegation. A public declaration was no longer possible. Meanwhile, the well-known battle of Bremen was taking place. The imperial government took advantage of the collapse of Bremen's government to subject this port city to its power, and to impose a government of right wing socialists more to its taste. It thus intervened in the military region of the Ninth Army Corps, without prior notice, which gave rise to serious discontent: the Soldiers Council of the Ninth Army Corps responded by mobilizing its forces, that is, with a declaration of war. This was a very precipitous step, taken without consulting the Workers Council, one which would have the most disastrous consequences if it did not have any real power behind it, and even more so, if it did not have any capability for carrying out military actions; this turned out to be the case, since the Hamburg Soldiers Council refused to obey the orders of the Ninth Army Corps Soldiers Council High Command, at first clandestinely and then openly. The disaster which was immanent in these circumstances could only be prevented by the unanimous intervention of the workers of the four cities, assuring that the necessary measures should be taken. The Hamburg General Workers Council therefore passed a resolution demanding that the workers be armed within 48 hours. Compliance with this order could be expected of the military command, despite such short notice, since it had been delegated the responsibility for studying the question of forming militias many weeks before. The Workers Council also demanded that access roads be secured, that food supplies in the port be requisitioned, and that Bremen be supported with all military means possible. The attack on Bremen was not just the logical continuation of the Berlin military high command's attempt to repeal the fundamental achievement of the revolution, the exercise of the power of military command by the soldiers councils, and the elimination of the Hamburg Seven Points, which had already suffered a serious defeat in the struggles in Berlin, and which, with the defeat of Bremen, would be definitively annihilated: the total elimination of the revolutionary remnants of the old army was also immanent, as well as the fall of the new military apparatus which was in the process of formation into the hands of the old general staff.

The outcome of the political and military success of this action would be of more benefit to the military than to the imperial government. The same was true, or even more so, of its possible further consequences. The government would never feel safe as long as it was not master of its coasts. But if it were to establish itself here, the military gang will have gained a base where, one day perhaps while fighting against the imperial government itself it might join forces with the English troops of the Entente. The intention of the Council's left wing was to keep the government and its military away from the coast, and it was possible to achieve this goal. Given the forces of the formations of armed workers in Bremen, which were well-entrenched, several thousand men were enough to momentarily prevent the Gerstenberg division from entering Bremen. There were more than enough arms and munitions in Hamburg. The breathing space so gained could have been used to fully arm all the workers of the coastal regions of the North Sea. A battle for the port of Hamburg, with its stockpiles of food and materiel, would never be tolerated by the government. And at least during these moments of shared danger, the call to unity had an effect. Not even the right wing socialist leadership could yield under these circumstances; it was obliged to participate in public demonstrations against Noske, and had resigned itself to the possibility of armed defense. The communist wing, meanwhile, considered linking up with the industrialized regions of the Elbe to join with the revolutionary workers of Saxony and central Germany in one uninterrupted chain. It wanted to take advantage of the opportunity to intervene in the course of events in the rest of Germany, and to give a decisive boost to the revolution. Were this plan to succeed, the government and the national assembly would be lost, since a few weeks later the strikes broke out in central Germany.

This policy ultimately failed as a result of the serious disagreements among the Council's factions, even though unity among the workers themselves took a great step forward, and the general swing towards the left obliged the right wing socialist leaders to clearly distance themselves from the government's militarist policy. The disagreements among the factions led to the resistance of the Hamburg Soldiers Council and its leadership to the orders of the Ninth Army Corps High Command. A vivid display of personal grudges! Amidst these events the Hamburg Seven Points met their definitive demise, buried by precisely those who had previously used them as a springboard for their first promotions, and who had shortly thereafter distinguished themselves, following the general trend, as government favorites.

These events decided the Council's fate. Its activity from this point on would be nothing but agonizing and disgraceful death throes, from which the communist representatives kept their distance. The immediate consequence of this death spasm, for the workers, was the total paralysis of the department of social policy. Even in the Council, its activity was violently criticized because although this had been true since its inception its rulings clashed with the judicial norms of imperial law; since the revolution had only replaced the prior sovereignty with the Council, it was said, the Council's jurisdiction must be limited by the laws of the Empire; this constituted an attempt to base the revolution upon bourgeois law, which was possible because all the courts had recognized the imperial government. It finally occurred to the department's supporters to subject all the department's rulings to the Council's enabling clause. But the justice department, which had been assigned the task of examining the case, proposed submitting an appeal to the courts to test the validity of the department's rulings. An old experience was once again verified: when you have political power, legal formulations are an easy matter. When power is lost, legal formulations cannot overcome and eliminate the resistance of reality.

Up to this time an arbitration committee had yet to be created. The demobilization commissioner declared that until such a committee was nominated, he would name one in its place. There were thus two departments of social policy, with overlapping functions, one based on a decree of the imperial government, the other on the shattered political power of the Council.

The end had come for the department of social policy, and the decision to bring the matter before the General Workers Council amounted to no more than a ploy to gain time, faced with the necessity of recognizing the full significance of the situation, which would have been more dignified.

Since the Council had withdrawn from the political arena, there were some debates on this problem, but no definitive position was adopted. When the new *Bürgerschaft* met for the first time, with a majority of right wing socialists, the Council president, also a right wing socialist, surrendered the Council's political power to the new parliamentary body. In accordance with the policy of the imperial government, the new Workers Council, which was meeting at the same time, would no longer exercise political functions, but only economic ones.

An apolitical council system – an impossible demand, a political fantasy! The government, with the help of loyal military units, defeated the revolutionary remnants of the old army. But it has not yet been able to stop the workers' revolutionary strikes, nor will it be able to do so, so it seems. Chained to the bourgeoisie, and to the compromise it concluded with the bourgeoisie, which entailed both the rejection of any socialization as well as the elimination of the councils, it will have to reject any concession which could endanger this coalition, and with it the continued existence of the government itself. Even more important is the fact that it has retreated on both these points before the pressure of the strikes. It promised that the councils would be institutionalized in the constitution, that socialization would be carried out, and that the legal foundations for socialization would be created. However, the different parties to the labor process recognized by the government contradict the fundamental idea of the council system. The so-called Socialization Law is a stillborn law, which does not go beyond the juridical principles of the legal state, and the taxation of the coal trade is the opposite of a socialization measure. While these concessions and the way they were made could only strengthen the contradictory intermediate position of the government, without satisfying the working class in any way, the pacification ploy of making the councils participate in socialization contains an even greater contradiction.

Only those who hold political power can carry out socialization. Socialization is only possible by confronting and fundamentally transforming the old bureaucracy, by radically confronting capitalism, as an economic principle and as a social class, by totally replacing the existing social powers, by completely reorganizing the laws of property, production and distribution. And in this vast process of the transformation of all of society, the councils are the revolutionary and transformative instruments of the working class. Who would believe that, having found a solution for these problems, relegating the councils to the economic sphere is the most urgent political task of the present and the greatest social problem of our culture in the future?

The councils in large industrial factories embrace, as a matter of principle, control over the enterprises in the technical and commercial aspects as well. In the smaller and more decentralized industries, their tasks are even more daunting. Here they will lay the foundations for concentrating production into larger units. Savings, in the widest social meaning, are now a vital necessity for all of society. A private capitalist economy saves in each particular capitalist enterprise, while a socialized economy saves on the level of the economy as a whole. Even if it closes small and medium-sized enterprises and therefore destroys private capital, an economy undergoing socialization will intervene in this manner if required by the general interest, or if this can be done without serious consequences. In this transformation towards higher forms of production, in the employment of labor power and physical plant which will have thus been freed, the factory councils will be as indispensable as the councils of the towns, the cities and industries, since such a reorientation of industry would be impossible without a corresponding reorganization of its administration.

As a new social principle of organization and administration, the council system opposes to municipal politics, which is the basis of the private economy, and therefore of capitalist society, the idea of the union of all those who work in production on the basis of the nature and location of their production. Just as the era of tribal organization had its own forms of group socialization, and the era of the private organization of the economy manifests forms of interconnection between essentially different groups, so too does socialized society create its own particular new forms of union and integration. The blood ties of tribal organization as a constructive principle of human economy and society were succeeded by the no less simple idea of one's residence, of municipal politics within a country or a territory. This principle, which has dominated civilization for thousands of years, is now replaced by the principle of labor. To the idea of municipal politics, and its highest manifestation in democracy and parliament, is contrasted, without being totally disconnected from those two concepts, the organizational and administrative idea of the councils, which is radically opposed to the former notion. This does not imply that a social organization which has taken thousands of years to develop and has attained its latest bourgeois-capitalist form during the last several centuries can be rapidly and totally established upon entirely new bases. The two social principles, perhaps for a very long time, will be obliged to accept practical compromises and to coexist. What must be decided upon now is not the absolute elimination and destruction of the old principle, but the question of which of the two principles should dominate society, which one of them must prevail over the other. Until now, the ties of nationality have been based upon coercion from above. The new system will organize the nations from below. And it is precisely due to this fact that the new system will obtain the security which will allow it to prevail over the old, which no foreign forces will be able to prevent or oppress, and which will bring in its wake, in all regions and throughout the world, with the guarantee of domestic invincibility, the possibility of the unlimited expansion of the world socialist order.

Factory Organizations or Trade Unions?¹

Fritz Wolffheim

The German revolution, whose political phase ended on November 9, 1918, meant, in addition to the destruction of German imperialism by means of the war, the destruction of the entire German Empire as well. Once its military power was destroyed, and the workers and soldiers told the big landowners and princes to go to hell, the German Empire, as it had existed until that time, ceased to exist. The German Empire had been, since 1871, a bourgeois class state under the leadership of princes and big landowners. It is true of every state that it provides an organization for the people within its borders. All bourgeois class states involve the concentration of their inhabitants into one nation. A nation is the organization of the people under the leadership of the bourgeoisie. The founding of the nation means that the bourgeoisie is organized as the ruling class, and that it tries to make sure that the subject masses are either totally isolated or believe in an organization which cannot endanger bourgeois rule. As long as a bourgeois state is firmly rooted in the means of political power, the ruling class possesses the power to prevent the proletariat from creating a revolutionary organizational form. If the proletariat wants to organize, it must first acknowledge this state and unite within a framework which the latter generously concedes for a certain form of organization. When the proletariat began its class struggle it confronted the ruling bourgeoisie in a situation where it had no right to organize. So the struggle of the proletariat began with the struggle for its right to freedom of association. This is why, in a military-police-bureaucratic state like the German Empire after 1871, the struggle began with political forms. The political struggle had to build the foundations which would enable the proletariat to construct its own economic organization. The political struggle is also the vehicle for expanding the scope of the freedom conceded by the bourgeoisie to the proletariat to form its own organizations.

This is why, prior to the revolution, both the political and trade union movements, despite their laying claim to the revolutionary traditions of 1848, were essentially reformist. The workers movement was reformist because it recognized the class state, because its principle goal was to try to influence the rulers from within an institution of the class state, from inside parliament. It was reformist in its trade union struggles because, rather than organizing the working class with the objective of destroying the bourgeoisie, and abolishing the principle of hiring wage labor, its goal was to negotiate with the employers, guaranteeing their future existence,

¹ Fritz Wolffheim, *Betriebsorganisation oder Gewerkschaften?*, Hamburg, 1919. This pamphlet contains the text of a speech presented on August 16, 1919 before the assembly of the Communist Party's Hamburg local. It was published "by unanimous consent of the assembly".

and thus to try to obtain more favorable wages and working conditions for particular sectors of the working class. And when the party and trade unions participated in the class struggle, they did so only within the framework of the existing state. Even in the heat of the struggle, in strikes, it was, for the trade unions, not a matter of attempting to destroy the bourgeoisie but of compelling particular groups to yield to certain demands of particular sectors of the working class, demands which were framed so that their satisfaction would be possible, and would by no means jeopardize the future prosperity of capital. This must be kept well in mind if we want to clearly understand whether the trade union form of pre-revolutionary times corresponds to the needs of the German proletariat now that it has carried out a political revolution. Having destroyed the power of the landowners and princes which the bourgeoisie had at its disposal, the originally political revolution has destroyed all powers which could have blocked the proletariat's road to power. Then the proletariat faced the question: what kind of state should be organized? Should a capitalist state or a proletarian state be born? The old capitalist state was overthrown by the revolution; when it fell, there was no state at all, and the decision concerning what kind of state should replace the old one which had fallen was in the hands of the proletariat. The proletariat has not become aware of this fact; it was not accustomed to reflecting on the nature of the state. The proletariat had customarily restricted its efforts to gathering together a mountain of white slips of paper every five years, so that its so-called representatives could climb up to the heights of parliament. In matters relating to economic organization, the proletariat has been prone, or compelled, to yield all decision-making power to a small group of leaders, and to limit itself to paying its dues, so that a small number of leaders can enjoy a safe and secure existence. These were basically the functions of the proletariat in Germany, and if its trade union and political organizations were used for anything else, it was with the intention of transmitting the stultifying mental training for which the school and the barracks had so nobly prepared the German people, the party and the trade unions, as well as the workers, who might otherwise have developed revolutionary ideas. Since the only thing which the essence of the state has to deal with now is revolutionary activity, it tries with great determination to get the German proletarians to exercise themselves over the question of whether this or that indirect tax is more or less beneficial for the landowners, rather than the problem of analyzing the nature of bourgeois power, and what kind of power the proletariat has to create in order to eventually organize that power as a state. All the Kautskyists spoke of the conquest of power, but how to achieve this conquest is not the subject of their study, nor do they want the workers to attend to the matter. Now, when it has been two years since a proletariat which is not as cultivated as the German proletariat, the Russian working class, showed what means are required for the conquest of power, and upon what basis this power is subsequently organized, then all the Kautskyists come and implore the German people, for the love of God, not to imitate the "cruelties" unleashed by the destruction of the bourgeoisie as a class in Russia.

The German proletariat had grown accustomed to following its leaders; the whole world only appeared to it as a prison courtyard, and no one was more surprised by the successfully concluded German revolution than the German proletarians themselves. Had this not been the case, if their capacity to speak and to think had not been so astoundingly lost, then at that moment, at least, they would have asked what had to be done to defend the power they had conquered. This question would have been the question concerning the essence of the State.

Lassalle, who lived during an era when *bonzes* did not yet exist in the German workers movement, solved this problem. "The State", he says, "is the concentration of all real means of

power existing in a people.”² The concentration of machine guns and the press, the rule over the banks, the rule over the means of production, the concentration of all military and economic organizations, this is the State. And what is decisive for the rule of the State is the question of which class among its entire people possesses the strongest means of power.

The power of the High Command’s generals consisted in their control over the whole ensemble of great masses of arms and men. When this circumstance changed, when the workers and soldiers took all the means of power into their hands, and the other classes amounted to nothing, then all that had to be done was to organize this power and to add to it the rule over the press and the proletarian state would have come into existence. The institutions of this proletarian state developed quite spontaneously among the masses in the days of the revolution. The military organizations were in ruins, the police and the courts, as well as the administrative bureaucracy of the state, were paralyzed. To prevent chaos, and to organize economic relations, the workers and soldiers councils were organized throughout Germany, as if by a natural process, which in the first days of the revolution had concentrated all power into their hands. The union of all the German workers and soldiers councils and their solid foundation in the masses of working people, in the mines, in the factories, in the countryside – this organization was the State. Within the framework of this organization the proletarians who possessed arms would have created a military organization: the Red Army. It did not occur to the proletarians that it was necessary to immediately firmly safeguard their power and to reorganize it. Whenever they thought in terms of organizations, they had in mind the concepts of their old organizations, the social democratic parties and the trade unions, which were born in the class state, and had matured within it, and which had neither the will nor the ability to safeguard proletarian power, to organize the proletariat as a State; not only had these parties and trade unions been integrated into the bourgeois class State, they had also become an essential part of it, and when all the organizations of the bourgeois State trembled when everything collapsed, they did not tremble, they became the backbone of the reborn bourgeois State. This is how the proletariat of Germany was defeated by the German proletarians, who had, by means of their parties, their trade unions, and their leaders, allowed the old German Empire, with its “Reichstag” which had just been tossed into the gutter, to return in the guise of the national assembly. This is how the commanding heights of the party and the trade unions became the commanding heights of this State. And this is how, in the state which had been reconstructed in this manner, the proletarians were disarmed, and the white guards were armed.

That such a misfortune should have befallen the proletariat is due in part to the fact that it was by no means prepared to carry out a revolution. But besides this circumstance there is another one which is very important. The proletariat had been accustomed to view the revolution

² This is certainly not a quote from any of Lassalle’s writings. Lassalle often dilated on the purpose of the state. To the “night-watchman idea” of the state, which, according to Lassalle, the bourgeois maintains, Lassalle opposes the “idea of the state of the workers as a whole” (to be realized by universal suffrage), which would be identical to the idea of the state. Lassalle meant all those who have a part in productive activity, be it manual, administrative, scientific, educational, etc. The state would then be the “unity of all individuals in an ethical whole, a unity which will multiply the individuals’ forces a million-fold. Its purpose will be the education and development of the human species towards freedom”. Ferdinand Lassalle, *Gesammelte Reden und Schriften*, edited and with an introduction by Eduard Bernstein, Vol. II, Berlin, 1919, p. 195 et seq., and pp. 240-241. The quotations are from the following works: 1) *Arbeiterprogramm Über den besonderen Zusammenhang der gegenwärtigen Geschichtsepoche mit der Idee des Arbeiterstandes* (speech before a Berlin artisans’ society in 1862); 2) *Die Wissenschaft und die Arbeiter*. A speech in his own defense before the Berlin Criminal Court, against the accusation of having publicly incited the non-possessing classes to hatred and contempt for the possessing classes. (That is, in the “Workers Program”. The trial took place in 1863.)

as essentially a political change, and thought that, once this political change had taken place, the other change would only be a question of time, and that when the old political forms are destroyed, there would be an evolution towards a socialist society, and that the proletarian struggle would no longer be necessary. And, once again, it was the social democratic party and the trade unions which nourished this belief within the proletariat, and which had forgotten, or wanted to forget, to explain to the proletariat that the proletarian revolution is not exhausted in bringing about changes in political forms, but is essentially an economic revolution, a revolution whose task is to basically revolutionize the whole economy. If the political revolution was carried out by means of the uprising in the streets, the same cannot be true of the economic revolution, which cannot be accomplished by means of armed actions, but must take place where the economic process has its roots in the factories. When it is a matter of providing a country's economy with a completely new economic foundation, one must go to the roots of the economy, so it is not enough to rectify some random surface phenomena of the existing economy. Its roots are in the factories, that is why the revolutionary economic struggle of the workers begins in the factories themselves. And if the revolutionary struggle of the proletarians begins and ends in the factories, and if the goal of this struggle is to put these factories at the service of the proletariat, then the only way to organize the proletariat for this struggle is on the basis of the factory organization.

The old trade unions were created during an era when the proletariat did not find itself in the midst of an economic revolution. Capitalism was still expanding, attaining higher forms, and Germany was still undergoing industrial-capitalist ascent. In those days, when the trade unions began to unite the proletariat within the entire people, capitalism was still split into factions. Many businesses still competed with one another. At that time it was not a question of destroying the bourgeoisie as a class, because it was still in the process of forming itself as a class. Then, it was only a question of obtaining better wages and working conditions for certain layers of the working class. And at that time, the old trade union form did correspond to the needs of the proletarians. Skilled workers were still predominant in large sectors of the working masses, and there were still small and medium-sized enterprises everywhere, with only occasional large businesses. The trade unions organized the workers by trade, and made the worker's neighborhood, rather than his factory, the basis of his trade union membership. All the questions of the trade union struggle were handled by trade union officials or at membership meetings, and were by no means decided where the workers find themselves day and night: in the factories.

Even before the war, this form of organization rendered the workers incapable of putting their forces to the test against capitalism in mass strikes. Because the old trade unions had fragmented the masses into groups defined by trade, they did not have the mass strike in their programs. As a result, the great shipyard workers strike of 1913 was defeated, because the workers' form of organization was not suited to the needs of a mass organization. The old trade unions were organizations of leaders who carried out the bulk of trade union activity; it was the leaders, not the masses, who negotiated. The leaders did not want the masses themselves to carry out actions. For these leaders, the strike was a last resort to be utilized in emergencies, rather than the natural weapon which the strike constitutes in a revolutionary period. In a revolutionary period it is no longer only a matter of improving working conditions, because capitalism is dying, capitalist society can no longer improve working conditions: now it is a question of destroying capitalist society. This can only be done by means of a continuous series of revolutionary mass strikes which, constantly spreading and successively embracing all industries, will shake the economy of the whole country to its very foundations and finally compel the capitalist class to declare bankruptcy. It is bankrupt now, but does it abandon all attempts to stage a recovery, or does it confess its incompetence? No, the capitalist class does no such thing; it cannot do

that, that would mean suicide. This will only happen when the proletariat compels the capitalist class to do it. The principle means to achieve this goal is the revolutionary strike.

This strike, which can break out because of simple economic demands, possesses a political dimension because it affects the masses in such a manner as to threaten the existence of the whole economy by spreading to other sectors of the economy. This has been clearly demonstrated by the miners strike. Due to a shortage of coal, railroad operations were curtailed and the transport of commodities was paralyzed. Whether or not the miners were aware of this, the fact that they joined the strike as one great mass itself has had political effects. And this is the second reason why the old trade unions are incapable of leading the struggle of the working class during revolutionary times. The trade unions are prepared for partial economic struggles; the old social democratic party is prepared for political-parliamentary struggles. A struggle which is revolutionary, and simultaneously economic and political, can only be carried out by the masses themselves. This is only possible within organizations which are created for the purpose of conducting such struggles. Where these struggles have broken out, where the workers have plainly seen the incompetence of the old trade unions is where this new form has now become a reality. The miners organized by mines, and among the mines by regions, and all the districts together into a *Union* which includes all the workers in the industry. Since the miners have discovered this new form, the shipyard workers have now also finally begun to discuss this new form of organization. In the shipyards they, too, are joining workplace organizations, in order to then unite these workplace organizations in a single *Union* of Shipyard Workers. There is also the *Deutscher Seemannsbund* (Seaman's Organization) and an industry-wide organization of the German railroad workers is being debated throughout the country. The German railroad workers have only just recently been pushed into the free trade unions,³ and they have already begun to create a new revolutionary trade union based on workplace organizations. In Halle as in Berlin and Hamburg, they have independently elaborated the organizational forms which they intend to combine into a unitary organization, based on workplace organizations. These preparatory labors are quite advanced, and if not this lost strike, then the next defeat will compel the railroad workers to turn their backs on the old trade union, and to find an organizational form which makes it possible for them to develop freely within the struggle without the restraints imposed by the trade union's centralized bureaucracy, which is so intimately intertwined with the state, and which in fact defends the interests of German state power. There is also a Bargemen's *Union* in Upper Silesia, and I have been informed that efforts are now taking place in Hamburg to unite the barge and river transport workers into a unitary organization.

There is still a great deal of hesitation; many workers still feel a certain fondness for their trade unions due to old habits. But revolutionary times demand revolutionary decisions, and whoever makes sentimentality the basis of their activity can win three political revolutions but then lose them because of the lack of an economic organization, just as the German proletariat has come to lose almost everything it gained after the first German revolution. The German proletariat, which is ready to conquer state power so as to organize a socialist economy, cannot do so unless it has first organized itself for this economy. If socialism is to be more than merely a bureaucratic scheme in which, instead of local employers, a centralized bureaucracy directs the economic process, and rules the working masses, as is now being attempted, then the proletariat must organize against the centralized bureaucracy in order to become a pillar of the productive process. This is the difference, and this is why the trade unions hate the factory organizations.

³ As a result of the legalization of freedom of association for certain categories of workers (the railroad workers, for example), there were no longer any obstacles standing in the way of joining a trade union for those workers affected by the new law. Note that the "free trade unions" are the social democratic trade unions.

A trust, which is a kind of North American corporate entity, can dissolve itself today, and reorganize itself in a new form tomorrow. This is a completely natural process for it when it encounters obstacles which impede its operations. The trade unions, however, cannot dissolve themselves after a revolution in order to reorganize on a new basis. They have to preserve their old centralization, their old bureaucracy, and do so in order to organize the white guards to make factory organizations impossible even before they arise. This is how things stand now. Today, when the workers are well enough organized to begin the process of transformation, where they have a sensible leadership, the trade union bureaucracy joins the white guards to fight against those who want to form revolutionary trade unions.⁴ If a trade union were to be dissolved, and the next day, the workers were to begin signing up for the new form of organization, what would such an event signify? It would signify that the masses would have an organizational form in which they could freely develop all of their forces. For the leaders of the trade unions, however, it would mean they would no longer be needed, and this is why the bureaucracy will not agree to such a thing, and are merciless with the factory organizations.

As everyone knows, we have the enterprise councils,⁵ which will be institutionalized in the recently-created bourgeois class State. This State will give the councils a few rights, and more duties. Their principle duty will consist of endeavoring, together with the employers, to increase each enterprise's productivity. This cannot be the task of the revolutionary factory councils. As long as the class State exists, the proletariat is at war, and the factory councils must be organs of the revolutionary struggle. They must unilaterally defend the interests of the workers, even if this means that the enterprise goes bankrupt ten times, since, in this economic order, it is not interested in assuring profitability. The proletariat today has no interest at all in the recovery of the capitalist economy, but in its collapse. Each step towards recovery is a step backwards for the proletariat. Each increase in the profitability of any enterprise only fixes the chain more firmly which has once again bound the hands of the proletariat after the political revolution. But if the factory councils are not to be institutions dedicated to preserving capitalist exploitation, but rather institutions of the struggle of the revolutionary proletariat, then they must not be controlled by the counterrevolutionary trade unions, which are institutions of the class State, but, instead, by the workers in the factories. The workers should not consent to any interference whatsoever in the running of these enterprise councils, especially by the trade unions. For this reason, as well, the proletariat needs factory organizations. Only if all the proletarians in an enterprise are united in a factory organization would they be capable of controlling everything that happens in the workplace. As long as this organizational form does not exist, the proletarians will be dispersed. Therefore, if you want to put an end to this dispersion into trade unions and parties, this can only be achieved if a new form of unity is created, a form of unity in which all the workers, whatever their trade, or their party, can together coordinate the affairs of the enterprise. This would only be possible in a factory organization. If the workers in a factory have to work together, regardless of which political tendencies they endorse, they could also carry out negotiations with each other and manage their own affairs within the factory.

The only condition for membership which the factory organization will have to establish, besides getting out of the trade unions, is that each member must defend the principle of the proletarian class struggle, and that he share the conviction that there can be no peace between the employers and the proletarians as long as the class State exists. A declaration to that effect is

⁴ In 1919/1920, the expression "revolutionary trade unions" was also used by other left communists, who would later — at least after their break with the "Red Trade Union International" — consider it a contradiction in terms.

⁵ *Betriebsräte*, the councils which sought to be simple reformist bodies and sought state recognition.

completely sufficient. This will keep out all those elements which used to be called “yellow”, and unite all the revolutionary workers, even if their political positions diverge on some points (which is of no account for activity within the factory), in a unitary struggle against the employer, and against the employers as a class.

It is not by chance that it is just now, in Germany, where the political revolution has given way to the economic revolution, that this form of organization is beginning to prevail. In other countries, where police powers are more limited, and where capitalist democracy, such as we now have in Germany, already existed, the workers have long been organized in accordance with these perspectives. In North America, the “Industrial Workers of the World” discovered this form of organization many years ago, and has been applying methods which seem new to us here in Germany.⁶ Just as the “Industrial Workers of the World” began to win the masses over to its principles at the moment that it became clear that social contradictions had become so exacerbated that there could no longer be any concessions in the struggle against the trusts, and that the capitalist economy had to be destroyed, so here in Germany, the idea of the “*Allgemeine Arbeiterunion*” (General Workers Union) began to spread at the moment when the proletarians of Germany understood that being revolutionary involves more than just making or listening to revolutionary speeches, that revolutionary ideas must be transformed into revolutionary action, and that without revolutionary action the economic revolution cannot be completed even if the economic conditions are ripe for such a transformation. Today this implies that the proletarians must be convinced that they have to break with the old trade union forms, which did good work in the past, but which today comprise a counterrevolutionary element, and that it is of the utmost importance to concentrate all their forces in revolutionary organizations which can engage in the revolutionary struggle, and which will later be capable of taking control of industry. Who should control industry? Should it be the trade union offices, or do the workers want to control it themselves? If the workers want to control industry, they have to create an organizational form capable of making them masters of production. This form is the council regime, and the basic unit of the council regime is the factory council: but the factory council can play this role only if it is rooted in the factory organization. If not, it would be a falsification of the idea of the council. It would not, in such a case, be an instrument of the revolutionary struggle, but a deceit to confuse the proletarians about what methods to choose for that struggle.

⁶ On the Industrial Workers of the World and Wolffheim’s relations with this “revolutionary trade union”, see Chapter 9 of this volume.

The Opportunism of the Communist Party of the Netherlands*

* [H. Gorter, *Het opportunisme in de Nederlandsche Communistische Partij*, Amsterdam, 1921. As Gorter points out at the end of the text, the main part of the pamphlet was completed in August 1919; its publication was postponed due to a paper shortage. Gorter extended his argument to well into 1920 by means of a large number of footnotes. The footnotes in the text are Gorter's; the footnotes and italicized words and phrases are taken from the original German text reproduced in *Die linke gegen...*, and also from the French edition of the latter work (translator's note).]

Hermann Gorter

The communists are distinguished from the other working class parties by this only... In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality... United action, of the leading civilized countries at least, is one of the first conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat.

Manifesto of the Communist Party

When one has dedicated as many years of one's life to the theoretical propaganda of Marxism, i.e., scientific socialism, as has the author of this pamphlet, and then decides to cease to do so in Holland, at least temporarily and at the very moment when socialism is passing from science to action then one would want the last stage of one's labors to be as clear for the workers as the previous two stages were.

In newspaper articles (in the *Tribune*) the results of this work have been published, but in a dispersed form, largely inaccessible to a wider public. They can be found in their entirety in this pamphlet.

The first period of my propaganda for scientific socialism in Holland was the struggle against Troelstra and opportunism in general, i.e., the revolutionary struggle within the SDAP.

The second stage was the struggle carried out together with the SDP for the revolutionary unity of the Dutch proletariat.

The third stage was the struggle against the leadership of the SDP (now the Communist Party), and for the revolutionary unity of the international working class. This last stage of my work might appear, to many workers, to be less important than the other two. In reality, however, the struggle for the revolutionary unity of the international proletariat has now become the most important task.

This is because both the Dutch Communist Party and the Third International are suffering from the same opportunism which ruined the SDAP and the Second International. And this opportunism appears to be preventing, or at least retarding, the unity of the international proletariat and the victory of the revolution.

This is why I want to explain the character and the development of my struggle against the leadership of the Communist Party of the Netherlands¹ as clearly as possible.

My last word on the Dutch Communist Party will be directed against the worst enemy of the working class.

The growth and concentration of national capital into syndicates, cartels and trusts, i.e., into monopoly capital, and the rule of finance capital over all other kinds of capital, led to the world war between the most important financial groups of the world's great powers, and the states grouped together under their leadership.

The working class did not rise to the occasion of this challenge because it had not formed a revolutionary unit on either the national or the international level. Consequently, the war broke out without any significant resistance on the part of the workers.

And when the war was underway, the working class could again do nothing, precisely because of this lack of international unity. If this unity is not produced by the revolution, it is quite likely that the revolution will be defeated in one country after another.

Because now, after the war, international capital whatever enmity may exist between national capitals, whatever their disagreements is firmly united against every national revolution. And they are joined by the social democratic parties, the social patriots who supported the war effort; and by the pseudo-Marxist parties (the Kautsky tendency) which everywhere commit the same act of treason as they did during the war, so that a united front is constructed throughout the world, an international front, which fights against any revolution for communism, and therefore against the international revolution as a whole; a united front of England, America, Germany, France, Italy and Austria, of Clemenceau-Renaudel, Ebert-Noske, Wilson-Gompers, Lloyd George-Thomas, etc.

If anyone still has any doubts that this is the case, just look at Russia and Hungary. The revolution of the soviet republic in Russia is threatened by all of them, by England and

¹ It will soon be possible to obtain a general perspective on my theoretical labors in the form of ten pamphlets which will appear as a complete series under the title, "*Het Communisme*": I. *The Communist Manifesto* (my translation); II. *The Fundamentals of Communism*; III. *Communism versus Anarchism and Syndicalism*; IV. *Communism versus Revisionism and Reformism*; V. *Historical Materialism*; VI. *Class Morality*; VII. *Imperialism, the World War and Social Democracy*; VIII. *The World Revolution*; IX. Lenin's *The State and Revolution* (my translation); X. *Communism*. These pamphlets, most of which were published long ago, have been updated to take account of the latest developments relating to imperialism, the world war and the world revolution. Several of them, originally published in Dutch, have been translated into other languages, primarily German. See the bibliography. Although these works have long been ready to go to press, their publication was postponed due to a lack of paper until 1920.

France as well as by Germany; this same coalition has also done its part to annihilate the council republic in Hungary.

Against this united front this much is clear only a revolutionary united front of the international revolutionary proletariat can fight effectively. A national proletariat and even several national proletariats together, would be defeated by this united front.

In addition and this is of the utmost importance not every country undergoes economic collapse at the same time and to the same degree. Capital is in a much stronger position in England and the United States, in the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries than in Germany, France and Italy. The former will still have large capital reserves for some time to come which will be used against the world revolution. There are even some grounds for doubt whether England and the United States are threatened by economic collapse at all. This is not yet clear.

Already, during the war, and even at the beginning of the war, this was where the great question arose: How to achieve this international revolutionary unity? And above all: What kind of tactics must the international proletariat, and thus each national proletariat, employ to make this unity possible, to fully realize it? These were the most important questions for the communist revolution. There are no reflections on these questions, nor any theories, in Marx and Engels, or in Kautsky, Rosa Luxemburg or Lenin.

This is why I have concentrated all my attention on this question since the beginning of the war, and have tried to provide an answer in two pamphlets: *Imperialism, the World War and Social Democracy* and *The World Revolution*.

This question became yet more pressing, and its solution all the more urgent, when Kautsky betrayed our cause, and Rosa Luxemburg was assassinated.

My answer was: the proletariat can only be victorious in its struggle and in the revolution, if it treats the imperialisms of the two camps of the great powers as equivalents, as they actually are, if it fights the imperialism of the two camps, that is, of all nations, as if it were one single imperialism. I have tried in every possible way, in the two pamphlets mentioned above, to prove that this answer is correct.

And the day probably approaches when it will be proven that the tactic I have defended since 1917 was the only correct tactic.

If, as is most likely, the Russian soviet republic is attacked again, or if the German revolution breaks out once more, the unity of the American and European proletariats will immediately become necessary. Because Anglo-French-American imperialism, supported by Scandinavian-Dutch imperialism, will immediately confront this revolution with military or economic means, or with both at the same time. And then the proletariat of England, France, America, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden will immediately have to unite with the proletariat of Germany, in order to bring all their forces to bear to prevent Anglo-French-American imperialism from defeating the German revolution.

The same would be true if the revolution were to break out in any other great power. It was this tactic which gave rise to my disagreements with the leadership of the SDP (CP). The SDP's tactical conceptions were fundamentally different from mine. Before outlining the evolution of my struggle against the SDP leadership, I shall set the record straight concerning the following point:

One argument employed by Wijnkoop against my international tactic was as follows: Gorter diverted the Dutch proletariat from its most essential task. This task is to bring about the revolution in the Netherlands. In response, I say:

The revolution in the Netherlands can only break out, and can only have a chance of success, if, in the most important countries, above all in Germany and England, capitalism

has been weakened by revolution. Because Dutch capitalism, unlike the countries which participated in the war, has not been weakened, but has been considerably reinforced. Its reserves of gold and the strength of its currency prove this. If the situation in all the other countries were like our situation, a revolution would not be possible in any of them, either.

Only when capital is severely shaken or is overthrown in the largest countries will the revolution also take place here, as a result of export and import and trade difficulties, etc.

By revolution, we mean the demolition of the existing society and the construction of a new one. The revolution comprises *both of these moments*.

Besides the power of Dutch commercial, industrial and agricultural capital, the revolution is also currently impeded by Holland's economic dependence on foreign trade. The Netherlands is in the same situation within the European context as Bavaria is within the German context.

Consequently, when Wijnkoop said that my tactic hinders the most essential task of the Dutch proletariat, he was mistaken.

However, preparatory movements are possible in the Netherlands: demonstrations, the creation of workers councils, strikes, etc. My tactic never constituted an obstacle to such movements. It was always in full agreement with them. And in this respect I have often felt admiration for the editors of the *Tribune*.

But has there been an occasion where the Dutch party could have taken part in the international revolution? Yes, there has been *one* point where the Dutch working class and the international revolution intersected, and that was the struggle against Entente capital when the latter was on the verge of victory, and then when it had won the war.

That was when Entente capital threatened the Russian, the Hungarian, the German and the world revolution, and the Dutch proletariat could have intervened by revolting against Entente capital where it was possible to do so.

This was the tactic which I recommended but which was rejected by Wijnkoop and Van Ravensteyn.

We also see that when the Dutch proletariat first acted in a revolutionary way, it was when it confronted the Entente, and not when it carried out a revolution against Dutch capital, which in Wijnkoop's opinion was its most essential task.

Thus, far from having hindered the cause of the proletariat, my tactic has promoted it.

On the other hand, we see that it is precisely Wijnkoop's and Van Ravensteyn's policy which has held back and still holds back the proletariat at the very threshold of linking up with the world revolution.

And now, to the issue at hand.

While browsing through the issues of the *Tribune* from the war years, it becomes apparent that, from the very first day of the war, it leveled fierce criticisms against the imperialism of the Central Powers, but (apart from a few observations formulated in the mildest terms by Henriette Roland-Holst) either said nothing about the Allies or more or less took their side, although they were certainly no less "responsible" for the war, or less cruel.

Consistently, and as a matter of principle, the *Tribune* never attacks the imperialism of the Entente, but savages Austro-German imperialism in innumerable articles.²

² I opposed this tactic of the *Tribune* (in the issue of February 8, 1918); my first argument was as follows: just as the domestic policy of the ruling classes divides the workers by means of such stereotypes as religious and liberal, conservative and democratic, etc. — differences which have practically been eliminated precisely by imperialism — the imperialists now divide the workers, only on a much wider scale, on a world scale, into the

One could cite hundreds of examples of this anti-German and pro-Entente position, but I only want to highlight this tendency's opposition to my own position, so I shall restrict myself to examining its most typical characteristics, which I have already cited on previous occasions.

In April of 1917, Lenin, Zinoviev and many other Russian revolutionaries traveled from Switzerland to Russia, in order to participate in the revolution and to transform the bourgeois revolution into the proletarian revolution. The German government allowed them to pass through its territory. This was criticized by the *Tribune*.

In July of 1917, Kerensky, under orders from the Entente, launched his final offensive against the Germans. It was a last-ditch, desperate attempt to save Russian capitalism. The Russian revolutionaries demanded peace so that Russian capitalism could be annihilated and the world revolution could begin. They were therefore correct to oppose the Kerensky-Brusilov offensive.

But the *Tribune*, and the leadership of the Communist Party in the Netherlands (at that time, the SDP), announced its support for this offensive.³

Nor did Wijkoop and Van Ravensteyn agree with the peace treaty signed by the Russian communists at Brest-Litovsk. "Such a peace", the *Tribune* announced on November 30, 1917, "would be a betrayal of the cause of the proletariat, much worse than the one committed by the Scheidemanns during their worst moments."

These three facts prove that the leadership of the Communist Party subordinated everything to the defeat of Germany and the victory of the Entente, even the beginnings of the Russian revolution — the model for the world revolution. And, therefore, that it did not see that the victory of Entente imperialism implied great dangers for the world proletariat, dangers at least as serious as those which would have accompanied a German victory; that it did not fight the two imperialisms with the same dedication; that it favored one of them, and it did not see that the world proletariat had to, and still must, form a united front against international imperialism. That is, its opinion was diametrically opposed to mine.

Even so, for the first few years of the war, this policy was at least plausible. At that time it appeared that Germany was not going to be defeated, that it could very well win the war, and that, consequently, its imperialism would pose the greater threat. And also: the Dutch government, Dutch imperialism, was closely aligned with German imperialism. It was therefore understandable, although somewhat short-sighted, for Dutch revolutionaries to exclusively attack German imperialism.

followers of one imperialism or another. It is only by means of this division that the imperialists of all nations are now achieving their goal. What, then, does one accomplish by fighting German imperialism with more vigor than one employs against Anglo-American imperialism? One supports the lie upon which the division of the workers is based.

³ That the Russian communists agreed with me on this issue, and would certainly not have approved of the *Tribune*'s position, is clear. Trotsky writes, in *Soviet Power and International Imperialism*: "The offensive of June 18, Kerensky's offensive, was the most terrible blow struck against the working classes of all countries, as well as the most terrible blow struck against the Russian revolution." Terrible, because the toiling masses of all countries expected "that the Russian February Revolution would show itself in its full magnitude and teach something new", and then had to see that the new government pursued the same "rapacious" goals as Czarism. Trotsky also saw the Peace of Brest-Litovsk as one more consequence of the (failed) June 1917 offensive. L. Trotsky, *Die Sowjet-Macht und der internationale Imperialismus*, April 21, 1918, Moscow, Belp-Bern, pp. 27-28. Pannekoek, as well, immediately criticized the *Tribune* — with the opportunists' customary distortions, the *Tribune* later denied having taken this position.

But when the United States entered the war, all of this changed. From then on it was possible, and then probable, that the allied powers would win the war, and that they would therefore necessarily comprise the most reactionary force arrayed against the revolution, and that they would assume the leadership of the reactionary camp, of the common *united* front against the proletariat. From then on the position of the leadership of the Communist Party (at that time it was still the SDP) became a serious error. On various occasions I personally wrote letters to the *Tribune's* editorial committee, saying just that. Various comrades instinctively agreed with me, especially in the party's Amsterdam section.

This is why comrade Luteraan published a very good anti-Entente article in the *Tribune* of October 4, 1917.

But the editorial committee, without actually directly addressing the question, responded in the most pathetic manner, which led me to believe that the situation was even worse than I had thought. The editorial committee obviously did not want the Entente to be criticized in the *Tribune*. As a matter of principle it had never done so, and it did not want anyone else to do so, either.

I then immediately wrote, at the beginning of October 1917, an article for the *Tribune*, which criticized German imperialism as well as that of the Entente and the United States (the article was reprinted last June in *De Nieuwe Tijd*). Wijnkoop, however, managed to prevent the article from being published until January of 1918. The editorial committee responded to my article in March, and I published a second article, which I wrote immediately thereafter, in July after the elections. We had to struggle from mid-October 1917 until mid-July 1918, i.e., nine months, to publish two basic articles criticizing the Entente and the United States!

Ultimately, Wijnkoop obliterated a very important, perhaps even the most important objective of the international proletariat: the struggle against the two imperialisms, the unification of the whole international proletariat against imperialism in its entirety just as Troelstra previously obliterated the voice of the opposition.

Why did the leadership of the Communist Party do this?

It *could not* be because it wanted the revolution to break out in Germany, and thus wanted Germany to be defeated. Defeat and revolution in Germany would not have taken place even one day sooner because the truth about the Entente was silenced. It would have been possible to fight both the imperialism of the Entente as well as German imperialism at the same time.⁴ But the leadership of the Communist Party prevented us from criticizing the Entente with all the means at its disposal. Why such harsh attacks and the bridling of free speech, as had previously occurred within the SDAP?

The reason is to be sought in opportunist electoral tactics.

The SDAP was pro-German. A large part of the Dutch workers, however, especially the syndicalists and anarchists, sympathized with the Entente. It was thought that these latter workers could be won over by not saying anything, as a matter of principle, against the Entente. The Communist Party's leadership's search for immediate electoral success was the reason why it stifled an even-handed and objective critique, and thus prevented the consideration of problems of the greatest importance for the proletariat.

The second reason was its limited point of view, which led it to think that it only had to fight *one* imperialism, instead of both of them, that it had to deal with one part, instead of taking on both imperialisms as a single whole.

⁴ We must at this point briefly insist upon the fact that we have always completely approved of the struggle against German imperialism. We have only demanded that the Entente be fought as well.

By its suppression of free speech the leadership of the Communist Party has shown that it has used every means at its disposal to bring about the triumph of its one-sided, pro-Entente policy. It has shown that, in order to further its petty partisan interests, it has followed the same tactics in foreign politics as Troelstra did in regards to domestic politics. It has shown that it did not want a pure, and therefore strong party (even though currently a small party) like Lenin and the Bolsheviks, but a party strong in numbers and above all in terms of votes (!)⁵ It has, in a word, shown that it cannot be relied upon: although it definitely stands to the left of Troelstra and the SDAP leadership, it comes from the same mold. It has subordinated international class interests to partisan domestic interests. It has in addition shown that its policies were partial to the Entente.

When America entered the war in 1917 I said that it was a great error not to fight Anglo-Saxon imperialism as much as German imperialism.

But in 1918, when Anglo-American imperialism had practically assured its eventual victory, when it assassinated (sic) the Russian revolution and its victory had thus become the greatest danger to the world revolution, then the policy of the SDP leadership became a crime.

Because at that moment, only the unity of the international proletariat against the leading power of international capital, against Anglo-American imperialism, could save the Russian and the world revolution.

Despite all of this, however, the leadership of the Communist Party (at that time the SDP) did not renounce its tactic: it finally publicly confessed its stance in a declaration of principles. In the *Tribune* of September 26, 1918, it wrote, repeating in part what it had already said in December of 1917:

“In fact, the United States is not pursuing, either as a primary or a secondary goal, directly imperialist interests. By that we mean territorial, economic or financial interests.”

According to the editors of the *Tribune*, the United States is not fighting for more influence in China, the Pacific, Japan, Siberia and Russia. According to the editors of the *Tribune*, the United States is not fighting for world domination! This is certainly the biggest lie ever read in a communist newspaper.

So, what is really happening?

The United States, that is, the capitalists, the big bankers and monopolists of the United States and their spokesman Wilson, are trying to divide Europe into small powerless states. Germany had to give up Alsace-Lorraine and Silesia (two pillars of its strength), it had to be deprived of its militarism. Austria-Hungary had to be split up into numerous independent states. Russia will be broken up into many parts, if the current trend towards national autonomy continues there. And discord is arising among these states, between Germany and France, and among the countries of Austria-Hungary, Poland, the Baltic, etc. The European continent is becoming an inferno of conflict. To sum up: no one country remains which can confront the United States. And the United States will therefore attain absolute world domination, especially if it continues its collaboration with the universal English empire.⁶

This is the goal which the United States is trying to achieve.

⁵ This question was of the utmost importance, since, *prior to the revolution*, an absolutely pure party is needed, which will accept no compromises of any kind.

⁶ The attempt of the United States to strengthen Yugoslavia at Italy's expense is based on this policy. The United States, like England, wants a balance of forces on the continent, which would give them predominance, rendering Europe powerless.

It is for this purpose that it is creating an army more powerful than any other, it is developing its own militarism, it is building a fleet which can compete with the world's most powerful navies, with each one separately, and with several at the same time. And it is for this purpose that it is militarizing all the institutions of the United States, including education, etc.

And the *Tribune* responded to these developments in the following manner: The United States did not take part in the war for any material interests. Not for territorial, economic or financial interests!!!

The United States wanted to use this war to establish its world domination. This can be deduced from the facts, even if its words lie and dissimulate as much as possible.

The assertion of the *Tribune's* editorial committee contradicts the entire development of capitalism, which teaches us that every great capitalist state, due to a constantly-increasing mass of surplus value, is forced to expand and thus to attack. It contradicts everything we observe in the policies of the other great states. No evidence at all is provided in its defense. I have provided evidence in my pamphlet on imperialism that all great states, and therefore North America as well, must practice a policy of aggression. It is not, therefore, necessary to repeat it here.

I was right, then, when I said that the *Tribune* not only fails to mention the Entente's objective, or conceals this objective, but also considers the imperialism of the Entente in a more positive light than German imperialism.

Just compare its treatment of the Entente with all the abuse directed by the *Tribune's* editors at German imperialism.

But the *Tribune's* editors go even further. They state:

"Above all, Wilson wants to protect the Union (the United States) from a terrible future danger, and to create a new capitalist world order, in which it will be possible to keep this danger at a distance more easily, if not prevent it altogether."

"In which it would most likely be possible to prevent, even forever, serious clashes between the great powers. This is the material basis of its 'idealism' and its war craze. A capitalist ideal, of course, but an order which would undoubtedly mean a higher level of development..."

"This imperialist ideal implies... nothing less than the possibility, the goal, of preventing the capitalist world from (once again) undergoing a terrible catastrophe, like the one it has just suffered for the last four years."

And, as the editorial committee said of Wilson's goal, "as time passed, the more it became the goal of the war, the more it also became the goal of radical political public opinion in many European countries."

I was therefore not just exaggerating when I said that the editorial committee's policy was favorable to the Entente.

And that its policy has a positive assessment of the goal of Entente imperialism.

After saying that the United States is not fighting for material advantages, it states that the United States, the whole Entente, and even all of Europe's pacifists, want a new world capitalist order to arise, in which serious conflicts will not exist, or will at least usually be prevented!

It preaches a reformism in foreign affairs which may have the same consequences as Troelstra's reformism did in domestic affairs.

In this respect, the editorial committee of the *Tribune* joins the company of all the reformists and social patriots, all the false Kautsky-style Marxists, all the pacifists, all the demagogues like Lloyd George, Wilson, Czernin, Max von Baden, etc., etc., and all the bourgeois

parties, who are endeavoring to fool the workers with the idea of a World Alliance and a worldwide peace.

The most stupendous deception ever perpetrated against the people in the history of the world has begun. And the *Tribune* participates in it without proffering even the shadow of an argument.⁷

And all of this contradicts everything which Marxism has ever taught us. It is the most extreme example of a pro-Entente policy, and it is the policy of the editorial committee of the *Tribune*.

The reader will therefore recognize that I was correct when I suggested that the editorial committee of the *Tribune*, once having advocated a pro-Entente policy, still has to do so now, and that it would have to continue to do so in the future. Because whoever defends such an opinion concerning American, English and Entente imperialism, will also have to support this imperialism in their political practice, in the chamber of deputies. Because even if they recognize that this imperialism is anti-socialist, it is in their opinion infinitely better than the German variety.

But now there is much more to take into consideration.

The entire position of the party leadership, as it relates to both domestic as well as foreign politics, now becomes clear.

When it was not guided by its anxious desire for immediate political influence, by its desire for the support of anti-German elements in Holland (syndicalists, petite bourgeois, the *Telegraaf*, etc.) and I stand by every word which I have written on this topic it was guided by its erroneous opinions, which have nothing to do with Marxism, about Anglo-American imperialism, which reached their culmination in the idea that the League of Nations and world peace might be possible.

We can now understand why the party leadership only fought German imperialism and never, as a matter of principle, that of the Entente. We can now understand why it suppressed Luteraan's opposition as well as mine, and persecuted others.

We can now understand why it did not want to participate in the Zimmerwald conferences.

We can now understand why it had some reason to criticize the journey undertaken by Lenin, and others, through Germany to Russia.

We can now understand why it approved of the Kerensky-Brusilov offensive. In addition to its previously-mentioned ardent desire for power, all of this was due to the opinion that the Entente's policy really was better than Germany's and that under Wilson's leadership, and under the leadership of American capital the Entente's policy sought, and was capable of achieving: "An order which would undoubtedly mean a higher level of development," as it says in the *Tribune*.

This is what lies behind the whole policy of the *Tribune* and the SDP.

But all of this has nothing to do with reality. It has become clear that everything written by the *Tribune's* editorial committee is wrong. The Peace of Versailles has offered convincing and definitive proof of this assertion.

Like all opportunism, theirs also produced ambiguities. They had to make the workers believe that all imperialism was to be fought, but this injunction was only absolutely clear in regard to German imperialism. This was quite obviously revealed in their position on the Russian revolution. They sent a telegram to Lenin, expressing their complete agreement with

⁷ I have also refuted these notions in over twenty pages of my pamphlet on imperialism.

his tactics, and saying that peace would have to arrive via revolution in all countries. But they forgot to add that their primary goal was Germany's defeat, and for this reason, that Russia should continue the war against Germany, if necessary. This is how they deceived both the Dutch and the foreign workers. And their entire tactic concerning the Russian and the world revolution, as a result of their position on Germany, and by its preference for the Entente's imperialism, was profoundly false and ambiguous.

The leadership of the Communist Party (at that time, the SDP) has nonetheless continued to practice this tactic even in its subsequent political activity in parliament.

The worst possible scenario, that Wijnkoop and Van Ravensteyn would also declare their support for the Entente and North America in the chamber of deputies, has now become a reality. And it was these two men who, during the war, in the fall of 1918, demanded that food should be obtained *by all possible means* – a quote from the *Tribune* from the United States. This also implied that ships and other materials would be put at the disposal of the United States which would facilitate the war against the Central Powers, Russia, etc. Everyone knows – and Wijnkoop's words *by all possible means* show that he, too, was quite well aware of this – that the United States, once the Netherlands accepted its proposal, would also ask for more ships, which would be used in the prosecution of the war. The Communist fraction in the chamber of deputies has thus thrown its support behind the Entente – to obtain white bread. And this at the very moment when the Entente was beginning to attack, and to overthrow, the Russian revolution, and perhaps the revolution in Germany and Austria! The fraction had already made this promise before the elections: Above all, white bread for the Dutch people. Whether this harmed the Russian revolution, or the German, Austrian, or international revolutions, was of little importance. Long live the nation! The nation above the international! White bread by all possible means! This is the same thing that Troelstra had previously done on a national level: "Help for the poor, if possible *with*, but if necessary *against* socialism", this is what Troelstra told me in regard to the agrarian question. Wijnkoop and Van Ravensteyn have done precisely the same thing on an international level.

It would be of no help to them at all if they were to say that they are leaving the implementation of the necessary measures to the bourgeoisie. It was they who proposed: By all possible means. They are therefore responsible, since they had previously accepted all possible means.

The SDP called upon the other socialist parties, the German, English, French and North American parties, to hold firm to international ideals during the war, and not to support the war. It demanded that comrades be prepared to suffer anything, hunger, the destruction of their countries, the death of their women and children, and their own deaths. But then, when the SDP itself and the Dutch proletariat had to suffer hunger – suffering a thousand times less severe than that endured by many countries involved in the war – then, for the SDP and the Dutch proletariat, it was no longer necessary to uphold their international ideals!

It was thus all for the sake of appearances, nothing more: the protests against the social patriots as much as the glorification of the Bolsheviks. When it was necessary to put one's own skin at risk for the international, to put the international above national interests at home, the party failed to rise to the occasion. In this respect, with this failure, the SDP has adopted the point of view of Kautsky, Longuet, etc., in the matter of political practice. It has elevated petty and *parochial* national interests above international *class* interests. Our times require, however, that *party* interests be disregarded in favor of all *international class* interests. Or, more precisely: *that party interests should become identical with international interests.*

Only if all the proletariats – the English, North American, French, and Scandinavian, in the first place – can accomplish this goal, would it be possible for the international revolution

to succeed. This must be the basic line, the fundamental idea underlying the international politics of the countries mentioned above, and indeed of all countries. International interests must merge with the national class struggle, completely impregnating it.

Furthermore, Wijnkoop and Van Ravensteyn did not protest when they faced a concrete test, when Rotterdam was turned into a base for England and North America. Even though this base would undoubtedly also be used against the German communist revolution; even though England and North America would undoubtedly attempt when the communist revolution broke out again in January to use this base to crush the revolution, as they had done in Hungary, and would like to do in Russia; even though the Dutch government, by handing over Rotterdam for use as such a base, had joined the international reaction for the first time; even though the Dutch proletariat, at that moment, could have participated in the international struggle in a *united front against* world capital and *for* the world revolution, the communists in the Netherlands did not even once call for resistance or protest.

Once again, it was the same tactic: all out against German imperialism, nothing against Anglo-American imperialism.⁸

And despite everything, there can be no doubt: all the proletarians must confront all the imperialisms as a whole, and thus, now, above all, the dominant imperialism of world capital, Anglo-American imperialism.

Anglo-American capital must be attacked in every country. A united front must be formed against this capital, which has the ascendancy and the leadership (in the struggle) against the world proletariat, and which is now oppressing the whole world, but especially Europe, Asia and Africa, the “civilized” countries as much as the “barbarous” and all the colonies. And which, thanks to its infinite resources spread throughout the world, might be able to resist the tide of bankruptcy and revolution. And which is today, as Russia was previously, the fortress of reaction.⁹

In every country, and especially the neutral countries as well, which serve as bridges between the world’s imperialisms everywhere, wherever the world’s imperialisms are attacked in the manner described above, wherever a struggle based on this policy is carried out by the workers in the great powers, who are decisive with regard to the final outcome, all the workers, and first of all, naturally, the transport workers, must refuse to lift even one finger for Entente imperialism.

⁸ This is what I said in the *Tribune* of November 7, 1918: The revolutionary proletariat of Holland is capable of understanding this simple revolutionary tactic, which says: support no imperialism. The decisive reason, above and beyond all the other reasons (such as war, hunger, etc.) — the international reason for the Dutch proletariat not to send food to Germany during the war, was that the proletariat must not support any imperialism.

The decisive international reason, the sole valid reason from the international revolutionary point of view, not to loan ships to America and not to allow it to use any bases in the Netherlands, is that the proletariat must not support any imperialism.

The Dutch proletariat must prove to the entire world that it is the enemy of all imperialisms, that it stands in solidarity with the proletariat of all nations, and that is why it fights every imperialism, even if it must itself suffer as a result.

⁹ I am not saying that such action (as I had recommended) would have been successful at that time in Holland. It is a question of principle, of the beginning of the correct tactic.

When I fought against Troelstra’s position on the question of education policy, many people thought that my objections were exaggerated. They did not think the danger was so serious. And now look at what has happened to that party (the SDAP) and to the educational system of the Dutch proletariat!

In Stockholm, in Göteborg, in Christiana, in Copenhagen, in Amsterdam and Rotterdam, just as in the English, French and Italian ports. And not only when dealing with shipments to Russia, but also to Germany, as I shall demonstrate in more detail below.

This was my tactic.

By not acting in this manner, the editorial committee of the *Tribune* and the parliamentary fraction of the Communist Party harmed the unity of the international proletariat. With their support for Anglo-American imperialism (for bread alone!) they have truly betrayed the cause of the world revolution.¹⁰

Naturally, a leadership which acts in such an opportunist manner in relation to this most important international issue also runs a serious risk of practicing an opportunist policy in domestic politics as well.

When the war ended, all my “prophesies” about Anglo-American imperialism were proven to be correct. That, for instance, the Peace of Versailles would break Europe into a hundred little states, which would be dominated by Anglo-American-French capital, thus Balkanizing Europe, turning it into a hell, where the English and American capitalists would rule as chief devils and the fate of the proletariat would be terrible indeed. A hell where new wars would immediately break out, where the League of Nations would merely be a tool in the hands of England and a means to establish North American rule over the world, and where a new world war is a certainty.

But even today, when the Entente has razed all of Eastern Europe, when it has subjected the whole proletariat of Eastern and Central Europe to terrible sufferings, when it threatens the Russian revolution with death, drowned the Hungarian revolution in blood, stymied the development of the German and Austrian revolutions, today, when in all the countries of Europe and North America, including the neutral countries, the revolution will not be just a revolution against each national bourgeoisie, but also against English and American capital, which control sources of food supplies and means of transport, today, when England and the United States have, even in all the other countries of North America and Europe, assumed the leading role in the leadership of world reaction, even today the leadership of the Communist Party does not take the stand it should against these powers, England and the United States.¹¹

With the strike of June 21, 1919, against the intervention of the Entente in Russia, it took a step in the right direction. This strike also proved, and practically demonstrated, that my tactic for the international revolution against Entente capital was indeed correct. But even now the Party only undertakes half-measures, and without the necessary understanding. It only attacks the Entente’s actions in Russia. What is really necessary, the denunciation of the

¹⁰ Even today, the editorial committee will not declare its principled opposition to the Entente and the United States. A brief article on a subsidiary issue, Persia, Russia — that is all. U.S. and English policy is not attacked in its totality, or in detail. Wilson and Lloyd George are not characterized in the same way as Hindenburg and Ludendorff, nor is democracy treated the same way as monarchy! They will not even take a stand on the League of Nations, etc., etc.

The foreign affairs editor, Van Ravensteyn, has yet to publish even one article in the *Tribune* which opposes the two leading capitalist powers.

¹¹ See also the article in the journal of the Third International: “Down with the Peace of Versailles”. “Nieder mit dem Versailler Frieden. Aufruf des Exekutivkomitees der Kommunistischen Internationale an die Werktätigen der ganzen Welt”, in: *Die Kommunistische Internationale*, Year One, No. 2, June 1919, p. 165, et seq. “Thesen über die Politik der Entente angenommen auf dem I. Kongress der Kommunistischen Internationale am 6 März 1919”, in: *Der I. und II. Kongress der Kommunistischen Internationale. Dokumente der Kongresse und Reden*, W. I. Lenin, Berlin (East), 1959, pp. 102-103.

Entente and the United States and of the ringleaders of world imperialism generally, including Germany, throughout the world, has not occurred. In short, it still employed, and continues to employ to this day, their erroneous tactic.

This is made apparent by the reaction of the Communist Party's leadership to the Peace of Versailles. A critique of its position on this issue will complete this portion of my argument.

The Peace of Versailles, imposed by American and Entente capital, means, I repeat, endless sufferings for the European as well as the Dutch proletariat. Food shortages, scarcity of goods, unemployment, higher taxes, nationalism and chauvinism, rearmament, new wars, a new world war, such will be the consequences of this Peace. The European continent will be rendered powerless, and all international capital will be subjected to the rule of England and America, in their struggle against the international proletariat.

Nonetheless, the Communist Party, following the recommendation of its leadership, has not joined the protest (at the last party congress Wijnkoop still viewed this protest as "a lot of hot air") against the Peace of Versailles.

What are the causes of this behavior, which is at first sight so strange and so absurd?

The first reason is: It did not want to miss the chance to strike a blow against the SDAP. The SDAP protests the peace; the Communist Party, then, must not do so! This opportunist reasoning, which has no other purpose than attracting votes and seats in parliament, is so miserable that it is not worth the effort to waste even one word on it.

The second reason: The Peace of Versailles is directed against German imperialism, whose destruction is of the utmost importance. German imperialism (and with it its inseparable allies, the Ebert-Noskes) protested against the Peace, so as to rally the German nation around it once again. Therefore, we must not protest against this Peace which will destroy German imperialism.

This argument once again proves how limited the attitude of the Party's editorial committee and leadership is in the domain of foreign affairs, in relation to the cardinal question of imperialism.

Because first, by not protesting one weakens German imperialism, but at the same time one reinforces Anglo-American imperialism, which, as I have demonstrated, was as dangerous as the German variety, but is now obviously much stronger. Now that German imperialism has been defeated and lacks everything, it will have little chance of seizing world power. Anglo-American imperialism has won, and has acquired world domination.

Secondly, the Peace of Versailles is not only directed against German imperialism, but also against the German communist revolution. The German revolution has been paralyzed by the occupation of the country, the interruption of supply shipments, etc.

Third, when the German communist revolution soon broke out once again, Entente imperialism formed an alliance with German imperialism against the revolution, as it had formed an alliance with Kolchak, Denikin and Mannerheim in Russia.

Thus, by not protesting against the Peace of Versailles, the Communist Party of the Netherlands supported Entente and American imperialism as well as the German counter-revolution.

In other words, it exhibited the same stupidity in its position on the Peace of Versailles as it had shown in its position on Kerensky's offensive.

The Dutch Communist Party has furthermore distinguished itself in this respect from all the other communist parties.

The Italian, French and English communists publish protests against the Peace of Versailles in their press. So do the Swiss, Norwegians and Swedes. And the Russians, too. And also the German Communist Party. The leadership of the German party declares in its official newspaper, the *Kommunistische Räte-Korrespondenz* of June 20, 1919:

“But the proletariat cannot remain trapped in slavery to either the domestic or the foreign bourgeoisie. If this peace means upholding the dictatorship of Entente capital, with or without the help of German capitalism, then we are for war against both the foreign as well as domestic exploiters.”

“We reject the Peace of Versailles, because it is a pact between the bourgeoisie of the Entente and the bourgeoisie of Germany, directed against the German proletariat, and for the purpose of upholding and intensifying the exploitation of the German working class.”

“But we are not fighting the bourgeoisie of the Entente in a common struggle with the supporters of rejecting the peace negotiations, but *against them*. Our struggle against the Entente imperialist is simultaneously a struggle against the Ebert-Scheidemann government, against the regime of German capital. And since we are engaged in a serious war with the dictatorship of German capital, within Germany, we also have to direct this war against the dictatorship of Entente capital.”

Heinrich Laufenberg says that the world’s revolutionary proletariat must unite to fight the Peace of Versailles. He sees the way, and the key, to world revolution in the common struggle against Anglo-American imperialism.

The Vienna party newspaper, *Die Rote Fahne*, expresses a position very similar to that of the German party. It also points out that the proletarians of all the countries of Eastern Europe are becoming the coolies of American and English capital.

All the communist parties attack the Peace of Versailles in their newspapers.

And, finally, the Third International protests against the Peace of Versailles, in the person of its president Zinoviev, and has passed a resolution at its Congress in Moscow (presented by Osinski) which, among other things, says:

“The ‘democratic’ states of the Entente are practicing an extremely reactionary policy.”

“Reaction is victorious (in the Entente countries as well) all over the capitalist world, when it falls under the influence of the Entente.”¹²

As we see, the whole Communist International protests against the Peace of Versailles.

Therefore, the whole Communist International defends the same point of view I have defended since 1914, and which I have disseminated in opposition to the leadership of the SDP and the Dutch Communist Party since the summer of 1917. But the Dutch party, a member of the Third International, does not protest the Peace of Versailles.¹³

The only correct position is: Struggle against the Entente, but not alongside the social patriots, not together with Scheidemann, but in absolute independence.

Furthermore, as was reported, when Wijnkoop informed the Congress that the Italian and French parties had called upon the proletariat to go on strike because of the Entente’s attack against Russian and Hungarian communism, he only told half the truth.

¹² One example among many will demonstrate the *Tribune*’s lack of understanding of and its support for Entente imperialism: When the Council Republic was proclaimed in Hungary, the *Tribune* wrote that one could be certain that the Entente would not try to destroy it...because General Smuts had been ordered to reach a compromise! Shortly thereafter the Entente annihilated the Council Republic.

¹³ Even if the Hohenzollerns return to power.

As the official newspaper of the English party, *The Call*, reported in June of 1919, the French and Italian parties called upon the proletariat to strike not just against the Entente's intervention in Russia and Hungary, but also against the Peace of Versailles.

And anyone anyone among the militants of the Communist Party of the Netherlands who admits that the Peace of Versailles is producing interminable sufferings for the proletariat; that the struggle in Europe against this peace could continue long into the future; that the Peace of Versailles is also directed against communism; that Entente imperialism will form an alliance with German imperialism against German and world communism; that the leadership of the struggle in the united front against communism is now in the hands of England and the United States, and that this leadership position in this struggle will be increasingly dominated by these same countries, to which the Peace of Versailles has granted world rule whoever acknowledges these facts, would not mention only half the proclamation of the Italians and French, as the leadership of the Communist Party desires, but the whole proclamation.

But is it not true that the German revolution has to defeat German imperialism first? Does the world revolution not depend upon this first step?

Of course, both these questions *could be* answered in the affirmative. Nothing is certain. But we have never denied this, and we have always approved of all propaganda against German imperialism.

But this is not how these questions must be formulated.

Because the question is not whether the German revolution has to prevail first, and whether the world revolution depends on this eventuality, but: How can the German revolution be victorious?

In this case there can only be one answer: Anglo-American imperialism will form an alliance with German imperialism against the revolution,¹⁴ and the German revolution will immediately confront not just German imperialism, but also French-Anglo-American imperialism.

It is therefore the duty of the German communists, and, consequently, also the duty of the Dutch and all other communists, to simultaneously fight both German imperialism and French-Anglo-American imperialism. Why? On the twenty-first of June you attend the demonstration against intervention in Russia, that is, you fight against the Entente's involvement in Russia; but you do not fight against the Entente's involvement in Germany? In Germany, you support the Entente? This demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of the real relation between world imperialism and the world proletariat.

The Peace of Versailles itself, with all the difficulties and adversities which it may pose for capital, is essentially an agreement between the two international imperialist camps. Adverse or not, it signifies *peace* between the two of them.

¹⁴ This has changed somewhat, as I have said. In their position on the League of Nations, for example. But in all the points mentioned above, they have still only gone halfway. The whole truth is not told. They leave one door open in case English capitalism should put up some resistance and save world capitalism. But they do not tell the workers the real reason for this opportunism. And what is one to think of such a leadership, which has failed on all the principle questions, and only revises its positions when this is suitable for opportunist motives? Even in the summer of 1920, a regular contributor to the *Tribune* wrote that the Polish aggression against Russia was not supported by French imperialism, and the editors expressed their agreement. And this, today, in 1920!

German capital has accepted it; it wants to comply with its terms and pay reparations. That is, English, American and German capitals want to join forces in order to resume the exploitation of the international proletariat.

Viewed in this manner, which is the only correct perspective, the Peace of Versailles is a peace between international capitalists, but a declaration of war on the international proletariat, and is directed against the revolution of the world proletariat.

And the Dutch communist proletariat, led by Wijnkoop and Van Ravensteyn, did not protest against this peace! And the Communist Party loyally followed them!

The statesman-like tactic and wisdom of Wijnkoop and Van Ravensteyn, which consists in attacking German imperialism, fighting only German imperialism and not Anglo-American imperialism (Wijnkoop said: "We are proud of it"), is thus an erroneous and short-sighted tactic. In reality, it helps Anglo-American imperialism, which is allied with its German counterpart; it therefore helps international imperialism.

German and Anglo-American imperialism, i.e., world imperialism, closes ranks against the revolution in such a way that it is necessary to attack both imperialist camps, and all imperialisms, as if they constituted one single imperialism. If one wants to fight German imperialism, one has to attack Anglo-American imperialism, and *vice-versa*. The tactic of the leadership of the Communist Party helps both of them; it helps world imperialism against the world revolution.

From everything which has just been briefly summarized above, one can conclude that the way chosen by the SDP and the Communist Party to fight world imperialism, that is, its foreign policy, has been bad in every respect.

Its position on Lenin's return to Russia, on the Kerensky Offensive, its defense of Wilson and the League of Nations, its suppression of the freedom of speech within the Communist Party in regard to criticism of the Entente, the practical support it gave to the Entente through the concession of ships and the port of Rotterdam, its failure to protest against the Peace of Versailles, all demonstrate that this is true.¹⁵

This is why, in 1917, 1918 and 1919, I rebelled against the party leadership.

All of this shows that the leadership of the Communist Party in the Netherlands *has not yet* risen to the occasion of the revolution, and that it still does not understand the revolution.

What great change leads to the revolution? The fact that the masses must do everything themselves. Only the masses, when they attain national and international unity, can bring communism.

But in this struggle the masses need a vanguard. This vanguard is the International Communist Party. This vanguard must be absolutely pure and faithful to its principles. Pure in its means and its ideas. Because if it is not, the masses will become confused and lost.

That is the way it is in every revolution. There was always a nucleus, a vanguard, a minority, which finally became the majority. Such was the nucleus of the *geuzen*, Cromwell's troops, and the various class groupings in the French revolution. As well as in the Paris Commune and the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917. Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg wanted the German Communist Party to be a nucleus of this kind.

Given that the masses, when they unite, can now defeat capitalism and build socialism, all efforts *must* be focused on the goal of preparing the masses for this task. The preparation of the masses must be the sole objective.

¹⁵ Which was naturally a failure, as can now be clearly seen.

Compromises, opportunism, the suppression of free expression, the deception of the masses, concealment of the intentions and the lust for power of the party or its leadership – all of this is now absolutely harmful. As has been proven in Germany, Hungary and Bavaria, these things lead the proletariat to destruction.

Instead of taking the pure way, we see, as in the conduct described above, that the leadership of the Communist Party applies an erroneous tactic, and aspires to power (!) for the party and for itself.

We see how it concludes compromises and competes with the other parties for popularity. We see that to achieve these goals it even suppresses freedom of expression.

Recent examples include its collaboration with Kolthek and its friendly attitude towards the NAS,¹⁶ its involvement (in competition with the NVV) in the municipal council's campaign to raise money for hunger relief in Vienna, its demand for nationalization of the land (in competition with the SDAP's socialization program), which is also counterrevolutionary at this juncture, and its presentation of England (where the situation could become revolutionary, but where the workers still have done nothing revolutionary, and where, should English capital survive the crisis, the workers could become collaborators in the oppression of the international proletariat) as a model.

Such opportunism proves that the goal of the leadership of the Communist Party is not the enlightenment of the masses, but power for the Party and its leadership. Expressed in one cold, clear phrase: The leadership is not building the party for communism, but using communism as a means for the aggrandizement and power of the party and its leadership.

That is what I have been fighting against for the last three years.

I hope that this summary explains my struggle on behalf of the workers. My struggle is founded on good reasons, reality has proven it to be correct, and I had no other purpose in mind than to achieve the revolutionary unity of the international proletariat, which is absolutely necessary for the triumph of the revolution; this struggle, like the previous one I led against Troelstra, was for the revolutionary unity of the Dutch proletariat.¹⁷

¹⁶ The same phenomenon, but on a larger scale, and not so petite-bourgeois, can be seen in the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Germany, and in the British Socialist Party in England. Everywhere, one notes an eagerness to put communism at the service of the parties. Over the long term, of course, this eagerness has no prospect for success; it must nevertheless be fought with firmness. The phenomenon was also much in evidence in the way the last international conference in Amsterdam was organized.

¹⁷ A few more words about my personal experiences in this struggle against the leadership of the Communist Party:

After having had to fight, as I have said, for nine months, until July 1918, to get two articles published, during the latter half of 1918 I published eight or ten more articles against the Entente and the policy of the Communist Party (the two matters being inseparable).

But the only reason those articles were published, was because I sent them to comrade Pannekoek (he met me outside of Holland), and threatened the editorial committee that if they were not published within two weeks, they would be published in pamphlet form.

All the methods customarily used by Troelstra, were used against me by the editorial committee of the *Tribune*. First of all, absolute silence. The editorial committee has never undertaken an in-depth analysis of the principle issue, Anglo-American imperialism. It desired that the comrades remain ignorant of this issue.

They tried to resort to some faithful friends to respond to my challenge, such as V.L., "Opmerker", etc. (V.L.=van Leuven, who published interesting articles on economic questions in the *Tribune*, a delegate to the Second Congress of the Communist International in July-August 1920; Opmerker ("Observer")=K. van Langeraad, a regular contributor to the *Tribune* and the *Nieuwe Tijd*), who, in this case, took pride in the self-same myopia in defending the editorial committee.

They tried to present the issue as if I had defined the two imperialisms as being “equal for the proletariat”, when I had actually insisted precisely on their differences. They spoke of “working with the philosopher’s stone, of wanting to explain the inexplicable, a lack of evidence, illusionist, doctrinaire, not seeing reality, fantasies”, etc.

Finally, they even went so far as to invoke the opposition of those who really labor for the party and those who are theoreticians.

All of this was in response to my first two articles against the two imperialisms. Wijnkoop and Van Ravensteyn also expressed their “absolute disagreement” with my pamphlet, “The World Revolution”. Foreign communists judged otherwise. *Izvestia* and *Pravda* immediately published the two articles, and the committee for prisoners of war in Russia reprinted them in a series in various languages — the same articles which could only be published here after a nine-month delay. The pamphlets have now been translated into eight or nine European languages.

Then they gave the whole affair a personal dimension, exactly as Troelstra had done before. I had offended the leadership (!!). In this manner they tried to divert the comrades’ attention and to slander me in the comrades’ eyes. In relation to which, I have only this to say: after he returned to Holland in December 1918, I knew that Wijnkoop was sometimes personally in danger. I immediately offered to accompany him whenever it was necessary that he expose himself to danger; and the first time he asked me to do so, I immediately consented. Since he was in no condition to appear in public as an orator, I felt an obligation to help him, as we had together founded the SDP and during the SDP’s first few years we shared good times and bad times in that party. I believe that this proves that one can by no means attribute personal motives to my dissent. I was only interested in international unity. I could no longer tolerate the situation in Holland, so I decided to seek another road so that I could freely express my opinion. I asked the party and its leadership to appoint me as a foreign correspondent for the *Tribune*: a position independent of the editorial committee.. Naturally, I did not want to be subjected once again to the suppression of my freedom of expression, in matters of such vital interest to the international proletariat. And imagine what such an act of suppression would signify in revolutionary times! I demanded an absolutely free hand as a correspondent, without editorial control or censorship, which oppress free expression and criticism. My whole past in the SDAP, the SDP and the CP, and above all the correctness of my theory of imperialism, justify my desire for this freedom.

I submitted this request four times. The first time was in a letter (already in the summer of 1917) to the editorial committee of the *Tribune*. At that time I told them that, according to my standards, their foreign policy was too nationalistic, and that was why I proposed that they accept my collaboration. They did not accept my proposal. Later, in an article in the *Tribune* in November, I made the same proposal to the party, after having made every effort during the previous year to get my views published regularly in the *Tribune*.

Once more I submitted my request to the party, in a letter which was distributed at the party congress in November 1918. Finally, my party local at Bussum submitted the same motion at the June 1919 party congress, and the Enschede local followed suit in 1920. In every case the answer was no.

Two Congresses ago, Wijnkoop said that the motion should not be approved “because Gorter is opposed to the editorial committee”. The question was not asked, then, whether I had not been showing the Dutch proletariat the road to follow, or whether I was probably correct on this occasion, too, or whether my theory was correct, or whether it was of use to the national and international proletariat, or whether reality had not proven me right on the most important issue for the proletariat. He only said: Gorter is opposed to the editorial committee, opposed to us. He only said: His opposition is a hindrance (that is, a hindrance to the petty everyday business of the party). Therefore: Expel him — as in the times of Troelstra. And the very same “leaders” who have made it impossible for me to carry on with my work, now accuse me of not working! In addition, Wijnkoop has stooped so low as to try to put an end to my influence both here and abroad, having, for example, personally told Lenin that I was a neurotic!

A very significant example of Wijnkoop’s efforts against me took place quite recently: I have been explaining to the workers that the German revolution would most probably break out once again, and declared that it would be the cornerstone for Western Europe. Wijnkoop has for the last six months publicly declared that this is practically impossible, and has instead offered the workers of England as an example. At the present time, the overwhelming majority of the English workers reject direct action; in Germany, however, the revolution is more powerful than ever. An honorable fighter would now have to say: “Fortunately, I was mistaken”. A decent

I once again insist, before the forum of all the comrades and friends of the struggle: The leadership of the Communist Party has failed on every question of importance over the last few years: Kerensky's offensive, decisive for the Russian revolution; English and North American imperialism, which is the bastion of the counterrevolution; the League of Nations and the Peace of Versailles, which are the principle weapons against the revolution; as well as in relation to various questions of primary importance in domestic Dutch politics, and its evaluation of the German revolution, which is the nucleus of the world revolution. In all of these international issues, events have proven that I was right. My tactic has been vindicated on every point.

Let us put aside this insignificant conflict within the Dutch party, and concentrate on the most important facts regarding the great international movement of the proletariat.

We note that the second phase of the history of the evolution of socialism is coming to an end, or has already concluded. The first phase was the socialism of the time before Marx: Utopia. The second was the phase of the development of socialism as a science from 1847, the year of the *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels, until the Russian revolution in 1917. The third phase began in that year: socialism in action.

Fact number one is the fact that the second phase has ended.

Fact number two is the discovery of the form by which the revolution and socialism can become a reality: the soviets, the workers councils. Born in the shops and the factories, they are spreading throughout all of society. They grant, *from below*, all economic and political power to the laboring classes. Sole, exclusive power. Dictatorship. They are building the new state which replaces the old one, which will finally "die", and will be transformed into a new society, which will no longer know class rule.

Fact number three as important as the dictatorship and the workers councils is the unification of the international proletariat, which is finally beginning to take place. In 1847, Marx and Engels called upon the proletarians of all countries: "Unite". But seventy-six years had to pass before the proletarians could heed that call. It was the concentration of capital into industrial syndicates and trusts, it was monopoly and finance capital, it was the world

fighter: "My adversary was correct". Wijnkoop, with his customary false and rigid attitude, calls me a windbag and praises his own perspicacity.

Finally, Wijnkoop and Van Ravensteyn have refused to participate with me on a commission for international affairs established here by the Third International. They first proposed that all decisions should be submitted to the presidency of the Dutch party, and when this was rejected, they refused any and all collaboration with me! They have thus achieved their goal: by rejecting my collaboration as a staff member of the *Tribune* they separated me from domestic activity, and by their refusal to collaborate with me on the international affairs commission they are separating me from international activity. Obviously, the Dutch workers movement still has not rid itself of petty-bourgeois tyranny, which has burdened it since its origins. I would also like to briefly relate the position of the editorial committee of the *Nieuwe Tijd*. Both Pannekoek and H. Roland-Holst, in 1917, 1918 and again in 1919, refused to give me any support. They were responsible for the fact that a hard-hitting article I wrote in defense of Luteraan's excellent exposition of his dissenting views was not published in the *Tribune*. They did not undertake any kind of direct struggle against opportunism in the Communist Party. When, in June 1919, I wanted to publish an article decrying the position of the party leadership on the Versailles Peace Treaty in the *Nieuwe Tijd*, I was prevented from doing so. And immediately afterwards, a personal attack against me was published in the same journal. I am only mentioning this here in order to warn the editorial committee of the *Nieuwe Tijd* that the only way to preserve revolutionary Marxist tactics in Holland is to be prepared to defend them in international politics as well, as they previously did alongside me. At the same time, I wish to remind them that our group of Marxist theoreticians is the only group to have resisted the opportunist trend in Western Europe. It is therefore incumbent upon us to defend Marxist principles in the Third International as well.

war, it was imperialism, which finally brought the proletariat together into a united front. The Third International of Moscow is the embodiment and the symbol of this fact.

Now *we see* the workers take up the fight in every country, in the revolution against monopoly, against big finance capital, against imperialism, against world capital.

Now we see the soviets arising in various forms everywhere.

Now we see the coming of international unity everywhere. *We see* that the revolutionary workers of all countries are uniting against imperialism, that they are joining together under *one* watchword — workers councils — that the Moscow International is assuming their leadership, that they are joining together to fight all imperialisms, that they view imperialism as a single whole, and that they are beginning to form a *single united* front against it.

And this international unity must continue to grow.

Capitalism itself guarantees that it will.

It guarantees the new imperialism; it guarantees the recent and upcoming wars, and the next world war, which already threateningly looms.

It guarantees the consequences of this first world war and of the Peace of Versailles.

And most of all, it guarantees the identity of the leaders of the imperialist powers: England and the United States.

It also guarantees the new League of Nations, in which, under these leaders, world imperialism will organize itself against the world proletariat, which alone compels the proletariat to unite.

Now, the League of Nations and its leading powers have already formed large armies: the White Guards of the Baltic, of Poland, Hungary, of the Balkan states, of Romania, Germany. And if the revolution advances towards the west, these armies will be joined by French, Italian, English, Belgian, Dutch, and Scandinavian White Guards. Only then will international capital really be in mortal danger.

Against all of these forces, the international proletariat will join together more and more, and its unity will be created by the struggle against the power of international capital.

There can be no doubt that an opportunist tendency can be perceived in a large proportion of western European communists. In Germany, we encounter it in the left wing of the Independents and in the communists who follow the “*Zentrale*”, in England in the British Socialist Party, in Holland in the Communist Party, under the leadership of Wijnkoop and Van Ravensteyn. In other countries the old opportunist tactic is revived, or it was never abandoned, which gives more power to the leaders than to the masses. The International itself is also proceeding in this direction. But this cannot last very long: the struggle is becoming more merciless, misery grows without end, and imperialism grows implacably.

And when the working class of every nation has been united in *one* struggle against finance capital, against monopoly, against imperialism, which organize and rule all of society, and against its leaders, against imperialism as a whole, when this has been carried out everywhere in the same way and under the same watchwords, when all those who create capital unite against all imperialisms, viewing them as a single whole, when, from this perspective, they join together by their own will, forming a single whole, then no power will be able to resist them, and they will be victorious.

The entire international struggle, each and every national struggle which is now taking place, contributes to this process of unification, it comprises this process.

Those who feel — like the editorial committee of the *Tribune* — that this international unity of the proletariat against international imperialism is still a utopia, something impossible; that the proletariat only has to defend itself against its own imperialism (I naturally acknowledge this necessity, I have never doubted that this is the task which is nearest at hand);

and that this is the way to victory, such people once again prove that, first, they do not understand imperialism, and second, they are blind to reality.

They are the naïve souls who, seeing how easily the Russian revolution won its first battles, now think that it will be the same everywhere else.

But the world revolution is not so easy and so quick.

The world revolution is a long-term revolution, it requires endless efforts, and will have its times of advance and its times of reflux.

It can only win by means of unity.

The adjustment of tactics and their subordination to, their determination by, their dissolution into, international tactics, is therefore the sole precondition for its victory.

Just as, in the past, the workers of *one* trade in *one* workshop joined *one* association, compelled by *one* boss to fight *one* struggle; and later, the workers of *one* trade in *one* city did the same, compelled by the city's owning class; then the workers of *one* trade in *one* country, compelled by the owning class of the nation; and, as the workers of all countries are joining parties opposed to the bourgeoisie, so now for the first time the proletarians of all countries are uniting, compelled to do so by monopoly, finance capital and the imperialism of all nations.

Those who do not believe in the necessity of this union of the world proletariat in one front against world imperialism, which they consider to be impossible, overlook the fact that the prior unions mentioned above, such as in *one* workshop, in *one* city, in *one* trade, in *one* country, in *one* party, also seemed impossible. But they became realities nonetheless.

International unity in *one* front against international imperialism will also become a reality. The proletariat of Germany, England, France, America, the proletariat of every country will unite with the Russian proletariat.

The Dutch proletariat will also be a part of this, despite the errors of its leaders. Perhaps, we hope, these leaders will exchange their current tactics for better ones.

This struggle, this process of unity against world imperialism, that is, against the existence of capital itself, is the world revolution, in which the Russian and German revolutions are only episodes. This unity against all imperialisms combined, against world imperialism as a whole, this unification of the world proletariat by the world imperialism of global capital and by its struggle against the latter — this unity for the world revolution, is what I want to foment with my struggle against the leadership of the Communist Party, and with my recent theoretical-Marxist propaganda.

And this struggle for unity is becoming the driving force behind the actions of the masses, their workers councils and the revolutionary struggle in each nation.

I will repeat once more, for the last time: if, during the coming spring, the Russian revolution is attacked again, or if, during this summer, or thereafter, the revolution breaks out again in Germany¹⁸ — in Germany, where the situation is probably more revolutionary than anywhere else — in Germany, which is the key and the gateway of the world revolution, and whose revolution is infinitely more important than the Russian revolution, because its success would endanger English and American capital, and world capital as well — or if a revolution breaks out in another great power, in France or England, then the unity of the world proletariat against Anglo-American-French-German capital, against world capital, will be necessary.¹⁹

¹⁸ This has now taken place. The heroic German proletariat, which must overcome infinitely more difficulties than the Russians, has once again risen. The German revolution, as Marx said, will be profound.

¹⁹ English troops *have already* intervened, in the March 1920 general strike.

The Dutch proletariat and the international proletariat have to be prepared for this eventuality, and they have to prepare today.

And even if the world revolution is defeated, if the whole world war and the current bitter struggle turn out to have been a lesson, a test for the international proletariat, from which it must learn to form *one single* revolutionary unit, then unity is also the first and principle requirement, and the guarantee of victory, which will soon be achieved.

In any case, the international tactics which I defend are necessary, they must be combined with the national revolution, they must be one and the same thing.

Because the world revolution will not only take place in national struggles, but in a great international struggle between labor and capital, between communism and capitalism.

A theoretician can never do more than show the workers the final goal of the movement, as accurately as he can, and the road to be followed in order to reach this goal. This, not being a leader of the masses, is his task.

The world proletariat, then which, by means of action, through the soviets and by way of the national revolutionary struggle, achieves global unity against the organized imperialism of global capital, and thus brings about the world revolution and victory will more exactly and correctly formulate my last word of propaganda for scientific socialism in Holland.

With this, I conclude at least for the moment my theoretical propaganda for communism here in Holland, in order to try to make a contribution to the development of communism elsewhere today, when it is *really* coming to *life*.

-August, 1919²⁰

²⁰ Some notes were added later.

Resolution of the Conference of the Abstentionist Communist Fraction of the Italian Socialist Party

The National Conference of the abstentionist communist fraction of the Socialist Party of Italy was held in Florence on May 8 and 9, 1920.¹

¹ We include this short text of the Italian Left (extracted from *Il Soviet* and published by *Kommunismus*) in this collection because it shows, in opposition to the legend maintained by Bordiga and the Bordigists, that the entire Italian Left was actually more “leftist” than the image they later tried to disseminate. This text reveals: 1) that, prior to the crucial Second Congress of the Communist International, the Italian Left almost made the issue of non-participation a question of principle; 2) that it had intended to form, upon the foundation of this principle, a left opposition within the International and that it had already judged that the latter organization was infected with “opportunism”, and finally, above all, 3) that it had the intention of calling, on its own initiative (and not within the framework of a socialist party congress, as had occurred at Livorno), *and as soon as possible*, a founding congress of the communist party in Italy.

As is known, “events” took a totally different turn. The Italian Left unconditionally accepted the discipline of the Communist International and never formed an international fraction within it; it set the parliamentary question aside as a secondary matter, and, out of discipline, participated in the elections; the party was not founded until January 1921, when the last wave of the workers movement (summer 1920) had receded.

Once the anathema was pronounced against Bordiga and the winners had concealed his role, a vigorous reaction was launched to defend the opposite viewpoint. Bordiga was indisputably the leader of the first communist party, this could not be denied; does this imply, however, that he exactly expressed the most profound and subversive tendencies of the abstentionist fraction? The fact is that Bordiga and the other members of the Central Committee never carried out the mandate with which they were charged by the fraction’s conference. The fraction, after the Second Congress, still had confidence in Bordiga, because it was incapable of creating another leadership. One can undoubtedly discern, in Bordiga and the first leadership of the PCI, the tendency to adapt to circumstances; something which once again took place in 1923 when Bordiga (for the simple reason that Gramsci, although heavily outnumbered, would not agree to sign the document) withdrew a manifesto of the party in which he called for a debate concerning the opportunism of the Communist International and an apparent break with party discipline (the draft of this manifesto is reproduced in *Revista Storica del Socialismo*, November-December 1964, and in French in *Invariance*, No. 7); this attitude was also revealed when Bordiga suddenly forgot his doubts about the revolutionary nature of the Communist International during the Fourth Congress when the program was finally presented and adopted.

Except for the degree of their isolation within their separate contexts, Bordiga played the same role in the PCI left which Rosa Luxemburg played in the nascent KPD; the difference being: 1) the distance between Bordiga and the rest of the party was much less than that which separated Luxemburg from the revolutionary members of the KPD; 2) Luxemburg was situated within left reformism; Bordiga had illusions about the revolutionary power of the Communist International and the good intentions of the Russian leadership; these positions contributed to preventing the free development of the revolutionary tactics of the western proletariat and neutralizing the new power represented by the PCI, a power which was killed without its ever having been able to clearly assume an authentically representative form.

Bordiga’s defining characteristics (equally valid for the period after 1945) were the following: trenchant in his theoretical works (although this facet often had two faces) and lenient (not prone to take drastic action) in practical affairs.

After hearing the report of the Central Committee² and the reports from the representatives of the party's³ leadership, the fraternal fractions,⁴ and the youth federation; and after another debate on the political situation in Italy and trends in the PSI, the Conference declares that the party, as a result of its current composition and activity, is not qualified to lead the proletarian revolution, and that its numerous defects have their origin in: 1) the presence of a reformist tendency within the party which, in the decisive phase of the class struggle, will necessarily assume a counterrevolutionary position; 2) the continued existence of traditional language in political and economic activity; the Conference unambiguously declares that the PSI's membership in the Third International cannot be considered to be in conformance with the statutes of the International, since the party tolerates the presence of precisely those elements who deny the principles of the Communist International, and who publicly defame them, or, even worse, demagogically speculate with them in order to obtain electoral success; and considering that the true instrument of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat is the class political party, which is based on Marxist doctrine and the historical experience of the communist revolutionary process, which is currently unfolding throughout the world, and which is already victorious in Soviet Russia;

the Conference declares that *it will devote all its efforts to creating a communist party of Italy, as a section of the Third International*, and that the fraction will persevere, both within this party as well as within the International itself, in *emphasizing the incompatibility of participation in elections to bourgeois representative institutions with communist methods and principles*, in the hope that other purely communist elements in the socialist party will also place themselves upon the basis of the new party, in the conviction that choice is only possible after abandoning those methods of political activity which now practically place them in the social democratic camp; the Central Committee is delegated the following tasks:

- 1) preparing the program and statutes of the new party, always keeping in mind the program presented by the fraction at the Congress of Bologna, as well as the orientation maintained by the fraction's organ⁵ in the discussion of the most important current problems of communist methods and tactics;
- 2) expanding international outreach in order to create *a fraction within the communist International which is opposed to electoral participation*, and defending the fraction's mandate at the next international congress, with the demand that action be taken to provide a solution to the abnormal situation of the Socialist Party of Italy;
- 3) convoking, immediately after the next international congress, the founding congress of the communist party, and demanding that all those groups within or outside of the PSI which lay claim to the communist program should join the party;

(For a leftist group on the PCI left, see the *Communist Awakening* group, which appeared at the end of 1927 and was active until 1929. Although it held Bordiga in high esteem, it opposed his leniency towards the Communist International; but a perusal of its journal shows that it could by no means contend with the Bordigists for party leadership)

² Read by Amadeo Bordiga.

³ That is, the leadership of the Socialist Party.

⁴ *Ordine Nuovo*, a leftist fraction associated with the journal of the same name edited by Gramsci.

⁵ *Il Soviet*.

4) summarizing the basic positions and tactics of the fraction in clear and effective principles, and disseminating them as widely as possible in Italy and in other countries.

The agreement to create an effective antiparliamentary fraction within the Third International could very well be of the utmost importance for the International itself. We can also see how, as in the case of the creation of the Zimmerwald movement during the war, when it was a matter of uniting all the forces which were faithful to socialism, Italy again seizes the initiative to fight, now within the communist movement, against all kinds of parliamentarism and opportunism. Opinions differed in regard to what position should be taken on the elections. A small group defended its opposition to the elections with tooth and nail, and finally a motion was approved, which was also signed by comrade Amadeo Bordiga:

The National Communist Conference, with regard to the fraction's continued membership in the socialist party throughout the electoral period of the administrative elections, declares its adherence to the following position:

The abstentionists will not by any means or in any way participate in the elections, and, wherever possible, will prevent a party electoral slate from being presented, and will advocate abstention with all the means at their disposal.

After voting on some organizational matters, and electing the comrades Amadeo Bordiga, Ludovico Torsia, Rodolfo Gobert, Tommaso, Borraccetri, Antonio Pisacane and Antonio Cecchi to the Central Committee, the conference adjourned.

The Communist Left and the Resolutions of the Second Congress of the Communist International¹

H. Roland-Holst

The consequences of the decisions reached in Moscow are more complicated for the left communist groups. The fact that the new demands for international centralization and discipline cannot be separated from the decisions concerning parliament and the trade unions has led to an unfortunate outcome, giving the impression that one part of the radical camp is against the formation of a solid international association.

Only one of the left groups, the Austrian communist group, has immediately confirmed its appreciation for the great value of such an association. Revoking its decision to boycott the elections, which had been proclaimed shortly before the congress, in order to participate in very unfavorable conditions in the electoral campaign, it has provided an example of international discipline of a kind never seen in the old movement.

In my view, it seems unjust and inappropriate to joke about this act of the Austrian comrades by calling them “Mamelukes”, as the *Arbeiter-Zeitung*² has done. However anti-parliamentary one may be, one can and, according to my criteria, one must appreciate the sacrifice such an act implies. The Austrian comrades are not necessarily puppets of Moscow who are blindly following orders. They could also be men who enjoy an interior freedom, who do not serve the lifeless word, but the cause, who do not fail to see the greater truth hidden behind a smaller one. They are convinced that the question of whether or not to participate in the elections is secondary, and that the primary question is this: international unity and international discipline.

An entirely different question, however, is whether the negative experiences in respect to participation in parliamentary elections, most recently suffered by the Austrian communists, and last summer by the Germans,³ do not cast doubt upon the consequences of a discipline which obliges parties in the Third International to act against their own better judgment and intuition. Does the Austrian failure not prove that grudging obedience to a directive, without enthusiastic conviction, not only fails to reinforce the revolution but actually retards its progress? Is this failure not a sign that it is desirable and necessary to give the member parties freedom of action in certain cases and within certain limits, and precisely in those cases where the conscious and active part of the working class either demands or rejects a particular course of action?

In his pamphlet on left wing infantilism, while addressing the issue of parliamentarism, Lenin has brilliantly reminded us of the danger of lethargy, which inevitably arises periodically in extreme left wing tendencies and constitutes their negative aspect. He explained to all radicals

¹ This is the last section of a long article by H. Roland-Holst: *Die Aufgaben der Kommunistischen Partei in der proletarischen Revolution (The Tasks of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution)*, published in *Kommunismus*, Vol. II, Nos. 1-2, 3-4, 5-6 and 7-8 (January-March, 1921). The text had been submitted to the journal's editorial committee in November of 1920. In the pages preceding the extract presented above, Roland-Holst discussed, among other topics, the 21 Conditions for Admission to the Communist International, which were adopted by the Second Congress and were vigorously opposed by the KAPD.

² KAPD newspaper.

³ The legislative elections in which the KPD obtained 380,000 votes.

that only by remaining in close and continuous contact with the masses can this danger be avoided, and in this respect he has done all of us a great favor. And he has personally convinced us that it is folly for the communists to refuse to participate in bourgeois institutions or non-revolutionary workers organizations, out of fear of weakness or corruption; the construction of the institutions of the new society will not be possible without confronting similar and even more serious dangers. Lenin has not presented any proofs, however – and neither he nor anyone else can present such proofs – that the communists of Western Europe must participate in parliamentary elections in defiance of the intuitive rejection of such elections by the revolutionary vanguard. All the examples he adduces from the practice of the Bolsheviks prove nothing. All of these examples refer to a phase in the development of the world revolution which we have left behind, and which will never return for any proletariat. The world war and the Russian revolution have contributed new elements to the course of events; the mentality of the masses, and even more so, the mentality of their vanguard, have changed.⁴ One of the symptoms of this change is the rejection by part of the revolutionary workers of the corrupted and disgraced parliament, which is profoundly hated and despised. What has taken place in Germany and Austria will probably be repeated in England and France, should the communists in those countries also participate in parliamentary elections. Over the long term, Pannekoek will be vindicated against Lenin, and the international resolution on parliamentarism will have to be revised at a future congress.

Based on what we have read in certain declarations in the *Workers Dreadnought*,⁵ the English anti-parliamentary left communists will follow the example of the Austrian comrades, that is, they will place more value on organizational unity at the national and international levels, than on the defense of their opinions on particular issues. Now that the Labour Party has refused to admit communist organizations, the most important bone of contention separating the right and left wings of the English communist movement has disappeared, and I think the Pankhurst group's position is tactically correct, which consists of advocating unification with the old BSP (now the CP). It would be idiotic to preserve the current fragmentation of forces, solely and exclusively because of the antiparlamentarism of a small group: a party cannot have an essentially negative purpose for its existence, without falling into lethargy and situating itself outside of the masses. However, the task of Sylvia Pankhurst's brave and dedicated group will be far from finished, once formal organizational unity is established. Since it is likely that the moderate wing of the English CP, with its strong predilection for parliamentarism, will be predominant, it will be the task of Pankhurst's group to be the revolutionary conscience of the party and to ceaselessly defend the new concepts concerning the role of the masses as the creative element in the revolution. In this way it will also help preserve the spirit of the Shop-Stewards Movement, and will help that movement grow stronger as well. The relative and absolute small size of the communist groups in England, as well as the lack of a strong apparatus of bureaucratic power and influential leaders in the old BSP make it more probable that organizational unity for the communists of this country is the best option, so as to provide the fresh, young and radical elements who are least prejudiced by the old concepts with an influence on the growth of the movement. The precondition for this – and this is very important – is that they preserve their independence of spirit, and do not allow themselves to be deprived of the right to criticize both the national and international leaderships.

⁴ This was actually true of the most radical part of the proletariat, not just certain intellectuals.

⁵ The journal of S. Pankhurst's group in London.

In contrast to what is taking place in England, in Germany it is not very likely that the left communist opposition can now fulfill its task within a unified party. The most important, although not the only reason for this, is that the question of the relation between communism and the trade unions in Germany has assumed a very different form than in England. In England, the new spirit which wants to dispossess the leadership of decision-making power over the struggle and its development, in order to place that power in the hands of the organized masses, has found a way to create its own organs within the trade unions: a practical solution, characteristic of the manner in which ways of life are changed in England. In Germany, with its much more rigid concepts and its arrogant fanaticism of power in all walks of life, such a thing has not yet been possible. The radical communist opposition considers the renovation of the trade unions from within to be impossible, and believes that it can attain its objective only by means of the general workers federations, the so-called "unions". There is thus a conflict with the official communist party, which for the time being appears to be insurmountable.

The political isolation of the extreme left implies great dangers for the latter, although, fortunately, there are plenty of opportunities these days to prevent a loss of contact with the masses. It is, furthermore, precisely its independence which allows the KAPD to freely propagate its ideas and to transform them into reality, without being paralyzed by the requirements of a dogmatic and authoritarian party discipline. Whatever forms they assume, depending on the specific situation, all the radical leftist groups everywhere represent essentially the same tendencies. The idea that only the energy, the initiative, the heroism and the dedication of the masses can make the revolution a reality, has not only been theoretically understood by these groups; they want to transform this idea into the soul of all organization and all action, they want to bring this idea to the consciousness of the working class masses.

This idea, of course, is not always a steady and luminous beacon held aloft by the left radicals. Their beacon is often overshadowed by multiple errors; the groups which are attracted to this beacon are often searching, looking for direction, making mistakes, and faltering, because they abandoned the old well-traveled roads. To this we must also add that extremes normally attract adventurers of the spirit: undesired episodes frequently result.

The KAPD has persistently sought theoretical understanding, i.e., the truth concerning the question of which road to follow for the liberation of the proletariat. It has had to expel dubious and confused elements from its ranks, and is undergoing a continuous process of maturation and increasing awareness. It has made mistakes, but its errors were never the result of the indecisiveness of a party bureaucracy still in thrall to antiquated concepts. It did not vacillate during the days of the "Kapp Putsch"; nor did it vacillate when it seemed for a moment that the soviet armies were only a few days from the gates of Warsaw, it did not hesitate when paralyzing the transport of arms and munitions to eastern Europe became a matter of the utmost importance for the Russian and international revolutions. Because of its faith in the mission of the masses, and the masses' power to fulfill that mission, the KAPD now represents the future. The KAPD acknowledges the necessity of party centralization, as long as this is understood to mean unity founded on basic principles, and on the will to translate these principles, regardless of the circumstances, into guidelines for action, rather than on the absolutism of a handful of leaders. It recognizes the great value of the party in the revolutionary struggle, and the task it must fulfill, which is to be the political center of the will and the thought of the working class. It rejects with equal fervor, however, both the idea of the dictatorship of the party over the masses, and the idea of the dictatorship of the party's leaders over its militants. The KAPD has undergone various changes, it has overcome enough false and erroneous concepts, and most of the truths which it has discovered are proven and authentic, precisely because it has discovered them by

means of its own efforts, and has not accepted them as a result of a ruling passed down from above. This gives it a power which few parties outside of Russia possess.

The Moscow accords concerning the tasks of the communist parties are still founded upon the old division of men into two species: an elite minority which thinks, decides and acts on behalf of all, and a large obedient herd. This division has dominated the past, and many reasons could be adduced to cast doubt on whether it will ever disappear. But the most important task of socialism is to overcome this situation as much as possible, by educating the masses to undertake their own inquiries, to make their own judgments, to act on their own behalf, that is, to organize their own affairs. This impulse, which in the soviet system is still expressed in an incipient and incomplete manner, exists in the groups of the extreme left as a powerful and conscious will. Especially for this reason, these groups are the bearers of a new development: they cannot be expelled from the International without the latter suffering a loss of strength and foreclosing future prospects. In this respect, Sorel's broadly applicable and profound judgment is completely valid, according to which it is better for the proletariat to temporarily content itself with weak and chaotic organizations, rather than to submit to associations which are imitations of the political forms of the bourgeoisie.

Our general conclusion is as follows:

As long as the objective and subjective conditions for revolution in the various countries continue to be as divergent as they are today, international discipline and centralization, as sought by Moscow, can only be realized in a limited manner. The Moscow accord on organization is very valuable, however. It is one of those regulatory ideas which, in all those countries where the revolution is still only a possibility and where the power of the past is still strong, and the force of the future is still weak, are useful and necessary, as counterweights against an exaggerated national particularism and as a means of socialist education.

In our western world, where bourgeois ideology, the idea of bourgeois freedom, has affected all classes, it is of the utmost importance to learn to renounce personal desires, aspirations, habits, and concepts which are contrary to common activity and common struggle. An education following the Russian example is therefore necessary for all western communists.

But while that is true, it is also true that the more highly developed individuality of the western proletarians, their greater need for intellectual independence and the personal and collective self-determination of their destinies, could be a corrective against the excessive inclination to accept the country, the people, the past, the experiences and actions of the Russians as models for the international movement. History never repeats itself, life's current never flows backwards, and its power continually creates new and distinct forms. The conditions amidst which the Russian revolution began and then triumphed will never exist again in the same way in other countries, in the entire world outside of Russia. And this is also why the relation between leaders and simple comrades, or the relation between party and masses, which arose in Russia as consequences of its particular situation, will not be repeated outside of Russia. Everywhere, the revolution encounters other situations, other conditions, and other human material, which must be worked and molded in accordance with other circumstances. The proletariat can learn a great deal from the Russian revolution; blindly following it is impossible. Everywhere, the current must find its own channel.

The example, the authority and the leadership of a brave, conscious, committed and selfless vanguard in the epoch of transition from capitalism to communism are indispensable for a successful conclusion to the proletarian struggle against its external enemies and, perhaps to an even greater extent, against the enemy within, that is, its own defects, greed and egoism. The penultimate achievement of revolutionary development will be the disappearance of the distinction between leaders and followers. While this division still exists, the masses will not have at-

tained self-determination and self-government, they will continue to be more the object than the subject of history.

We do not wish to delve into the question of whether the disappearance of this division between leaders and followers can take place in the manner foreseen by the Moscow accords, that is, through the progressive dissolution of the communist party into the masses, or the masses into the party. This would undoubtedly constitute a painless transition to the self-liberation of the masses. But history seldom works in such pleasant ways, and one must fear that it will not do so in this case, either. It is more likely that the communist party will not willingly abandon its tutelage over the masses, even when it will no longer be necessary. The masses might have to rebel against this tutelage in order to impose their total self-determination. But this historical possibility must not prevent the communists from fulfilling their task in the present epoch. This task is: to lead the masses to where they will no longer need the example and the leadership of a specially organized group, of a political-spiritual aristocracy; to render themselves unnecessary. The communists labor in order to prepare for their own disappearance.

Whoever has a firm determination to assure that power remains in the hands of the proletariat, must also be sure of the road to follow. Whoever wants the political struggle to end in the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the economic struggle to result in the transfer of production into the hands of the proletariat, can only have one slogan:

*Get out of the trade unions,
Create factory organizations!*

The Lessons of the “March Action”

*Gorter's Last Letter to Lenin*¹

Hermann Gorter

Dear Comrade Lenin:

When we last parted in November of 1920, your last words on our quite divergent ideas concerning revolutionary tactics in Western Europe were to the effect that neither your opinions nor mine had been sufficiently tested: that experience would soon prove which of the two is correct.

We were in complete agreement on that.

Now, reality has unfolded and we possess more than one experience. You will undoubtedly allow me to show you, from my point of view, the lessons we should learn.

You will recall that, at the Moscow Congress, you yourself, along with the Executive Committee of the Third International, declared your support for parliamentarism, for infiltrating the trade unions and for participating in the legal industrial councils in Germany, the only country in Europe where the revolution has actually taken place.

The Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD) and the Dutch Marxists responded by maintaining that your tactics would lead to an extreme enervation of the revolution, to chaos among the proletariat, to discouragement among the communists, and thus to the most disastrous defeats. On the other hand, antiparlamentarism, factory organizations, workers unions and their revolutionary action committees would lead, in Germany and in Western Europe, to the strengthening of the revolution and finally to the unification of the proletariat.

You and with you, the Executive Committee of the Third International intend to unite the masses under your political and trade union leadership regardless of whether or not they are truly communist. This is what you did at Tours, Florence, and Halle. Your objective was to provide these masses with new bosses.

We want to destroy the old organizations and to build others of a new kind, from the bottom up, which are animated by a new mentality. We do not want anyone but true communists to join us in this endeavor.

¹ Published in French in *L'Ouvrier Communiste*, monthly journal of the Communist Workers Groups, Paris, No. 9/10, May 1930.

You wanted to export Russian tactics to Western Europe, tactics from a country where capitalism was weak and where you had the peasants as collaborators.

We took account of the fact that, in Western Europe, the proletariat stands alone against a gigantic capitalism, which has at its disposal financial credit and raw materials. And therefore that we needed our own tactics, different from yours.

You want the dictatorship of the party, that is, of a few leaders. We want a class dictatorship.

You practice a leadership politics. And we practice a class politics.

Your tactics are basically a continuation of the tactics of the Second International. Nothing has changed but the external façade, the names, and the slogans. Essentially, you still belong (in Western Europe and Russia) to the old school from before the revolution.

The German proletariat's 1921 March Action has proven which side is right: you, comrade Lenin, and the Executive Committee of the Third International; or the KAPD and the Dutch Marxists who supported the KAPD. The March Action has provided an answer and has demonstrated that the leftists were correct.

There were two parties in Germany, each with its own tactics, both participating in the movement. The Communist Party of Germany followed your tactics; the Communist Workers Party of Germany followed its own tactics, which are also our tactics as well. What was the outcome, how did these parties behave during the March Action?

(Is it not always necessary, especially in the present case, that tactics, principles and theory find their justification in action?)

The Communist Party, through its parliamentary activity which only voiced the masses' disappointment with a bankrupt capitalism, diverted the proletariat away from revolutionary action. It managed to unite hundreds of thousands of non-communists, and became a mass party. With its infiltration tactics it has become a bulwark of the trade unions and with its participation in the legal industrial councils it has betrayed the revolutionaries and weakened the revolution. By doing all these things, Comrade Lenin, the Communist Party has only been following your advice, your tactics, and the tactics of the Executive Committee of the Third International. And when, as a consequence of these policies, it repeatedly collapsed into inactivity (during the Warsaw offensive, for example), or into treason when faced with the prospect of action (the Kapp Putsch), when by means of simulated actions and a raucous publicity it becomes reformist, constantly passing the buck whenever it can when faced with the struggle which the capitalists wish to force upon the workers (for example: the electrical workers strike in Hamburg, the strikes at Ambi and Leuna, etc.), in short, when the German revolution was on the decline into regression and enfeeblement, the best elements in the KPD began to demand, with increasing ardor, to be led into action — then, all at once, the Communist Party of Germany decided upon a great undertaking with the intention of conquering political power.

Here is what this plan consisted of: in the face of provocation by Horsing and the *Sipo*, the KPD decided upon a gradual, superficial, hierarchically-ordered action, without the spontaneous impulse of the masses; in other words, it adopted the tactic of the putsch.

The Executive Committee and its representatives in Germany had already been insisting for some time that the Communist Party, by committing all of its forces, should prove that it was really a revolutionary party. As if the essential aspect of a revolutionary tactic consisted solely of committing all one's forces... On the contrary, when, instead of fortifying the revolutionary power of the proletariat, a party undermines this power by means of its support for parliament and the trade unions, and then, after such preparations(!) it suddenly decides on action and puts itself at the head of the same proletariat whose strength it had been undermining, throughout this entire process it cannot ask itself whether it is engaged in a putsch, that is,

an action decreed from above, which did not originate among the masses themselves, and is consequently doomed to failure. This putsch attempt is by no means revolutionary; it is just as opportunist as parliamentarism or the tactic of infiltrating cells of party members into all kinds of groups.

This putschist tactic is the inevitable obverse of parliamentarism and infiltration, of the recruitment of non-communist elements, of the replacement of mass or class tactics by leadership tactics. Such politics, weak and internally rotten, must inevitably lead to putsches.

How could the KPD — corrupted by parliamentarism, internally weakened by the dead weight of non-communists, its strength sapped by discord between at least six tendencies and put at the service of a leadership tactic, as opposed to a mass tactic — have led a revolutionary action?

Where could the KPD have found the power it needed to confront an enemy as formidable as German reaction, armed to the teeth? Or to confront Germany's financial and commercial capital, which has successfully formed a bloc of all the classes opposed to communism?

At the time of the Horsing provocation on the part of the government, when a generalized and tenacious resistance became necessary, and when the masses themselves began to rise in central Germany, the KPD, as a result of its internal weakness, was incapable of any kind of effective combat. That was its downfall. At least half of its members remained inactive — in some places they fought among themselves. The reaction won easily.

When the rout began, Levi, your former protégé and standard-bearer — the man who, together with Radek, yourself, and the Executive Committee, is most responsible for the introduction of these debilitating tactics into Germany and Western Europe, of this tactic of the putsch — this same Levi attacked the KPD fighters from the rear, those who, despite the party's mistaken tactics, had proven to be its most revolutionary elements. As thousands of them were being arraigned before the courts, he denounced them, as well as their leaders. Not only does Levi, with his tactics, bear ample responsibility for the putsch, but also for the terrible punishments inflicted by the repression. And it is precisely with Levi that Däumig, Geyer, Clara Zetkin and, together with them — a fact of great significance — the whole parliamentary fraction of the party concur.

The Communist Party of Germany thus suffered a devastating blow. And with it, the whole proletariat of Western Europe, the Russian revolution and the world revolution also suffered a setback. The KPD, the only *mass* communist party in Western Europe, will probably be reduced to nothing. This will probably be the end of the KPD as a revolutionary party.

This party, comrade, has been constructed according to your principles, in a country where economic conditions are ripe for revolution. And when it strikes its first blow, it collapses. While its bravest militants are dying, being gunned down and filling the prisons, they are betrayed by their own leaders. This is the example set by the KPD and your tactics.

We will now proceed to the other example and the other tactic, those of the KAPD.

The KAPD, which does not want to have anything to do with parliamentarism or the old trade unions, but wants factory organizations, never needed a putschist tactic, which is always a consequence of a lack of internal cohesion. The KAPD does not have to suffer from this lack of internal cohesion, because it only admits communists as members; because, for the KAPD, it is quality that counts; because it does not have a leadership politics, but a class politics; because it does not want a party dictatorship, but a class dictatorship. This is why the question of a putsch cannot even be posed within the KAPD. The KAPD did not pursue a putschist tactic in the March Action. Its tactic is based upon the fact that neither a party nor a party's leadership can make the decision to start a revolution or a major insurrectionary movement, but that only the historical situation itself, that is, the masses' will to fight, must constitute the basis for such

decisions. The KAPD's tactic is meant to strengthen the proletariat by developing its consciousness and extending its revolutionary power while constructing effective combat organizations. This, of course, can only be done within the struggle itself, without ever shirking the fight imposed by the enemy or spontaneously arising from the masses.

This is how the KAPD has always acted, unlike the social democratic, independent and communist parties of Germany. This is how it acted during the Kapp Putsch, the electrical workers strike, the Russian offensive in Poland, and the numerous strikes in Germany, exactly as in the March Action. With this truly revolutionary tactic, arbitrarily ordered actions cannot even take place.

In the March Action, the KAPD only entered the fray after the government attack.

And now, would you like to compare the KAPD with the KPD, both during and after the Action? The Communist Workers Party showed itself to be so firm in its resolve and its tactics that during the Action it suffered from no discord whatsoever, and even after the defeat, the most complete unity prevailed at its delegates' assembly. Despite the defeat, its power was enhanced, as was that of the Workers Union (AAU).

This is the balance sheet of your tactics, those of the Third International, and those of the KAPD.

Comrade Lenin, it is not mere intellectual curiosity which makes me want to probe more deeply into these issues. It is because the tactics of the revolution in Western Europe and of the world revolution as well, depend upon a correct understanding of the problems they pose. Let us therefore more carefully examine these tactics in detail — your tactics and those of the leftists.

You want parliamentarism. You want to play a role in the theater, behind whose stage the New German State of Stinnes and the *Orgesch* lies concealed, a theater which lacks any real power. With your methods, the workers have been diverted from the real problems of the revolution, they have been herded (through the elections) into unreliable masses, a part of whom must necessarily fail to rise to the occasion at the decisive moment. With these methods, internal corruption was inevitable.

We are anti-parliamentary. We do not want the fictitious struggle, but the real one. That is why the KAPD remains unanimous and unshakeable.

You want the legal industrial councils. You have advocated them to the workers; you have convinced the workers to recognize these legal councils as organs of the revolution. What role did these legal councils play during the March Action? They abandoned and betrayed the revolutionary action.

We want revolutionary action committees. While the industrial councils remained inactive and practiced their treachery during the March Action, revolutionary action committees spontaneously arose among the masses and drove the movement forward.

You want to influence the trade unions through communist cells. What have these cells accomplished? Have they radicalized the trade unions? There has been no news of their doing anything. They have accomplished nothing. No matter how many times they have infiltrated part of the trade union bureaucracy.

We want factory organizations and the unity of these organizations within the General Workers Union (AAU), because the revolutionary struggle can only be carried out on the terrain of industry and upon the basis of industry. And what has the March Action taught us? It was fought in the industries and by industries. It was fought by the factory organizations. The factory organizations, not the trade unions, constituted the focal points of the revolution. The March Action has therefore supplied the proof that factory organizations are indispensable for the revolution.

The KPD, despite the heroism of a significant number of its combatants, has paralyzed the revolution with its tactics (which are your tactics), with its parliamentarism, its infiltration of other organizations and its legal industrial councils.

The KAPD, the Workers Union and the factory organizations have shown themselves in the eyes of the entire world to be the leaders of the German revolution, that is, of the revolution in Western Europe and the whole world.

You want organization, you get chaos.

You want unity, you get schism.

You want leaders, you get traitors.

You want masses, you get sects.

(It is thus necessary to add yet one more observation: you, comrade Lenin, you, Zinoviev and Radek and so many others in the Third International, you said that the tactics of the KAPD would only produce sects.)

We see what actually happened.

Your KPD embraces, according to its own figures, 500,000 members. But the KPD also admitted (at its last congress), and everyone knows quite well, that the majority are not communists. Let us assume, however, that half of them are communists. In that case, your tactics and those of the Third International have attracted, out of the nine million trade unionists in Germany, 250,000 communists to your party.

But how many communists are there in the Workers Union (AAU), which was founded on the basis of the principles of the KAPD? A ballpark figure: 250,000. Judged by the numbers, our tactics have therefore been just as successful as yours.

But it is not only in terms of numbers that our tactics reveal their superiority. There is also this difference: first of all, the KPD and its cells have been created by countless millions of marks spent on newspapers, organization and propaganda – the KAPD and the AAU have not cost even one penny. Secondly, the KPD and its cells have collapsed in your hands, while the KAPD and the AAU are solid and flourishing. The KPD and its cells are worm-eaten with internal treachery. The KAPD and the AAU are growing in strength and unity.

Reality has provided us with the following elements of experience: as the March Action of the German proletariat has clearly demonstrated, so we hope that the entire International will recognize that your tactics, those of the Executive Committee and the Comintern, lead to collapse and defeat, while the tactics of the left generate unity and strength.

The Third Congress of the International must therefore modify its tactics.

Comrade Lenin, we admit the adequacy of your tactics for Russia, and personally wish to tell you that the judgment of history, as I see it, concerning your revolutionary efforts as a whole, will proclaim that you have done great work, the best possible. In my view, you are, after Marx and Engels, our most eminent guide. This does not obviate the fact, however, that you are mistaken in respect to the tactics to be employed in Western Europe.

And now, we turn to the German proletariat, and say: “if it is true that you are convinced in your hearts and minds that the left wing is correct, if you are ready to fight in accordance with its methods, then abandon the KPD and all the old parliamentary parties; get out of the trade unions, and join the General Workers Union and the Communist Workers Party”.

And we call upon the whole proletariat of Western Europe and the entire world to adopt our tactics.

The KAPD's Report on the Third Congress of the Communist International¹

At the meeting of the KAPD Central Committee on July 31, 1921, a KAPD delegate to the Congress of the Third International presented the following report. The complete and definitive version of the KAPD's report will be published as a pamphlet after the other delegates return from Russia.

Comrades!

The KAPD delegation arrived in Moscow before the Congress in order to become acquainted with all the problems relating to Russia and the international workers movement as a whole; to get an accurate idea of the current situation by means of an exchange of viewpoints with the other delegations as they were arriving, so as to rectify the attacks and distortions to which the KAPD has been subjected, and to clearly set forth our point of view to the other delegates during the course of individual discussions. All of these tasks have been impossible within the confines of the Third International; it was necessary to make the most of the occasion. In fact, even after we arrived in Moscow, the daily newspaper of the Congress and various Russian government journals continued to attack the KAPD and distort its positions. We arrived in Russia in mid-May with the following missions: 1) *attacking the decisions of the Second Congress of the Third International*; 2) *establishing, to the greatest possible extent, an opposition within the Third International*. The delegation did not succumb to the illusion that it was possible to radically modify the official positions and Theses of the Second Congress; it had to emphatically insist upon battling against them, nonetheless.

We devoted our greatest efforts to the second task mentioned above (establishing an opposition). In the course of our discussions with the delegations from Bulgaria, Mexico, Spain, Luxembourg, England, Glasgow, the Bulgarian Group and the IWW (Industrial Workers of the World), it became clear that we share some points in common with all these groups. The "Bulgarian Lefts" are closest to our positions. Their understanding of the Mexican situation is exactly the same as ours. The Bulgarian organizations are not actual "unions", but coordinating bodies composed of syndicalists, anarchists and shop stewards. The relation between these organizations and the party is more or less such as we have tried to achieve: it is the party which directs the movement.

After the Bulgarian comrades, it was the *Spanish comrades* whose positions were closest to ours. They understood us perfectly. There is just one problem: the concept of the need for a political organization has yet to be generally accepted in Spain; but it is gaining ground. The comrades find themselves beyond trade unionism, on the road to communism. Their organization has 1,100,000 members: approximately 50% of all the organized workers in Spain.

¹ This text has been translated and published in issue No. 7 of *Invariance*, pp. 81-93.

The comrades from Luxembourg are convinced advocates of factory organizations which are closely linked to the party. There is a “good” workers movement in Luxembourg, and its delegates assured us that they wanted to stay in close contact with us.

The *Glasgow Group* agrees with us on the theoretical level, but their organization is not very cohesive. The *Belgian representatives*, during the course of our first discussions with them, proved to be in complete agreement with our principles and tactics; they stated, however, that our methods of struggle were not yet applicable in their country.

The IWW was vehemently opposed to the positions of the Third International. It has a rather syndicalist character, but its delegates have admitted that a political organization is necessary for leading class struggles; they intend to study our experiences and draw the appropriate lessons. They asked us for political material. We also held interviews with comrade Roland-Holst, of the Dutch minority faction; and with some members of the Austrian delegation, with whom we were able to establish some points of agreement.

After these separate discussions with each delegation, we held an open forum. It was then that we came to clearly understand that the idea of forming an opposition within the Third International was an illusion, even though the delegates, considered separately, were in theoretical accord with our views. As it became clear to them that our discussions were meant to lead to the representation of a point of view in emphatic opposition to the Third International, they became frightened and balked. We then tried to create a framework for opposition on the basis of three themes: parliamentarism, trade unions and ultra-centralism. This did not succeed either. Finally, we attempted to obtain a homogeneous position on the part of all the opposition groups on just one of these themes. The most promising one in this respect was the question of parliamentarism. But this attempt failed as well. Everyone was afraid of being excluded from the Third International. It was then that, more clearly than ever, we realized how right we were to break with the Spartacus League. Within the Third International, if the Theses of the Second Congress are accepted, it is impossible to express an opinion other than that of the Russian Communist Party.

All of which leads us to just one conclusion: we, the KAPD, stand alone. *We must therefore abandon our mission to found an opposition.* But we should not conclude that the KAPD’s representation at the Congress was unjustified, or that we should have behaved like Rühle did at the Second Congress. We simply understand that we can only rely upon ourselves, and that our task has become much more difficult, but also much more necessary. It was necessary to force the Third International to clearly reveal its opportunism, to show by means of its exclusion of the KAPD, the impossibility of an independent revolutionary organization remaining within the Third International.

Since we had foreseen that we would only be allowed to speak for the minimum allotted time period, we used other means to make the delegates aware of the principles and methods of action of the KAPD. To this end, we composed outline presentations of all the important problems, theses and principle guidelines of the KAPD (see Volume No. 7 of *Proletarier*, the theoretical journal of the KAPD) as well as a report on the Communist Workers Party (the KAPD). These works were translated into English and French and were printed in large numbers and were distributed to many delegates.

Prior to the opening of the Congress, the Executive Committee held many meetings, in which all the members of our delegation participated. The line which the Congress would adopt could be seen at these meetings. Before we left Germany we had conceived a dual hypothesis concerning the Congress: either the Third International would inaugurate a new, more activist policy, or it would plunge deeper into the old orientation. As it turned out, *even the hope*

for a reactivation of the Third International a hope which could have been kept alive by the recognition of the March Action seemed to be illusory.

After overcoming incredible difficulties, we managed to obtain an interview with Lenin prior to the opening day of the Congress. *During the course of this interview, Lenin declared that Levi was basically totally correct in his position against the March Action; and that he had only violated party discipline and thus committed an act which could not go unpunished.*

This constituted an important sign for us, since Lenin's authority is unquestioned within the Russian Communist Party.

This state of affairs was further illustrated by the attitude of the Russian representatives on the Executive Committee. The comrades of the French Youth group and certain elements of the French party, for example, criticized the party's leadership: it had remained inactive at the moment of class mobilization in 1919. The delegates from Luxembourg also formulated serious accusations against the French party. When the workers of Luxembourg occupied the factories in March and the French Army intervened, the leadership of the French party remained mere spectators and did nothing. When these complaints were brought up for debate, Trotsky took Loriot's side against the French Youth and Luxembourg delegates; he even reproached the latter for harboring nationalist motivations. Lenin also openly favored Loriot. Previously, Bela Kun, Radek and Zinoviev had mildly criticized Loriot. But from the moment that Trotsky and Lenin expressed their views, they shut their mouths. This sort of immobilizing opportunism also made its appearance in relation to the issue of the Czechoslovakian party, led by Sméral, who is a complete rightist.² The fact that the social-democratic rightists dominated this party and that they were allowed to enter the International was not mentioned at all... A mild resolution was presented, however, in which some observations were made concerning Sméral and the rightists. (Immediately afterwards, during the Congress proceedings, the resolution was vacated of all meaning, even omitting the part which was directed against Sméral: the Czechoslovakian delegation had demanded that it be revised in this manner and Lenin himself intervened on their behalf). These examples should suffice. The Executive Committee also determined the structure of the Congress proceedings. *The political bureau of the Executive Committee made the proposals and, naturally, no one ventured to formulate the slightest revision of its proposals.* This was how the various committees were constituted. We sent representatives to the following committees: the committee for preparing the report of the Executive Committee, the committee on the world economic situation, the committee on tactics, the committee on the trade union question, the committee on organization, and the committee on the tactics of the RCP. We presented our theses to all these committees. But we could not present them before the whole Congress assembly. The Congress only heard the theses submitted by the Executive Committee itself.

We proposed to the Executive Committee that we should be permitted to present supplementary summaries on certain issues. We were told that we had to do this in the committees. But the committees, once formed, never actually functioned (except for the committee on the economic situation).

The first session of the Executive Committee took place in the Bolshoi Theater. It was an entire day of opening ceremonies; Zinoviev opened the Congress by delivering a speech summarizing the history of the Third International. The various delegates presented reports on the

² The Czechoslovakian CP was formed as a result of a split in the socialist party and the socialist party's center faction went over to the CP as well. In 1922, it had 170,000 members (cf. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-23*, Vol. 3, p. 447). Along with the PCF and the KPD, it is one of the rare "mass" communist parties in Europe during the twenties and thirties. In Norway, for example, the social democratic majority joined the CI and became the Communist Party, but most of these communists returned a few years later to the socialist party.

situations in their respective countries. The session ended with a performance by Russia's most eminent artists. Chaliapin (the Russian Caruso) aroused the most enthusiastic response. As the concluding act, the whole Congress was taught to sing a popular Russian folk song. To summarize: the day began with Zinoviev, and closed with Chaliapin. Despite all of these diversions it was not merely a day of ceremony, as, in the midst of all the confusion the rules of order were established and the Presidium of the Congress was elected.

On the second day, Trotsky presented a three-and-one-quarter-hour report on the *world economic situation*. Among the particular points, whether outstanding or not, of his speech, its central point eventually clearly emerged: *the proletariat must come to terms with the fact that the revolution would be long-delayed and that, consequently, it must adopt a tactic of long-term preparation* due to the fact that capitalism had recovered its strength and overcome its difficulties. As proof of the superficiality of Trotsky's analysis (which underestimates the new international alliance of world capital), we quote the following passage of his speech, in which he prophesies, with the precision of a railroad timetable, the outbreak of the Anglo-American War:

"In 1924, the tonnage of the American fleet, according to its own program, will be significantly greater than that of the English and Japanese fleets combined. England's guiding principle has until now consisted in assuring that its fleet is more powerful than that of the next two largest fleets together. Many Americans in the Democratic Party are bragging: in 1923, or maybe even by the end of 1922, we will be as strong as England. In any case, England's *memento mori*³ is written on the agenda: if you let this happen, you are lost."

"Before the war, we had an armed peace. People said: there are two trains heading towards each other on the same rails, they will crash into each other. But it was not observed that, between their respective positions, there was a station. The time was not indicated on the timetable. On this occasion, we have it on paper or on world history's calendar. This should take place in 1923 or 1924. Either England will say: I will be pushed aside and become a second-rank power; or, to the contrary, England must employ all the forces inherited from its great past in the game of war and stake its whole destiny on this card for a limited period of time."

Our report on the same topic was not accepted. Since speaking time was limited to ten minutes per person, we applied the following tactic: we split up our report and had several comrades share the task of reading our report; thus, two comrades from the KAPD spoke (the speeches of comrades Sachs and Seeman are published in *Kampfruf*,⁴ issues Nos. 14 and 15⁵).

Our delegation had already presented a critique of Trotsky's theses on the world economic situation during the committee's proceedings (this critique is published in No. 218 of this journal). They were subjected to many criticisms, but Trotsky continued to assert that his theses must be adopted *in principle*. They could not be subjected to corrections, except in matters of style or wording. Even though Frölich, of the VKPD, expressed his opposition, the theses were immediately adopted in principle, in accordance with Trotsky's proposal. At the moment this question came up for a vote, a rupture emerged in the VKPD delegation.

Meanwhile, the *credentials committee* presented its report. Radek's explanation of the problem involving the admission of the Bulgarian "leftists" is quite characteristic of this committee's work: "The group of the alleged Bulgarian 'leftists' cannot mention any activity of their own, and we have considered it to be totally inappropriate to reward people who have carried out a

³ "A reminder of death"

⁴ Official journal of the AAUD.

⁵ Cf. *The German Left. Texts...*, which reproduces the principle interventions of the KAPD delegates at the Congress.

project of disorganization by giving them a consultative voice in the Congress.” The admission of the Bulgarian “leftists” was rejected; it was the Communist Party of Bulgaria, of a purely social democratic character, which would constitute the official section of the Third International.

Afterwards, the report of the Executive Committee was presented. Zinoviev reported on the Executive Committee's activities over the last few years, defending the Executive Committee's point of view on strict compliance with the 21 Conditions, making special reference to the Italian party, the “March Action” and the KAPD. Later, the Executive Committee's position throughout the year received its critique in the practical form of the offer that the Italian Socialist Party would be readmitted to the Third International upon the condition that it should sacrifice Serrati. *Just as the Executive Committee's harsh attacks against Levi and his cohorts were skillfully replaced by the accusation of having “violated discipline”.* It treated them gently and even soon thereafter came to fully approve of Levist opportunism. After this report, he read the now-famous *Memorial to the German Proletariat*, concerning the Max Hölz affair. This *Memorial* describes Max Hölz as a valiant rebel against capitalist society, whose actions, while corresponding to his love for the proletariat and his hatred for the bourgeoisie, are not appropriate. The CI opposes his use of terror. The KAPD protested against this *Memorial*; it showed that this *Memorial* turns its back on the acts of Max Hölz and that in the KAPD's eyes it was nothing but an insult. Radek bridled at this “disruption”, saying, among other things, that the KAPD had even gone so far as to fight in defense of the tomb of the fallen.

Then the debates on the Executive Committee's report began. It was the KAPD's delegation which fired the first shot. The KAPD, responding to Zinoviev who had attacked the party in his report, found it amusing that it should be included in the same bag with Dittmann and his ilk, and made the following declaration to conclude its interventions:

“We protest, with the greatest firmness, against the attempts to put us into the same bag with the Dittmanns and the Serratis, by the use of a few quotations taken out of context. We do not forget, for even one moment, the difficulties encountered by soviet power due to the ebb of the world revolutionary wave, but we are at the same time aware of the danger that all of these difficulties may lead to a contradiction between the interests of the world revolutionary proletariat and the momentary interests of soviet Russia—a real or an apparent contradiction.”

“At a session of this committee, it was declared that the Third International must not be considered as an instrument of soviet power, but that the latter was merely the strongest bastion of the Third International. We also think that is how it should be. But we think that when contradictions arise between the vital interests of soviet power and those of the Third International, it is our duty to openly and fraternally examine these contradictions within the Third International.”

“As far as practical solidarity with soviet Russia is concerned, we have always done our duty, and this is obvious. For example, we have celebrated the October Revolution with demonstrations, we have generously participated in efforts to provide aid to imprisoned Red Army soldiers, and we prepared the solidarity actions of August 1920; the latter failed due to the lack of involvement on the part of the USPD and the Communist Party. Demonstrating our solidarity with soviet Russia was one of the decisive motivations for our party when it decided, despite our very serious reservations concerning its tactics, to join the Third International.”

“We shall continue to pursue such policies, but we shall, everywhere and at all times, oppose with the most steadfast resistance any instance where the policies of soviet Russia lead the Third International into reformist practice. We are convinced that such reformism is in contradiction of the true interests of soviet Russia itself, as well as those of the world proletariat.”

The well-known attack on the KAPD took place on the second day of the debate on the Executive Committee's report. Number 214 of our journal provides the complete text.

In response to the vote on the ultimatum⁶ directed at the KAPD, we nonetheless presented the following motion:

- “1. The 21 Conditions of the Second Congress are now even less capable than they were previously of providing any kind of security against reformist putrefaction in the future.
2. After the creation and admission of the large mass parties, the Third International needs, now more than ever, the presence of a purely proletarian revolutionary opposition.
3. Such an opposition cannot be effective unless it is not overwhelmed by the apparatus and the number of votes of a party that wants (as a matter of principle), at whatever cost, to unify the masses behind it and thus can only be and must be reformist.
4. The Unified Communist Party (VKPD), in particular, remains to this very day, in relation to its tactical principles, within the camp of Paul Levi. Its own left wing is usually the prisoner of a fatal self-deception.
5. In conclusion, currents related to the KAPD are now forming in every party in the Comintern. But they cannot continue to grow in the interest of the proletarian revolution and the International, unless the KAPD can continue to subsist as an independent party within the CI.

For all of the above reasons, we propose that the *KAPD should remain in the CI as a sympathizing organization.*”

Radek delivered the speech summarizing the question of *tactics*. We proposed a supplementary summary, but our entire delegation was granted only one hour to speak. We presented our point of view (rejection of trade union and parliamentary methods) and called for the application of the methods of struggle of the Communist Workers Party and the General Workers Union.

At one moment during the debate, the VKPD defended the offensive launched during the “March Action”. *Soon, however, the following typical incident took place: after Clara Zetkin had spoken and after everyone had their turn speaking, after Lenin and Trotsky said she was right and condemned Levi merely for a breach of discipline, the “leftist” whims of the VKPD’s delegation evaporated.* Radek reproached the *Rote Fabne*⁷ for having too suddenly and precipitously begun the “March Action”. The VKPD’s Friedland admitted that this was true.

The theses on this question were sent back to the committee for re-elaboration.⁸ Before the conclusion of the Congress a vote was taken on the appropriate tactical orientation for the International. Confronted with this vote, we prepared the following declaration:

“The theses presented for the vote of the Third Congress are the consistent and even intensified continuation of the basic line adopted by the Second Congress and of the policies which

⁶ The decree of the Executive Committee demanding the fusion of the KAPD into the VKPD.

⁷ Official newspaper of the VKPD.

⁸ I.e., the question of tactics.

have been pursued until now by the EC. The theses grant an unlimited field of activity to the traitorous intelligentsia of the opportunists and reformists of every country for their work of mystification, especially when they are considered in the context of the world economic situation. Any clear dividing line separating them from the Hilferdings is erased; all organic relations to the reality of the modern class struggle are abandoned.”

“The supposed left wing of the Congress⁹, pushed forward by the revolutionary workers who support it, began to make feeble attempts to correct these tactical theses. Their efforts were rebuffed in conformance with the wishes of the right wing, by the majority. Nor did we lend them any support. They did, of course, testify to their good faith desire to augment revolutionary activity, but they did not reckon with the concrete conditions of the struggle; they did not attack the bourgeois-parliamentary basis of the 21 Conditions, nor did they attack the general tendency implied by that basis; for this reason, their efforts were transformed into an obstacle to any further clarification.”

“The preparation for the victory of the proletarian revolution in the capitalist countries can only be carried out within the struggles themselves. These struggles are necessarily born from the fact of capital's economic and political attacks. The communist party can neither unleash such struggles by itself, nor can it refuse to enter the fray, without sabotaging the preparations for victory. During the course of those struggles which do erupt, it cannot gain their leadership unless it opposes to all the illusions of the masses the complete clarity of the final goal and the methods of struggle. This is how it can become, by means of a dialectical process, the nucleus for the crystallization of the revolutionary fighters who, during the course of the struggle, gain the confidence of the masses.”

“With this declaration, we set ourselves in opposition in every possible way to the adoption of the theses on tactics, and we refer to the theses we have presented on the role of the party in the proletarian revolution.”

Lenin presented the report on the tactics of the Russian Communist Party. He unveiled the Russian government's new line on the policy of concessions, free trade, etc., and he defended it. Russia's new policies are well-known and have been subjected to criticism on various occasions. A comrade from the KAPD made a statement against Lenin's speech.

Then Radek gave his speech. *After him, comrade Kollontai, of the Russian Workers Opposition, spoke.* Her intervention was an event of the highest importance, which would have the most far-reaching consequences. Until then, no one had dared to publicly intervene in opposition to the current policies of the Bolsheviks and the soviet government. The comrade declared that she was obliged to *put revolutionary discipline above party discipline.* She directed her attack particularly against the Bolshevik policy “which is preparing the return to capitalism” and then she attacked the attitude of the soviet government “which rejects those workers who are ready to construct the soviet system.”

Trotsky immediately took the floor and attempted, by means of very long explanations, to subject comrade Kollontai to ridicule. He could not, however, refute her arguments. The KAPD delegation then addressed this issue. We placed particular emphasis on the fact that, although we had never meddled in the domestic affairs of the Russian Party, now that we had become aware of comrade Kollontai's arguments, we were obliged to adopt an even more critical position in respect to the soviet government.

At that moment, comrade Roland-Holst, from the Dutch minority faction, felt obliged to defend the RCP against our attacks, declaring that the RCP was of the left and always had been.

⁹ Essentially, the VKPD left wing (cf. Chapter 13).

On the trade union question, Zinoviev and Heckert from the VKPD presented their report amidst the total indifference of the Congress assembly. Once again, our entire delegation was condemned to only one hour to present our views. At that moment, the Congress feigned an attack of deafness. Our theses on the trade union question were referred to the committee, where they were rejected as possible bases for discussion, with the allegation that “the Congress had, in its every position, rejected the conceptions of the KAPD”. We proposed, prior to the vote on the theses submitted by the central bureau of the EC, that we should once again explain our theses in a brief concluding intervention. This request was denied.

The Youth question: Münzenberg’s report. Women’s rights. The Eastern question: none of these presentations aroused the least interest in the Congress.

After having vainly attempted, despite all the attacks and distortions to which we were subjected, despite all the maneuvers to reduce us to silence, to prevent the Third International from being utterly submerged in opportunism, we drew up a balance sheet of the Congress. Faced with the ultimatum of the Congress demanding that the KAPD yield to the discipline of the International, we responded as follows:

“The KAPD delegation has submitted the results of the Congress to a new examination, both as regards the decision which it must announce in response to the motion of the Congress which demands, in the form of an ultimatum, the dissolution of the KAPD into the VKPD, as well as in respect to our relations with the Third International. Fully acknowledging the gravity of the responsibilities it assumes, the delegation unanimously draws the following conclusions:”

“The tactical struggle against the KAPD throughout the Congress was from the beginning carried out like a fight against an adversary whose arguments must not be taken into consideration, insofar as its basis, and its very existence as a political factor, must be annihilated on the pretext of discipline.”

“This is confirmed by the following facts:

1. For several weeks, the Congress participants have been given a completely false image of the KAPD, through articles which misrepresent our party in the Russian press, in the *Communist International*¹⁰ and in the Congress newspaper. Meanwhile, our in-depth reports and our rectifications have not been printed.
2. The way the Congress was structured constantly obliged us to fragment the expression of our positions. That this tactic had been pre-arranged becomes especially clear due to the fact that we were not even granted the opportunity to prepare a report or even a supplementary report on an issue which directly concerns us, the issue of the KAPD. We were thus obliged to refuse to speak at all so as to not become accomplices in a farce.
3. The basis for the ultimatum directed against us was an alleged EC resolution brought to the attention of the Congress participants despite the fact that the EC never addressed the matter in any of its sessions, and despite the fact that none of its sessions ever heard, and therefore had all the less opportunity to have arrived at, any decision on this problem.

¹⁰ Leading newspaper and official organ of the CI.

4. This question, which had for a whole week remained one of the last points on the Congress's agenda, as an issue which was to be treated separately, was never even separately discussed with us in preparation for the EC report. (Point Number Two of the day's agenda). It was arranged by "decree". In this manner, the result which was expected in advance was achieved: the Congress's judgment was settled in advance, before it could have dared to become aware of our positions during the course of a debate on questions of principle.

This formal procedure is strictly connected to the political orientation along which the Third International has been evolving, under the determinant influence of the Russian comrades. The outcome of the Congress has proven this: the political line of Paul Levi has been victorious in the Congress; the formal recognition of the March Action has been revealed as the freedom of revolution."

"The Czechoslovakian party was admitted as a section with full rights, without any real guarantees at all and on the basis of empty promises. Out of fear, its opportunist leader Sméral was treated with great tact. As for the Italian Socialist Party, which has just signed a pact with the fascists, it was treated with the utmost indulgence amidst a welter of concern for details. The principle of participating in bourgeois parliaments was preserved, despite the sorrowful experiences of Germany, Austria, France, etc., and even though the caricatures of the supposed revolutionary parliamentarism were seen in action. Reaffirming the disastrous policy of working in the old trade unions has led those who have followed it, despite all their phraseology, towards Amsterdam; the capitalist ploy of economic parliamentarism was also preserved. The Congress has even supported, without a single word of demurrer, the ridiculous idea of revolutionizing the consumer cooperatives."

"All of this is testimony to continued adherence to the path laid out by the Second Congress, and to the same detour: from revolution to reformism; from the sphere of struggle to the tactics of diplomacy, to intrigues and the illusory whitewashing of contradictions. All of these examples justify the protest (against the adoption of the theses on tactics) which we have published in the summary reports."

"These are the facts which must be taken into account (in considering the resolution demanding our dissolution into the VKPD) in order to conclude that the ultimatum is totally unacceptable to the KAPD. Such a reunification would mean our subordination to the discipline of a party in decomposition, in which reformism has snuck in the back door under the influence of the Congress. We would be muzzled by an organizational apparatus (press-finances-cliques-leaders) which is set up against us. Any faint hope of having a salutary influence within such a party lacks the least basis in reality. The delegation has dispensed with all such hopes on its own accord, even without a special order from the party:"

"The delegation unanimously rejects the ultimatum to join the VKPD."

"We do not declare the KAPD's break with the Third International, although we do have the power to act in the name of our party. Our comrades will address this matter. They will provide their response to the attempt to force them to join with others on the road of reformism and opportunism. The international proletariat will await their response."

"Our decision was made in the full awareness of its very serious nature. We are fully aware of our responsibility to the German workers, to soviet Russia, and to the world revolution. The revolution will not allow itself to be shackled by a Congress resolution. The revolution lives. It will continue on its path. We go with it; at its service, we follow our road."

Signed,

The KAPD Delegation

We decided to read this declaration at the end of the Congress, in order to make our opinion completely known to all the delegates. But this was not authorized by the Presidium; we were merely allowed to include our declaration in the published summary reports.

We understood why the Presidium did this:

The entire Congress was overcome by a condition of blind enthusiasm. The applause was endless, the cameras were flashing, and the movie cameras whirred. At that moment, our delegation constituted an accusation; it was a warning, like the warning given of old to Babylon.

But the directors of the Bolshoi Theater would not get away so easily. During the course of *the meeting of the Executive Committee* which took place on the following day and which was attended by the representatives of every country, our declaration was nevertheless read by our delegation and convincingly and loudly proclaimed to more than one representative of the revolutionary proletariat that a hangover would necessarily follow the binge of resolutions adopted amidst all the hoopla and indecent publicity stunts.

We must also mention that our delegation was only admitted to the final session of the Executive Committee for the sole purpose of reading our declaration and that we had to immediately evacuate the premises afterwards. It was in our absence that the Executive Committee debated the question of the KAPD and approved a resolution which was later communicated to our delegation. This resolution stated:

“Despite the declaration of the KAPD which amounts to a declaration of war on the Communist International, the recently-elected Executive Committee has decided:

1. To immediately publish a detailed open letter to the members of the KAPD and to demand that the KAPD arrive at a decision within the next two months.
2. To send a delegation to the next congress of the KAPD.
3. The delegation of the KAPD is, pursuant to the terms of the resolution of the Congress, authorized to provisionally participate in the Executive in a consultative role, but without a vote.”

The members of the KAPD are capable of providing the response which this declaration of the Executive Committee deserves. We know how it was arrived at, we know the text. *The balance sheet of the Congress is this: the Levi tendency, in general, has won. The “March Action” has been renounced. The “theory of the revolutionary offensive” has been registered among the infantile disorders. The KAPD has been excluded from the Third International.*

Comrades! We have done all we could. We acted as the members of the party had demanded. Without any compromise, and without any concessions to the tapestry of illusions known as the Third International, we have followed our own road at the Third World Congress.

The KAPD faces gigantic tasks. In its thought, its decisions and its action, it will have to make its way rapidly and decisively so that the world proletarian revolution will be victorious!

Report presented at the session of the Central Committee of July 31, 1921

*Report of the Session of the Central Committee of the KAPD
(July 31, 1921)*

On the third point of the agenda: the policy of the Russian State and the Third International.

From one era to another, history follows a logical course and not even Russia can avoid it. The economic relations in Russia can only thwart the Russian comrades in their ongoing attempt to skip the capitalist phase. The feudalism of the Russian agricultural economy must, first of all, be overcome, insofar as this agricultural economy, due to its immensity and the lack of developed industry and markets, stamps the economic and political character of the country with its basic features. Class contradictions exist between the Russian peasants, who aspire to a private capitalist economy, and the Russian proletariat, which is fighting for a communal proletarian economy. The Russian government has become the representative of the bourgeoisie and the peasantry through the alteration of its policies in favor of the economic interests of the peasants. Such policies are always the consequences of economic development. The soviet government thus finds itself, for some time now, in contradiction with part of the Russian proletariat. Today, discord has reached an extraordinary level: the formation of the workers opposition in Russia and the violent struggles against the soviet government are characteristic proofs of this. The KAPD's position on the soviet government must be modified in accordance with these facts: in the future, the KAPD can no longer unconditionally support the decisions of the soviet government, since its decisions are directed in part against the revolutionary proletariat in Russia: the workers opposition. Support for the soviet government can only be justified to the degree that the latter fights against the common enemy of the Russian proletariat, the peasants, and the petit-bourgeoisie: the feudal nobility. Furthermore, the KAPD must definitively separate itself from the Third International, because the latter has become an element of Russian State policy and must consequently adapt to the transformation underway in the character of the Russian government. After the Third Congress, the Third International has openly shown itself to be an enemy of the proletarian world revolution, insofar as it has excluded the KAPD. But we cannot remain outside a proletarian communist international; the KAPD must, starting now, begin to lay the foundations of new, truly revolutionary communist workers international.

After debate, during the course of which some representatives expressed the idea that the soviet government — despite the radical reversal of its economic policy — might still be the representative of the Russian revolutionary proletariat, the Central Committee put forward its conceptions in the following declaration, which was adopted against the negative votes of Hanover and East Saxony, with Berlin abstaining:

1. The Central Committee believes that the course of events at the Third World Congress has brought about, *in principle, a rupture within the Moscow International.*

The Central Committee, taking into account *the need for international class struggle*, intends to construct a communist workers international for the accomplishment of the most urgent tasks of the world proletarian revolution.

The Central Committee believes, furthermore, that the fundamentals, the tactics and the organizational form of this communist workers international must be adapted to the conditions of the proletarian revolution.

2. The Central Committee declares that our policy towards the soviet government must at all times be dictated by that government's positions. If the soviet government were to act as a factor in the struggle of the proletarian revolution, then the KAPD must support it with active solidarity. Should that government abandon our camp and assume the role of police chief for the bourgeois revolution, then the KAPD must fight it in a resolute manner.

Program of the AAUD

Adopted at the Third National Conference
of the AAUD in Leipzig

(December 12-14, 1920)

Translated by Denis Authier
(*La Gauche allemande. Textes...*)

Introduction

Its welter of initials and its confused relations with revolutionary syndicalism should not mislead us into thinking that the AAUD was just another group. The AAUD was part of a tendency that shot into prominence at the turn of the century with mass strikes which combined “politics” and “economics”, as well as the huge, at times anti-trade union strikes in northern Germany in 1913 which gave rise to autonomous committees. In conjunction with this trend the idea of the unitary organization was born, the first formulation of which appeared in the Bremen *Arbeiterpolitik*. The left communist newspapers, especially the one published by Wolffheim and Laufenberg, never ceased to expound its necessity.

In April-May 1919, the first important *union*, the General Miners Union, was formed by previously unorganized workers together with almost all the trade union members in that economic sector, before being dismantled by the police. The former members of this *union* would join the revolutionary syndicalists (who were then backpedaling in respect to the rest of the movement) or the AAUD; others would return to their old trade unions. The Port and Shipyard Workers Union of Hamburg, founded in August 1919, combined a defense of immediate interests with the advocacy of certain political perspectives: arming the workers, a critique of the Spartacist leadership of the KPD, and active solidarity with the Russian Revolution. The AAU of the Ruhr was formed at the same time on a similar basis.

The founding congress of the AAUD took place in February 1920. The first spokesmen of unionism, who were at that time already deeply involved in their national-bolshevism (which attracted a small minority within the AAUD), were sidelined. One debate dominated the congress: must the party-form be abandoned as soon as possible (the position defended by Roche, of Hamburg), or should it be at least provisionally maintained (the position defended by Schröder and the leadership of the future KAPD)?

The KAPD would be tempted to treat the *unionen* as its working class base. Pannekoek criticized the practice which transformed them into “factory groups” instead of “workers groups”. Since the future, he said, lies in the neighborhood and city soviets, in the councils which embrace and transcend the workplace, what good is a *union* which is nothing but an extended version of the party?¹ His criticism was justified, but in its essentials, from the time of its founding, the AAUD was not a branch of the KAPD. In the winter of 1920-1921 the AAUD alone had some 150,000 members (while the KAPD had about 40,000). It was the most active *union*. It regularly published a dozen weeklies and its numerous pamphlets occasionally had print runs of up to 120,000 copies. It would lose almost all of its members after 1923.

Program of the AAUD

1. The AAUD fights for the class unity of the proletariat.
2. Its goal is a classless society, the first phase of which is the dictatorship of the proletariat, that is, the will of the proletariat alone determining the political and economic organization of society in its entirety, thanks to the organization of the councils.
3. The progressive realization of the council idea is the road which the growth of the self-consciousness of the proletarian class is taking. The dictators, properly speaking, are the delegates of the councils; these delegates must carry out the decisions of the councils. The councils² can be recalled at any time by the rank and file which bestowed their mandates. There is no place for so-called leaders except as advisors.
4. The AAUD rejects all reformist and opportunist methods of struggle.
5. The AAUD is against any participation in parliamentarism, since that would mean sabotage of the council idea.
6. Likewise, the AAUD rejects all participation in the legal enterprise councils as dangerous class collaboration with the employers.
7. The AAUD is opposed to trade unionism because the latter is opposed to the council idea.
8. But the AAUD is particularly opposed in the most violent possible manner to the trade unions because they are the principal obstacles to the continuation of the proletarian revolution in Germany. They are the principal obstacles standing in the way of the unification of the proletariat as a class.

¹ “Letter to the KAPD”, quoted in *The Dutch Left...*

² The council was, then, an elected committee. The whole personnel of the factory united for revolutionary actions comprised what was called the Factory Organization.

9. The goal of the AAUD is unitary organization. All of its efforts will be directed towards the attainment of this goal. Without admitting the justification for the existence of political parties (since historical development impels towards their dissolution), the AAUD does not fight against the political organization of the KAPD, whose goals and methods of struggle are also those of the AAUD, and strives to move forward alongside the KAPD in the revolutionary struggle.

10. The mission of the AAUD is to carry out the revolution in the workplace. It takes the political and economic education of the workers seriously.

11. During the phase of the conquest of political power, the Factory Organization becomes a link in the proletarian dictatorship exercised in the workplace by the factory councils, which is founded upon the Factory Organization. The purpose of the Factory Organization is to assure that political power is always and exclusively exercised by the executive council.

(Extract from *“The General Workers Union Revolutionary Factory Organization”*, published by the Economic District of Greater Berlin, 1921, p. 48.)

Extracts from the *Guidelines of the AAUD*

(December 1920)

What Is Organization?

To organize means to arrange and give form to something. Parties, trade unions, the army, the Church, the State and the League of Nations are organizations.

What, basically, is an organization? Have they always existed in their current forms? The whole world knows the answer is no. Among nomadic peoples they were different from those of the Middle Ages, centuries later, with that era's feudal guilds and serfs. Germany, then fragmented into dozens of principalities, duchies, free cities, etc., had a form of organization unlike that later assumed by the German Reich. Nor should this be surprising. The external forms of an epoch are not simple wrappings which can be donned and shed at will. So, what we must confront today, in the form of a trust or a large city, just like the organization of a city registrar's office or a local commission for the poor, is as much connected to the *general situation* as are the branches of a tree or its trunk to its roots. They form a whole. The organization is therefore a particular construct which possesses precise foundations. Just as skin takes different forms, and is smooth or wrinkled depending on the general condition of the body, a change in an organization's foundations brings in its wake a change in the organization. Relations of production and economic relations constitute the foundation of man's social relations; it is upon them that man's way of producing what he needs depends. Capitalism is the modern form of production. Thus, the current form of organization is inseparable from the existence of capitalism itself, it is its result. Naturally, it is, like capitalism, subject to change: it ceaselessly undergoes metabolism, it grows, ages, dies and is reborn. An historical and revolutionary *process* unfolds. To be born, a new organization must emerge from, by means of an often very painful evolution, the upheavals and convulsions of which the old organization is still capable. The way in which the combatants conceive of this genesis naturally plays a decisive role in this process. One could all the more easily demolish the old organization and make room for the new one if one knows where the explosives must be placed.

The Old Organization

The State

At present, the *modern State* represents the most advanced and most powerful expression of the capitalist system. Will it, or will it not, achieve its principal goal, that is, a world economic syndicate and the League of Nations? This depends on the struggle, the resistance, and the victory of the world proletariat, and on the stages traversed by the latter on its road to victory.

For the proletariat, the capitalist State is the representative of the ruling class. It protects the private economy and private property. It is the executioner of the exploited. Its justice is class justice. Its organization and administration (trusts, trade unions, bureaucracy, militarism, parliamentarism, education via school textbooks, etc.) inhibit and repress the proletariat. They allow a restricted number of “guarantors”, assisted by their intellectual slaves, to *govern* an immense majority of *subjects*. They reduce the proletarians to the status of cogs in a machine. On top: leaders, blessed by the gods and untouchable, then the administrators who depend entirely upon them, and at the bottom, below all, the masses, dispossessed of rights, to whom some crumbs are thrown or who are fitted with the bridle and the bit: whether they receive crumbs or the bridle depends upon the ease with which it is thought that the “beast” can be pacified.

The Parties

The parliament is a link in the chain of the organization, and one of the forms of expression, of the capitalist State. *Parliamentarism* is one of the most typical forms of activity in the capitalist world, that is, a world of exploited and exploiters, a world of political-economic inequality, a world of class struggle. Parliamentarism designates not just the occupations to which the “official” representative institution is devoted, which today is no more than a business office for capitalism, a façade *behind which the real business is conducted* and a safety-valve of capitalism, but it is above all a symbol of capitalism. It is the expression of the being, the structure, the basic constitution of capital, of its tactics and its methods in the current period.

The form assumed by political parties is bound to parliamentarism. So much so that the parties have precisely the character of capitalist organizations and are therefore constructed according to the following principle: leader and masses; as the leader over the masses, the organization goes from the top down. The leader commands, the masses obey. Above, a leader or a group of rulers; below, an army of the ruled, a few foxes and millions of donkeys. It is the “Simon Says” principle. The masses constitute the *object* of politics, an object which the “leaders” manipulate in accordance with their needs. The instrument of such a party is tactics, or more precisely, the *tactics of the capitalist businessman*, pure fraud. The leader is the businessman, the party is his *property*. The neighboring businessman is his competitor. These tactics, the ever-more-refined ways and means of capitalist business practice, make for success. They stop at nothing. To be a party man means: to enforce spiritual narrow-mindedness, to practice charlatantry, to stifle what is human in man.

The unequal development of capitalism in the various countries, the competition between nations, even between racial and cultural communities, and, since the second half of the 19th century, the *organized* combat, defensive and offensive, becoming more noticeable every day, of the oppressed proletarian class, temporarily prevent capitalism, as a political-economic system, from attaining its ultimate possibility of expression, *i.e.*, centralized rule over the world thanks to a capitalist world economic syndicate.¹ This era, the second half of the 19th century, in which

¹ Prior to and during the war, revolutionaries were debating whether a single world capitalist State was in the offing. The majority arrived at the conclusion (correctly, in our view) that this was impossible: competition,

the proletariat acquired consciousness of itself as a class by comprehending the capitalist process and in which, on the other hand, instinctive consciousness led to its comprehension of, that is, to an understanding of the necessity of, the *class struggle*, of proletarian *solidarity*, and of international bonds, whose goal is a *classless society*--this era is the one in which modern communism was born.

But since capitalism was not yet exhausted and the proletariat had not yet formed a mass *conscious* of belonging to the same class, and both continued to develop within one and the same process, it is clear that proletarian organization could not be born all at once, and especially prior to the political victory of the hitherto oppressed class, an organization which would have unlike capitalist organization a primarily proletarian class character and which could utilize proletarian methods of struggle derived from that character. Attempts towards this end were made, of which traces can be found in the confrontation between Marx and Bakunin. But these attempts were naturally weak, or accomplished nothing, or were distorted. Proletarian class consciousness developed very slowly (the mere *number* of members of the socialist organizations is of no significance) and the characteristic trait of the *transitional period* bridging that epoch and ours is the flood of a multitude of the exploited into the ranks of the social democratic parties and trade unions. The struggle of these organizations, as they were being carried out on capitalism's own terrain, obviously did not require the "advocacy" of a goal, but advice concerning the road to follow and how to most advantageously utilize all the bourgeois strongholds. The trade unions' fight for wage increases and the parliamentary struggle were political necessities in an epoch when a slogan like the unhindered right to vote could awaken and provoke revolutionary energies. But in the course of this fight, the next goal, which was "the development of proletarian class consciousness", was lost sight of completely. The point of view according to which "the emancipation of the working class will be the task of the workers themselves", and which made the *development of the workers class consciousness* the principal task which should not be forgotten for even one moment, was increasingly disregarded. The more time passed, the more the socialist organizations assumed the character and the methods of capitalist organizations. They became "organizations of leaders", private property in the hands of those who pulled the strings and who were still under the spell of bourgeois capitalist conceptions. They became *ends in themselves*.

The "leadership" of the *class struggle* was in the hands of a few individuals who were *cut off from the needs of the proletariat*. It was the victory of parliamentarism which necessarily led to the paralysis of the revolutionary activity of the masses. The class struggle and the revolution became the concern of a *group of high-level managers*.

This trend has not yet come to an end. The "socialist" parties, or, more properly, the rabble of the parties, only attained their most repugnant display after the revolution of 1918. From this point of view, the old social democracy is related in a direct line of descent to the "Unified Communist Party" (VKPD) and the degree of abjectness only increases as we get closer to the VKPD.

even monopolistic competition, is the very soul of capital. Applied on the scale of a single country, this "super-imperialism" hypothesis evolved to become the theory of "State capitalism", later elaborated by Bruno Rizzi (*L'URRS, collectivisme bureaucratique*, Part I, 1939; Champ Libre, 1976. For an English translation, see *The Bureaucratization of the World*; London, Tavistock/New York, Free Press, 1985), and by some elements of the German Left, and, after 1945, by the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. Concerning the latter group, see the well-documented book by P. Gottraux published by Payot (Lausanne, 1998).

The Trade Unions

Even more clearly than the parties, the trade unions became organizations of a perfectly capitalist nature. Born in an epoch of small-scale war against employers who were not yet powerfully organized in cartels, they were originally the adequate form for proletarian combat against capitalism's tendencies towards pauperization.

“It was by combating capital, combating its tendencies to absolute impoverishment, setting limits to the latter and thus making the existence of the working class possible, that the trade union movement fulfilled its role in capitalism, and this made it a limb of capitalist society itself...”

“Just as parliamentary activity incarnates the leaders' psychological hold over the working masses, so the *trade union movement* incarnates their material authority... In developed capitalism, and even more in the epoch of imperialism, the trade unions have become enormous confederations which manifest the same developmental tendencies as the bourgeois state in an earlier period. There has grown up within them a class of officials, a bureaucracy, which controls all the organization's resources—funds, press, the appointment of officials; often they have even more far-reaching powers, so that they have changed from being the servants of the collectivity to being its masters, and have identified themselves with the organization. And the trade unions also resemble the state and its bureaucracy in that, democratic forms notwithstanding, the will of the members is unable to prevail against the bureaucracy... [T]he workers do not control their trade union, but... it stands over them as an external force against which they can rebel, although they themselves are the source of its strength—once again like the state itself” (Pannekoek).²

In the final accounting, the trade unions form a bureaucratic organization on the margins of the world of the private economy, to which, however, its leaders are connected, as veritable permanent employees, for good and for ill. Since their existence depends upon the existence of the trade unions, they unavoidably find themselves under the pressure of circumstances; and their decision-making power is thus increased, while they are more and more hesitant to use it even in the best cases.

The trade unions are organized by trades. They have increasingly deviated from the rigorous and implacable idea of the class struggle and instead content themselves with demands for better wages and working conditions for the various job categories. They have separated the employed workers from the unemployed, the young from the old, men from women. The employers, united in ever more powerful trusts, put them on the defensive, despite their decline into an increasingly more pronounced *reformism*. They have, whenever possible, prevented important strikes. The general strike and the mass strike were preventatively denigrated as general nonsense. In effect, such strikes would annihilate the trade unions, as well as the existence of their bureaucratic leadership.

Council Organization as Proletarian Organization

The decline which has overtaken the capitalist period also affects its forms of organization. Our descriptions of the party and the trade union clearly show us that their organizational

² Quoted from *World Revolution and Communist Tactics*.

forms are, or have become, capitalistic. These organizational forms are *economically* based upon the profit economy and tend to assume a form developed within the private economy: State capitalism. These forms, from the ideological point of view (that is, as a spiritual reflection of their economic foundations), are the origins of the cults of personality, the “leader” and authority, and the growth of individualism and egoism.

The formation and growth of the proletarian class naturally brings about forms of organization and expression which accord with the development of that class. This outcome is obviously not produced unless the proletarians have a perfectly-developed *consciousness* of forming a class whose own interests are opposed to those of capitalism. These forms of organization and expression are not created overnight and are not perfectly pure *a priori* constructions; they evolve thanks to the progress of intellectual understanding and the influx of increasingly crucial masses of people. They *will not attain complete maturity* unless the proletarian base exists, hence until after the disappearance of the private economy and the profit economy, which will have been replaced by a *communitarian proletarian economy adapted to need*.

It is easy to understand that there will be an organization unlike capitalist organization when the proletariat will have become a society, a total collective owner of all the means of production (mines, factories, etc.), of everything which had previously been “property”, when everything belongs to everyone in common. But before reaching that point, the proletariat creates and does so all the more effectively the more conscious it is of its forming a class forms of expression, *organs*, which incarnate *class* consciousness, social consciousness, the consciousness of mutual solidarity. When this form of organization becomes a revolutionary process, it is called *council organization*.

This organization develops by way of an uninterrupted struggle against capitalist forms. It disrupts them, smashes them to pieces, it causes them to explode. In this new organization, leaders and masses will relate to one another differently. The current will not flow from above downwards, but *first of all* from below upwards. Then one will be able to witness the living interpenetration of the united whole.

The organization of the councils will be the mortal enemy of all bureaucratism, of all parliamentarism, of all partnerships with capital. It will be totally based on the masses who are conscious of constituting a class.

The organization of the councils will therefore as long as the workers fight for it permit liberation from the capitalist yoke, and particularly from the yoke of the bourgeois ideological sphere. In its future is incarnated the *progressive evolution of the self-consciousness* of the proletariat, the will to transplant the class consciousness of the proletarians into reality and to give it a real expression. The intensity of the fight for this organization of councils allows one to exactly measure to what extent the proletariat conceives of itself as a class and how determined it is to impose its will.

It is equally obvious that the workers councils are not just empty words but are completely the expression of the new proletarian organization. It could happen that, while developing, authentic councils are corrupted and crystallize into a new bureaucracy. It will then be necessary to combat them as vigorously as the capitalist organizations. But the course of development will not halt, and the proletariat will not stop, until it has given the new organization the council system its historically attainable expression in the classless society which lies beyond the “dictatorship of the proletariat”.

The Factory Organization is the preliminary step towards the formation of the specifically proletarian organization, or organization in councils. The outlines of such an organization have already been created on various occasions. But only the *revolution* clearly left its mark upon the Factory Organizations which then could be considered to be the real offspring of the most lucid proletarian class consciousness. They were born because they were the class weapons of the workers combat. The old organizations, especially the trade unions, could not and did not want to play that role.

The Factory Organizations are not, then, artificial. Nor are they the products of confusion. The class consciousness of the proletariat breaks out in them with all its power due to the economic relations and the clear understanding of specific conditions. They are new institutions which grow from the bottom up, expand, shatter all that is old, destroy and uproot it, and convert *social* life and thought into realities.

No one can deny that we are living in an epoch where the capitalist world is on its last legs. Communist production is the only possible way out. Now is the time to find the way by which the revolution can be most rapidly and successfully brought to a conclusion. It is not enough to take political power (the proletarians took political power in 1918) one must *hold on to it*. The most urgent task facing the proletarians—who are still largely imbued with capitalist ideology—is to discover, against the power of capital in Western Europe, against the power of its organization (State, militarism, parliamentarism, management, bureaucracy, schooling, hierarchy), the possible ways to definitively destroy these old forms. But one does not build by satisfying oneself with destruction. That which is content to criticize, to reject, without being able to offer positive proposals, finally finds a place within the bourgeois world. The bourgeois intellectuals also make a harsh critique of their world. But scorn, jokes and derision alone are not enough to allow the growth of proletarian class consciousness. The struggle against centralism and blind obedience, against leaders and trade union *bonzes*, cannot succeed, that is, it will not allow the *proletarian revolution* to move forward, if it is content to fight them to the death and to smash them to pieces; it is necessary that purely proletarian forms should arise (as a prelude to the organization of the councils) and that these new forms should *uproot* the old. The Factory Organization is the expression of this demand.

If the workers desire their definitive liberation as a *class* and not just advantages for a few cliques and social strata, *it is necessary* for them to create forms which are completely the work of their own class rather than the products of a few “leaders”. They must create forms in which autonomous thought and action are not just words, but *realities*. Such forms, having issued from their deepest being, that is, having been born from their proletarian class will, shall stand totally opposed to all forms which are dependent on capitalism, to a greater or lesser degree. While they cannot be absolutely “pure”, because we are living in a period of transition, their *orientation* must be absolute and always *clear*: their corollary must be proletarian *solidarity*, which for this same reason becomes an imperious *necessity*.

The Factory Organizations are above all *organizations of class struggle*.

United in the AAUD (General Workers Union), they comprise *neither a political party nor a trade union*. These two terms are employed in accordance with the meanings they have had up until now, that is, referring to institutions whose nature we can all understand with reference to today’s parties and trade unions.

Within these organizations the proletariat begins to consciously organize itself for the complete demolition of the old society and for its unification as a class. In the Factory Organizations the masses will be united by the consciousness of their class solidarity, of their *proletarian* class solidarity: they constitute the location where the unification of the proletariat is organically prepared (that is, like a natural process, in accordance with the circumstances). The

Factory Organization is the beginning of the communist future and, as the backbone of the factory councils, will become the basis of the future communist society, of the classless society. Classless society means communitarian economy and all-encompassing forms of social expression. It means the total unification of the *economic base*.

At first, everyone will receive as much as possible. Later, according to their needs. Everyone will have to work as much as is necessary for any given situation.

The formation of such Factory Organizations as organizations of class struggle can only take place in the workplace. There, where each is the class brother of the other, all are obliged to be equals, and to have the same rights. There, the masses find themselves within the engine of production; they incessantly struggle to understand and to control it. There, the spiritual battle takes place, the revolutionary transformation of consciousness, in an incessant electric current passing from man to man, and from masses to masses. Everything is oriented towards the supreme class interest rather than the mania of forming organizations. The interest of each trade is reduced to its proportionate share. At a more advanced level of development, the Factory Organization will become an instrument of class struggle in perpetual motion, an institution which is always bubbling with new blood thanks to the permanent possibility of new elections, recall, etc.³

The Unity of the Factory Organizations within the AAUD

The Factory Organizations, in a profusion of living elements, are grouped together in the General Workers Union (AAUD). This association is not an arbitrary amalgam of different groups, each separate from the other and existing independently, but responds to an internal need. As the council idea develops as an expression of the class will of the proletarians, the various Factory Organizations must grow along with the latter. In effect, born in pieces, they only find their culmination in the vast current of the general evolution which leads to the proletarian form of organization. Just as streams end up forming a river, they will necessarily unite. Such an association, in conformance with the council idea, emerging from the rank and file, is wanted and needed by the proletarian class. To fight as an exploited class *unites*, creates and provides a form for the social *bond*, for proletarian solidarity, and for *class solidarity*, which is not expressed in words but in deeds.

As an organization of the whole, as a beginning of the organization of the councils, the AAUD, naturally, is never complete. New Factory Organizations will flow into it, and more than once mud and silt will spread through it, instead of clear water. It is a natural process. It will be obliged to ceaselessly fight for its purity.

Centralism and Federalism

The fight which the AAUD must lead is the class struggle in its purest form. It is already carrying on part of this fight by constituting its own organization in accordance with the proletarian idea of the councils, in opposition to capitalist forms of organization. It strives ceaselessly and in every way within the production process to realize this idea in an ever clearer and purer form. Its very existence alone is already a threat to all the capitalist forces. It provides an exam-

³ This passage is taken from the *Program of the KAPD*.

ple of the progressive development and crystallization of proletarian class consciousness, and therefore compels the whole proletariat to take a stand. The organization's development in this direction will increasingly demote to a secondary level the conflict between what are known as *centralism* and *federalism*. From the AAUD's point of view, the polemic over these two principles, these two forms of organization, will become a dispute of empty words. Obviously, these two terms must be understood according to the meanings they have possessed until now, and not according to a new meaning foisted upon them.

By *centralism* we understand the form which, through the will of a minority, bridles and enslaves the masses. For the AAUD, it is a demon which must be extirpated. It is antisocial.

Federalism is the opponent of centralism, but an opponent operating on the basis of the same economic system. It is the sovereignty, the stubborn obstinacy of the individual (or the workshop, or the region, or the nation) understood on its own terms. It is equally antisocial and must be fought just as vigorously.

These two forms progressively evolved over centuries past. Federalism was victorious in the Middle Ages, while centralism prevailed during the period of advanced capitalism.

Sympathy for federalism is based simply on the fact that, by seeing it as the negation of centralism, one assumes that it will bring freedom and paradise. This desire for federalism leads to a caricature of *autonomy* (the right to self-determination). So it is thought that when one attributes autonomy in all domains to each region, to each place (one might also say, to each person), one is acting in a social and a proletarian way. In fact, this accomplishes nothing except to abolish the empire so as to replace it with a number of small principalities. Petty kinglets (local bosses) arise everywhere who themselves assume rule over a fraction of the membership in a centralized manner, as if it was their own private property: from this, fragmentation and general collapse ensues.

Centralism and federalism are both *bourgeois* forms of expression. Centralism is more typically big bourgeois, while federalism is more petit-bourgeois. Both are anti-proletarian and stand in the way of the purification of the class struggle. The proletariat knows that it cannot defeat capital unless it closes ranks. The more the consolidation of the council system advances, the greater will be the gains registered by the proletariat's unity in both intensity and scope. Within this unity, with its control from below, with its unleashing of all proletarian forces and potentials, with its strong bonds connecting the leaders to the masses, all conflict will then be absorbed, the development of class consciousness and the development of absolute social affinity will become realities. First spiritually, and then later in the communitarian economy.

It will be easily understood that all of this is yet in the process of becoming and that the road which the AAUD must follow before reaching its goal is still a long one, and that many errors will yet be committed (in particular, the meddling interference of certain groups or individuals--which is quite understandable as a result of the disorder caused by the confusion of secondary tasks); this will provide the "centralists" and the "federalists", who are for the most part good fighters, although with confused ideas, with the continually renewed occasion for protesting against dictatorship or to demand more dictatorship. But this must not prevent us from following the correct road; which is to say that the proletariat, as an *international* class, seeks and finds, by building the council system, its increasingly more compact unity, a unity which it realizes in order to definitively vanquish capitalism and the spirit of capitalism, a unity which will later issue into its conclusion as the classless society.

The very structure of the AAUD, as clearly manifested in the organization's statutes, itself engenders between *masses and leaders* relations unlike those prevailing in organizations of the capitalist type. If, in the latter, the proletarians are the playthings of all variety of politicians, in the AAUD they will increasingly become the masters of their own fates, of the fate of their class. The theory according to which the real emancipation of the laboring class can only be accomplished by the workers themselves becomes a material force.

The concept of "masses" acquires a different meaning than it has in the capitalist system. In the minds of the supporters of the private economy, the word "masses" is always synonymous with corpse, with an object which is manipulated at will. It is considered as the "property" of certain men, offices and cliques. *In proletarian thought, on the other hand, the masses do not constitute an incoherent collection of confused egos, but instead denotes the proletariat to the extent that its class consciousness allows it to indissolubly unite social thought and will.*

Such masses can only arise through their own increasing activity and ceaseless organizational efforts, first in the fight against capital, building their own organization; then, in their constant collaboration in the production process.

What we have just said expresses the current understanding of the word "leader" from the proletarian point of view. This leader must be intimately connected to the class-conscious masses. He will represent and organize the life and thought of the masses, who will in turn transmit their own enthusiasm to him. He must not fight like a businessman does, for his property, for his people, for his nation, but as an integral part of the vast proletarian masses who feel, who think, and who desire, and who exist throughout the entire world. He must not fight while saying, "I want to transform the proletarian movement into *my* movement, the revolution is *my* affair, it is me whom you must follow"; all of these sentiments correspond to private capitalism, they comprise part of bourgeois ideology.

As long as it has to fight, the AAUD will therefore not reject leaders *a priori*, which would be equivalent to rejecting all intelligence, all ability, all resolute will. If it did so it would no longer be a socialist organization but a military and bourgeois prison in which, fatally leveled, the human being would be mistaken for the product of a machine. It would also be utopian, since the struggle has just begun. This position, however, will burden the proletarian leaders with the greatest responsibility. The only requirement of the organization and the system will be that all its officers are subjected to the strictest *control*. The council organization is to be understood in this *sense*. It carries out a merciless battle against one-man dictatorship, against ruling cliques and organized power centers which have separated from the needs and living conditions of the proletarian masses and which use the methods of capitalist social climbers. It most violently takes its stand against the *intellectuals*, that is, against those persons who use their higher education to transform the proletariat into a plaything of their own conceptions and interests.

The AAUD is the inveterate enemy of the capitalist bourgeoisie from both the internal and external points of view. It thus naturally finds itself on the terrain of the "*dictatorship of the proletariat*". Its subsequent goal will be to fight for the realization of this dictatorship. Such a dictatorship means that *in the struggle for the communist and classless society there is no compromise of any kind between exploiters and exploited, between capital and labor. To attain this goal, it is absolutely necessary for the proletariat to have all decision-making power over all of society's political and economic institutions, via the council organization.*

The dictatorship will last until the old powers have disappeared. The AAUD stigmatizes as much as it can the imposture of bourgeois democracy, which takes for granted an *a priori* economic inequality.

It would be a waste of time to dilate upon the nature of that kind of democracy (of the ballot-box) to proletarians who have had to endure its indelible effects since August 1914. Every democracy of that kind is a dictatorship of the owners. At a time when all of the preconditions for the proletarian seizure of power are present, that is, when capitalism's survival is no longer possible except by way of an unprecedented increase of exploitation, leading to the deaths of millions upon millions of proletarians, the exploited, in ever-increasing numbers, are carrying out a *revolutionary* struggle against "democracy" and will not rest until capital lies prostrate at their feet. One cannot expect a voluntary abdication, except perhaps one which is only for appearance's sake (as in Hungary, for example). Once the proletariat becomes the ruling class and while communism is being built, it will have to use every means to demolish every counterrevolutionary movement; it will have to use *violence*. Otherwise, it would commit suicide. The dictatorship of the proletariat is irreconcilable with the freedom of the bourgeoisie. To deny this would be either the result of a lack of understanding, the chatter of priests, utopia, or a direct or indirect defense of the counterrevolution.

But the AAUD's clear profession of faith in favor of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" consists equally of the fundamental rejection of any kind of collaboration with capital. It is the profession of faith in favor of the proletarian struggle relying on its own methods.

The politics, or, to put it another way, the struggle of such an organization, has an *a priori* proletarian class character. This means above all rejecting any form of parliamentarism regardless of its type. It should also be said, expressed negatively, that all parliamentarism leads to the sabotage of the proletarian revolution as soon as such Factory Organizations come into existence.

Furthermore, *the AAUD's battle is entirely international*. The proletariat, as a *class*, acts resolutely only as a result of its international, unified character. The internationalist point of view stands in the forefront. The AAUD's goal is *the international communitarian economy* and, finally, *humanity as a classless society*. The form taken by its struggle is naturally linked to a certain extent to the conditions in each country. It will, from the very start, incessantly strive to create links between and to unite the revolutionary councils of the various countries.

Guidelines of the AAU-E¹

(June 1921)

Introduction

Unionism was the result and the agent of a revolutionary dynamic which was unstable and precarious in 1919, and faltering in 1920. When the only possible kind of activity was reformist, the (obviously antagonistic) coexistence of capital and labor, and therefore also the trade union organization with its separation of trades and factories, of employed and unemployed, made a comeback. No longer the instrument of a struggle which had since come to an end, the AAU was reduced to the status of an appendage of the KAPD, which for its part soon broke up into groupuscules.

After Rühle's exclusion (October 1920), the East Saxony district of the KAPD dissolved into the AAUD. Some time later, the Hamburg district of the AAUD excluded those of its members who wanted to remain in the KAPD. All over Germany, a part of the leftist ranks passed over to the "unitary" organization. The proponents of the latter were particularly enraged by the KAPD's party politics during the March Action. On October 21, 1921, the movement held its first autonomous conference and assumed the name AAU-*Einheitsorganisation* ("AAU-Unitary Organization"). It was able to present itself as the authentic continuation of the AAUD since the latter had proposed the unitary organization as one of its goals. It had 13 economic districts and more than 50,000 members, uniting the bulk of those militants who had abandoned the party. The crisis within the KAPD and the unions under its influence played a part in swelling the AAU-E's membership to 60,000 in 1922, versus the AAUD's 12,000.

Despite its proletarian base, the AAU-E, rich in tendencies and conflicts, did not enroll workers alone. Intellectuals and artists enthusiastically participated in its activities, and *Die Aktion* was, in fact, its most important journal. Rühle left the AAU-E in 1925, judging that the weight of reaction was too powerful for militant activity to have any meaning. Although Pannekoek was not an active member of any group after 1920, the AAU-E could legitimately lay claim to embodying his positions to a significant extent.

The KAUD (the Communist Workers Union of Germany) would be founded upon the principle of the unitary organization in 1931, regrouping the vestiges of the German communist left.

¹ These theses comprised one of two projects proposed by the opposition within the AAUD. They were presented by the East Saxony and Hamburg districts at the Fourth Conference of the AAUD (June 1920), were adopted as definitive "guidelines" by the first autonomous conference of the opposition in October, and were published in *Die Aktion* No. 41/21, 1921.

Guidelines of the AAU-E

1. The AAUD is the unitary political and economic organization of the revolutionary proletariat.

2. The AAUD fights for communism, for the socialization of the production of raw materials, the means of production, and the forces of production, as well as of the consumption goods which are the products of those forces. The AAUD wants to establish production and distribution according to a plan, which would do away with the current capitalist mode of production and distribution.

3. The final goal of the AAUD is a society where all power will be abolished, and the road to this society passes by way of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is the exclusive determination of the political and economic organization of communist society by the will of the workers, thanks to the council organization.

4. The most urgent tasks of the AAUD are: a) the destruction of the trade unions and the political parties, the principle obstacles standing in the way of the unification of the proletarian class and the further progress of the social revolution, which can be the affair of neither the party nor the trade unions; b) achieving the unity of the revolutionary proletariat in the factories, the cells of production and the foundations of the society of the future. The form assumed by this unity is the Factory Organization; c) the development of the self-consciousness and the solidarity of the workers; d) the preparation of all measures which will be needed for the work of political and economic construction.

5. The AAUD rejects all reformist and opportunist methods of struggle, and is opposed to any participation in parliamentarism and the local enterprise councils; such participation would be tantamount to sabotage of the council idea.

6. The AAUD fundamentally rejects all professional leaders. Its only relation with official leadership will take an advisory form.

7. All positions in the AAUD are unpaid.

8. The AAUD does not consider the proletariat's struggle for freedom to be a national, but an international affair. For this reason the AAUD strives for the unity of the entire world proletariat in a council International.

Lenin's *Infantile Disorder...* and the Third International

(August 7, 1920)

Franz Pfempfert

Introduction

In April 1920, when Lenin was putting the finishing touches to his *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, he was as yet unaware of the founding of the KAPD, which would reinforce his determination to liquidate a political tendency which seemed to him to be a denial of reality. In order not to lose touch with the masses, one must go wherever they are to be found. This is the axis around which all of the arguments in Lenin's book revolve, making the book a theory of manipulation: we shall take advantage of the discord in the enemy's ranks, we shall unmask the leaders of the Labour Party before the eyes of their membership by making proposals which they cannot fulfill, we shall use the space provided to us by bourgeois democracy against that democracy...

The KAPD, through the pen of Gorter, who published his *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin* in July, still attempted to open up a dialogue. Gorter stressed the point that, unlike the situation in Russia, in the countries of the old bourgeoisie with deeply-rooted democratic traditions, no method could transform the parliaments into weapons, and one did not need to unmask a social democracy and a handful of trade unions which, rather than carrying out "betrayals", fulfilled a precise function.

The *Open Letter* was an attempt to prove to the Bolsheviks that they were mistaken in their efforts to get the communists to imitate them everywhere. Gorter argued as if the KAPD had a clearer awareness of the real interests of the International and the Russian State than Lenin, Trotsky or Zinoviev. Until the middle and even until the end of 1920, the German Left Communists did not consider themselves to actually constitute an opposition to the Bolsheviks; to the contrary, it was the Spartacist leadership which seemed to them to be unfaithful to the principles they felt they held in common with the Bolsheviks. Pfempfert argues from a noticeably different position since, like Rühle, he rejects any positive role for a party. He does, however, just like Gorter but even more explicitly, argue as if a revolutionary situation was in the process of maturing and as if all that was needed was an adequate slogan to be launched by a resolute minority at the right place: the factory, "the reproductive cell of the new society".

Political stabilization, which was being ever more distinctly established after 1920, deprived the "self-initiative" advocated by Gorter and Pfempfert of its practical scope. To cite just one example, contrary to the hopes of the supporters of an electoral boycott, abstention was of little

account. In this confused and turbulent period, the masses were far from demonstrating their loathing for the ballot box, especially on the occasion of the elections to the Constituent Assembly which would decide upon the political regime to succeed the Empire (January 26, 1919). They voted in droves: two-and-a-half times more voters than in 1912, two-thirds of them entering the voting booth for the first time.

Gorter's *Open Letter to Comrade Lenin* was left without any public refutation. It would be ten years before its first French edition saw the light of day, published by the Groups of Communist Workers (among whose members was André Prudhommeaux), and thirty-nine more years before the second French edition was published.

Lenin's *Infantile Disorder...* and the Third International

I

The Third International should be the association of the revolutionary proletariat of all countries in the fight against the dictatorship of capitalism, against the bourgeois State, for the power of toiling humanity, for communism. Having originated in a country where the workers have already, by great efforts, conquered this power, has helped the Third International to win the sympathies of the world proletariat. Enthusiasm for this new worldwide association of the exploited goes hand-in-hand with enthusiasm for Soviet Russia and for the incomparable heroic combat of the Russian proletariat. But the new structure of the Third International has as of yet had neither the time nor the opportunity to achieve moral results as an organization.

The Third International can and will be a moral force if it represents the expression of the will of the world's revolutionary proletariat, and then it will be indestructible and irreplaceable as the International of the fighting proletarian class. But the Third International would be an impossibility and a vacuous phrase should it want to be the propaganda instrument of one or more parties.

If the Third International were really the association of the world's revolutionary proletariat, the latter would then have the feeling of belonging to it, regardless of formal membership. But if the Third International presents itself as the instrument of the central power of a particular country, then it will bear within itself the seed of death and *it will be an obstacle to the world revolution*.

The revolution is an affair of the proletariat as a *class*; the social revolution is not a *party* matter.

We must be yet more precise:

Soviet Russia will perish without the help of *all* revolutionary combatants. All the workers who are really class-conscious (and the syndicalists, for example, are also unconditionally part of this category!) are ready to actively come to its aid. The Third International would act in a criminal and counterrevolutionary manner if, in the interests of a party, it were to do anything

which could douse the sacred fire of fraternal solidarity which smolders in the hearts of all proletarians for Soviet Russia (and not yet for the Third International as a separate organization!).

Is this so hard to understand? Is it folly, comrade Lenin, for us to shout at you: it is not we who need the Third International at this time, but the Third International which needs *us*?

II

Lenin thinks that is indeed folly. In his work, *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, which he has just launched against the revolutionary proletariat, Lenin thinks that the Third International must abide by the statutes of the Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik) and that the revolutionary proletariat of all countries must submit to the authority of the "Third International" and, therefore, to the tactics of the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks should determine what arms the fighting proletariat of the rest of the world should use. And only those proletarians who unconditionally obey will be chosen to belong to this world association. In the Principles of the Second Congress of the Third International, Lenin has formulated this postulate in a yet clearer way: not only has he given general instructions, but all of the details of *tactics*, of *organization*, and he has even prescribed the *name* which should be assumed by the parties in all countries. And the finishing touch:

"All the decisions of the congresses of the Communist International, as well as of its Executive Committee, are binding on all parties affiliated with the Communist International."

Even if this is methodical, it is still madness!

In a country as small as Germany, we have repeated experience, most recently in March of 1920, of the fact that a tactic which leads to victory, for example, in the Ruhr, was impossible elsewhere; that the general strike of the industrial workers in central Germany was a joke for the Vogtland, where the proletariat has been condemned to unemployment since November 1918. And should Moscow be the supreme general staff for us and for all the other countries?

What draws us towards the Third International is the shared goal of the world revolution: the dictatorship of the proletariat, communism. The Third International must stand alongside the fighting proletarians of all countries, instructing them concerning the various situations and types of revolutionary civil war. The combatants would be asses instead of combatants were they to want to have nothing to do with the task of examining the weapons used by the comrades fighting here and elsewhere. But they would be sheep were they to fail to stop dragging themselves down roads which they had long since recognized to be impractical for them and which they consequently abandoned.

Lenin's attack against us is, in its tendency and in its details, simply monstrous. His text is superficial. It does not conform to the facts. It is unjust. Only in its phraseology does it display any hardness. Of the rigor of the thinker Lenin, which was ordinarily manifested in his polemics most of all, not a trace is to be found.

What does Lenin want? He wants to tell the Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD) and the revolutionary proletariat of all the other countries, that they are imbeciles, idiots, and, worse yet, that they are not docilely knuckling under to the wisdom of the *bonzes*, since they are not allowing themselves to be led in an extremely centralized way by Moscow (through its intermediaries, Radek and Levi). When Germany's revolutionary vanguard rejected participation in bourgeois parliaments, when this vanguard began to demolish the reactionary trade union institutions, when it turned its back on the political parties of leaders, in accordance with the watchword, *the emancipation of the workers can only be the task of the workers themselves*,

then this vanguard was composed of imbeciles, then it committed “leftist infantilisms”, then it necessarily had to be denied the right to join the Third International (this was the result of Lenin’s pamphlet)! Only when the workers of the KAPD return, like repentant sinners, to the Spartacus League, the sole bringer of salvation, will they be allowed to join the Third International. So, this is how it stands: Back to parliamentarism! Enter Legien’s trade unions! Join the KPD, that party of leaders in its death throes! This is what Lenin is shouting at the conscious German proletariat!

As I said above: a monstrous book! I must also call attention to the futility of the arguments which Lenin dusts off from the 1880s to persuade the German leftists that he knows how to employ quotation marks against them.¹ All his explanations concerning centralism and parliamentarism are on the level of the USPD. And what Lenin writes in favor of working in the trade unions is so amazingly opportunist that the trade union *bonzes* have set themselves no more urgent task than to reproduce and distribute this section of Lenin’s work as a leaflet!

The polemic which Lenin directs at the KAPD is scandalously superficial and inexcusably inept. In one passage, for example, he says:

“In the first place, contrary to the opinion of such outstanding political leaders as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the German ‘Leftists’, as we know, considered parliamentarism to be ‘politically obsolete’ even in January 1919. It is clear that the ‘Leftists’ were mistaken. This fact alone utterly destroys, at a single stroke, the proposition that parliamentarism is ‘politically obsolete’.”

This is what the logician Lenin writes! In what way, please tell me, is it “clear” that we were mistaken? Perhaps in the fact that, in the national Constituent Assembly, Levi and Zetkin did not sit next to Crispien’s people?² Perhaps in the fact that this communist duo is now seated in the Reichstag? How can Lenin, so thoughtlessly and without offering even the shadow of proof, write that our “error” is clear and then add the assertion that “this alone destroys the proposition,” etc.? Monstrous! Also monstrous is the way Lenin responds in the affirmative to the question, “Must we participate in bourgeois parliaments?”:

“Criticism – the keenest, most ruthless and uncompromising criticism – must be directed, not against parliamentarism or parliamentary activities, but against those leaders who are unable and still more against those who are *unwilling* to utilize parliamentary elections and the parliamentary tribune in a revolutionary, communist manner.”

It is Lenin who writes this! Lenin suddenly wants “to utilize democracy”, a method with which he had settled accounts by referring to it as “the demand of renegades” (in *The State and Revolution*, in *The Renegade Kautsky...*, and in *Bourgeois Democracy and Proletarian Dictatorship*)!

The revolutionary proletariat of Germany has distanced itself from the “venal and corrupt parliamentarism of bourgeois society”, that “system of illusion and deceit”. This proletariat has fully acknowledged the battle cry: “All power to the councils!” It has come to understand that it cannot “utilize” the bourgeois parliament. It has recognized the trade unions as institutions which necessarily lead to a *community of labor* between exploiters and exploited, and for that

¹ He is undoubtedly speaking of the antiparliamentary opposition in the SPD, especially in Berlin, which, however, did not become organized until 1889-1892 around the group called “The Youth”. Analogous tendencies arose during the same era in Denmark, Switzerland, England (William Morris) and Holland (D. Nieuwenhuis). It was also at that time that the “Marxism”/“Anarchism” split was consummated.

² Clara Zetkin (1857-1933), member of the SPD Left, later a Spartacist, supported Levi.

Crispien (1875-1946), left the SPD to join the USPD right wing. Attended the Second Congress of the Communist International, but was opposed to joining it and later returned to the SPD.

reason alone sabotage the class struggle, and it is of little import whether their members should criticize this or that. The revolutionary proletariat of Germany has had to atone for its submission to leaders with hecatombs of workers corpses. The infamous Central Committee of the Spartacus League has destroyed that illusion. The proletariat has *definitely* had enough of all that!

And now Lenin comes along and tries to make us forget the bitter lessons of the German revolution as well as the lessons he has himself taught? Is he trying to make us forget that Marx taught that it is not individuals who are responsible? And that it is *parliamentarism* which must be fought and *not the individual parliamentarians!*

Several months have passed since “communists” first took their seats in the Reichstag. Read the minutes of the parliamentary sessions, now that Levi-Zetkin “have utilized” this tribune “in a revolutionary, communist manner” (actually, no more than meaningless journalistic verbiage)! You have read the minutes, comrade Lenin. Where is your “keenest, most ruthless and uncompromising criticism”? Are you satisfied with them?...

It is easy to prove: the KAPD has most effectively utilized the “electoral struggle” in the sense of carrying out revolutionary agitation, and it has been able to utilize it more effectively than the parliamentary communists precisely because it has no “candidates” running after electoral victory. The KAPD has unmasked the parliamentary scam and has brought the ideas of the councils to the remotest villages. But the vote-hunters have confirmed, during the few months of their activity in parliament, that we were right to be anti-parliamentary. Comrade Lenin, has the idea never occurred to you, a Leninist idea, that in a country with 40 years of social democracy’s parliamentary foolishness behind it (that party also wanted, in the beginning, to “utilize” that tribune solely for propaganda!), it is a totally reactionary act to enter parliament? Do you not understand that in a country characterized by parliamentary cretinism, parliamentarism *can only be stigmatized by means of the boycott?* There is no stigmatization more violent, none which penetrates more deeply into the consciousness of the workers! A parliament unmasked by a boycott carried out by proletarians would never be able to deceive and trick the proletarians. But a correct “programmatic” speech, which Clara Zetkin delivers with the approval of the bourgeois and social democratic newspapers, and from which the press takes what seems suitable, such a speech engenders respect in the bourgeois parliament! Had the bosses of the USPD not gone to the Constituent Assembly, the consciousness of the German proletarians would be much more developed today.

III

Lenin favors “the strictest centralization” and “iron discipline”. He wants the Third International to endorse his views and to eject all those who, like the KAPD, are critically opposed to omnipotent leadership.

Lenin wants military-style authority to prevail in the parties of every country.

The instructions of the First Congress of the Third International had a somewhat different flavor! In those instructions, directed against the Independents whose fighting spirit was uncertain, it recommended:

“... separate the revolutionary elements from the ‘Center’, something which can only be achieved by means of resolute and merciless criticism of the ‘Center’s’ leaders.”

They also said:

“It is in addition necessary to form an alliance with those elements of the revolutionary workers movement who, although not previously members of the socialist party, now stand completely on the terrain of the proletarian dictatorship in its soviet form, that is, first of all with the syndicalist elements of the workers movement.”

But now a different tactic prevails. Instead, the slogan is: Down with the syndicalists! Down with the “idiots” who do not submit to the *bonzes*! The Executive Committee is in command, and its orders are the law.

Lenin thought he could quote Karl Liebknecht against the “Leftists”. I shall quote Karl Liebknecht *against Lenin*:

“The vicious circle in which the big centralized organizations operate, provided with functionaries who collect their salaries and who are quite well-paid considering their social background, consists not only in the fact that these organizations are creating, in this professional bureaucracy, a social layer directly hostile to the revolutionary interests of the proletariat, but also in the fact that they confer power upon a leader, who easily becomes a tyrant and is chosen from among those who have a violent interest in opposing the revolutionary politics of the proletariat, while the independence, the will, the initiative and the moral and intellectual autonomous action of the masses are repressed or completely eliminated. The paid parliamentarians also belong to this bureaucracy.”

“There is but one remedy, on the organizational plane, for this evil: suppression of the paid bureaucracy or else its exclusion from all decision-making, and the limitation of its activity to technical administrative work. Prohibition of the re-election of all functionaries after a certain term of office, which shall be established in accordance with the availability of proletarians who have in the meantime become experts in technical administration; the possibility of revoking their mandates at any time; limitation of the purview of the various offices; decentralization; the consultation of all members in regard to important questions (veto or referendum). In the election of functionaries the greatest importance should attach to the proofs they offer concerning their determination and readiness in revolutionary action, of their revolutionary fighting spirit, of their spirit of boundless sacrifice in the active commitment of their existence. The education of the masses and of each individual in intellectual and moral autonomy, in their capacity to question authority, in their own resolute self-initiative, in the unrestrained readiness and capacity for action, in general constitute the only basis to guarantee the development of a workers movement equal to its historical tasks, and also comprise the essential conditions for extirpating the dangers of bureaucracy.”

“Every form of organization which obstructs the education in an international revolutionary spirit, the autonomous capacity for action and the initiative of the revolutionary masses must be rejected... No obstacle to free initiative. The educational task most urgently needed in Germany, a country of blind, passive, mass obedience, is to favor this initiative among the masses; and this problem must be resolved even at the risk of being exposed to the danger that, momentarily, all ‘discipline’ and all the ‘solid organizations’ might all go down the drain (!). The individual must be given a margin of freedom much larger than he has been attributed with until the present by tradition in Germany. No importance at all must be conceded to the profession of faith in words. All the dispersed radical elements will fuse into a determined whole in accordance with the immanent laws of internationalism if intransigence is practiced towards all opportunists and tolerance is practiced towards all the efforts made on behalf of a revolutionary fighting spirit in the process of fermentation.”

IV

I know that Lenin has not become a “renegade” or a social democrat, although *Left-Wing Communism...* has a purely social democratic effect (the German leaders were saying almost exactly the same things in 1878). How, then, can the publication of this text against the world revolution be explained?

The monarchists have the custom, in order to excuse the stupidities (or the crimes) of their monarchs, of always alleging that their majesties were “misinformed”. Revolutionaries *cannot* (they do not have the right to) make such an excuse. We are well aware, of course, that Karl Radek and the Spartacus League, in order to divert Lenin’s attention from the causes of their political failure, have *purposefully* told him lies about the situation and the revolutionary proletariat in Germany. The insolent letter directed by Karl Radek at the members of the KAPD shows just how things have been presented to comrade Lenin. But this by no means excuses Lenin! In any event, such exculpation is useless: the fact remains that Lenin, with his stupid pamphlet, has complicated the struggle of the revolutionary proletariat in Germany, although he has not abolished that struggle.

It is true that Lenin has been shamelessly lied to about the affairs of the Spartacus League and the KAPD, but he should have nonetheless said that it is a serious error to identify the German situation with the Russian situation. Lenin was perfectly capable, despite Radek, of seeing the difference between the German trade unions, which have *always* led a counterrevolutionary existence, and the Russian trade unions. Lenin knew perfectly well that the Russian revolutionaries did not have to fight against parliamentary cretinism because parliament had neither a tradition nor any credit among the Russian proletariat. Lenin knew (or should have known) that in Germany the leaders of the party and the trade unions *necessarily brought on* the 4th of August 1914 by “utilizing” parliament! That the authoritarian and militaristic character of the party, accompanied by blind obedience, has stifled the revolutionary forces in the German workers movement for decades. Lenin should have considered all of these things before undertaking his battle against the “Leftists”. Had he done so, a sense of responsibility would have prevented Lenin from writing this unforgivable pamphlet.

V

To convince the world proletariat that *Left-Wing Communism...* indicates the right road to the revolution for *every* country, Lenin presents the road which the Bolsheviks followed and which led to their victory, because it was (and is) the *right* road.

Here as well, Lenin finds himself in a completely untenable position. When he cites the victory of the Bolsheviks as proof that his party had worked “correctly” during the fifteen years of its existence, he is hallucinating! *The victory of the Bolsheviks in November 1917 was not due solely to the revolutionary strength of the party! The Bolsheviks took power and achieved victory thanks to the bourgeois-pacifist slogan of “Peace”!* Only this slogan defeated the national-Mensheviks, and allowed the Bolsheviks to win over the army to their side!

Thus, it is not their victory in and of itself which can convince us that the Bolsheviks worked “correctly” in the sense of maintaining the firmness of their principles. It is instead the fact that they know how to defend this victory now, after almost three years!

But and this is a question posed by the “Leftists” have the Bolsheviks always run their party dictatorship in the way that Lenin demands, in *Left-Wing Communism...*, that the revolutionary proletariat of Germany should run their party? Or has the situation of the Bolsheviks been such that they did not need to abide by Lenin’s “condition”, who demands that the revolutionary party “be able to *mix with*, to *fraternize with* and, if it so desires, to a certain extent to *unite with* the *broadest masses* of the workers, primarily with the proletarian masses, but *also* with the *non-proletarian masses*” (*Left-Wing Communism...*).

Until now, the Bolsheviks have been capable of putting into practice, and have only succeeded in putting into practice, one thing: the strict military discipline of the party, the “iron” dictatorship of party centralism. Have they been able to “mix with, fraternize with, and, if [they] so [desire], to a certain extent to unite with” the “broadest masses” of which Lenin speaks?

VI

The tactics employed by the Russian comrades are their business. We protested, and had to treat Mr. Kautsky as a counterrevolutionary, when he allowed himself to slander the tactics of the Bolsheviks. We must defer to the Russian comrades in the matter of their choice of weapons. But we do know one thing: *in Germany, a party dictatorship is impossible*; in Germany, only a *class* dictatorship, the dictatorship of the revolutionary workers councils, *is capable* of victory (and it will be victorious!), and (what is most important) will be able to *defend* its victory.

I could now write, following Lenin’s recipe in *Left-Wing Communism...*, that this “is clear”, and then change the subject. But we do not need to evade the question.

The German proletariat is organized in different political parties which are parties of leaders with distinctly authoritarian characteristics. The reactionary trade unions, controlled by the trade union bureaucracy due to the strictly centralized nature of their structures, are in favor of “democracy” and the recovery of the capitalist world, without which they could not exist. A *party* dictatorship in this Germany means: workers against workers (the Noske³ era began with the party dictatorship of the SPD!). A KPD-Spartacus League party dictatorship (and Lenin proposes no other kind!) would have to be imposed *against* the *workers* of the USPD, the *workers* of the SPD, the trade unions, the syndicalists, and the Factory Organizations, as well as against the bourgeoisie. Karl Liebknecht *never* aspired to such a *party* dictatorship with the Spartacus League, as the whole corpus of his revolutionary work demonstrates (and as is shown in the passages I quoted above).

It is incontestable that all the workers (including the workers at the beck and call of Legien and Scheidemann!⁴) must be supporters of the new communist order, providing their internal divisions do not render the repression of the bourgeoisie impossible. Are we to await the last judgment, when all the proletarians, or even only a few million of them, are members of the KPD (which is today composed of no more than a handful of employees and a small number of people of good faith)? Perhaps the Third International will be the inducement that will oblige

³ Noske (1868-1946), SPD Minister of War in December 1918, organized collaboration between the socialists and the Freikorps. Architect and symbol of the ensuing bloody repression.

⁴ Legien (1865-1939), government socialist, Minister in November 1918, Chancellor of the Republic in 1919, one of the architects, together with Noske and Ebert, of the anti-Spartacist repression.

the revolutionary workers to enter the KPD (as Karl Radek and Mr. Levi have imagined)? Can the egoism of its leaders remain ignorant of the fact that, at this very moment, the *majority* of the industrial workers and the rural proletariat is *mature* and ready to be won over to a *class* dictatorship?

We need a slogan for summoning the German proletariat to *unite*. We possess it: “All power to the workers councils!”. We need a place for recruitment where all the class-conscious workers can meet without the interference of party *bonzes*. We have such a place: *it is the workplace*. The workplace, the reproductive cell of the new community, is also the base for recruitment. For the victorious realization of the proletarian revolution in Germany, we do not need *bonzes*, but conscious proletarians. Those who currently call themselves syndicalists or independents, share with us the goal of destroying the capitalist State and realizing the communist human community and therefore they are part of us, and we shall “mix with, fraternize with and unite with” them in the revolutionary Factory Organizations!

The Communist Workers Party is not, therefore, a party in the bad sense of the word, because it is not an end in itself! It makes propaganda for the dictatorship in its sense of the word, because this dictatorship *is not an end in itself!* It makes propaganda for the dictatorship of the proletariat, for communism. It trains its combatants in the Factory Organizations, where all the forces that will abolish capitalism, establish the power of the councils and permit the construction of the new communist economy are concentrated. The Factory Organizations are brought together in the *Union*. The Factory Organizations will know how to guarantee the rule of the proletariat as a *class* against all the manipulations of the party bosses, against all traitors. *Only the power of the class* provides a broad and firm foundation (as capitalism proves!).

The Communist Workers Party of Germany has had to endure Lenin’s *Left-Wing Communism...*, Radek’s maledictions, and the calumnies of the Spartacus League and all the parties of leaders, because it is fighting for the class rule of the proletariat, because it shares Karl Liebknecht’s views concerning centralism. The KAPD will quite well survive *Left-Wing Communism...* and everything else. And, whether or not Karl Radek understands this, and whether or not Lenin writes a pamphlet against us (and against himself): the proletarian revolution in Germany will take different paths than in Russia. When Lenin treats us as “imbeciles” it is not us but he himself who is the target, since in this matter it is we who are the *Leninists*. We know this for a fact: even if national or international congresses prescribe the most detailed itineraries for the world revolution, it will nevertheless follow the course imposed by history! Even if the Second Congress of the Third International pronounces a judgment condemning the KAPD in favor of a party of leaders, the revolutionary communists of Germany will know how to easily deal with this and will not whine about it like the *bonzes* of the USPD. We are part of the Third International, because the Third International is not Moscow, it is not Lenin, it is not Radek, it is the world proletariat fighting for its liberation!

(*Die Aktion*)

Leading Principles of the KAI (The Communist Workers International)

(Extracts)

(1922)

Introduction

When Rühle envisaged a Fourth International in *Moscow and Us* (September 1920), the political current of “council communism” had several hundred thousand adherents in Germany, a figure which would decline to 20,000 in 1923, and then would be reduced to a few hundred when Hitler took power.

The construction of a Communist Workers International (KAI, its German acronym) is explicitly referred to in the declaration of the KAPD central committee (July 1921) which officially acknowledged the party’s break with Moscow, or (in the eyes of those who disapproved of this decision) which made the break irremediable. Gorter was one of its most fervent advocates. But the KAPD Congress of September 1921 proved to be much less enthusiastic. This issue would be one of the causes of the schism of the KAPD, and the parallel split within the AAUD, into two factions.¹

Basically, the so-called “Berlin” tendency prioritized the reconsolidation of a party which had been in free-fall since the spring of 1921. In the disturbances of 1923, its calls for an insurrection fell on deaf ears despite the increasing impoverishment of the working class as a result of an astronomical rate of inflation, within a context of social (and national) violence of every description. The AAUD-Berlin did, however, lead an important strike among the North Sea fishermen, but did so upon the basis of “industrial unionism” (that is, on the basis of a whole economic sector), and no longer on the basis of the unitary association of the workers of an entire region regardless of trade. The time of “unionism” had passed, and the time of struggles carried out according to job categories had returned, even if the combativity and solidarity evinced in the new struggles were still powerful.

The so-called Essen Tendency immediately made the formation of the KAI its principal activity. Its supporters thought it was vain and even dangerous to try to radicalize reformist struggles against a capitalism in its “death crisis”, which would lead to imprisoning the workers on an exclusively reform-oriented terrain. For this reason it no longer assigned the AAUD, or at least that part of the AAUD which remained under its influence, any other role than spreading revolutionary propaganda, the effects of which were to prove to be insignificant. Opposed to purely

¹ We shall not pursue the further history of the communist left after 1921. See *The Dutch Left*, chapter V, and our *The Communist Left in Germany, 1918-1921*, Appendix I.

wage-oriented struggles, the Essen Tendency would provoke the appearance of various anti-leadership, anti-organization, anti-intellectualist and sometimes even anti-intellectual theories.

The KAI would hold several conferences, and one of their few consistent attendees would be the Bulgarian left communists. After 1924 it would exist only as an idea episodically propagandized by a small office staff.

What sense was there in creating an International when it had already been pointed out, by Gorter in 1923, for example, and not without some basis in reality, that “the world proletariat as a whole has until now proved to be hostile to communism”?

This absurdity has a logic of its own, based upon the expectation that, as capitalist attacks against the proletarians increased (and this view would persist after 1919, during the 1920s, after 1933, etc.), the proletarians would be increasingly driven to rise against capitalism. It was therefore thought necessary to construct the organization which, though minuscule today, would not fail to grow tomorrow...

The historical conditions did not permit the KAPD to be anything but a detachment of “shock troops”, in Franz Jung’s formulation. And its attempts to compensate for this weakness by intervening in the international arena were to be in vain.

The Leading Principles of the KAI

(Extracts)

(1922)

The Third International¹

1. The Third International is a Russian creation, a creation of the Russian Communist Party. It was created as a support for the Russian revolution, that is, for a revolution which was partly proletarian, partly bourgeois.

2. Due to the dual nature of the Russian revolution, insofar as the Third International had to come to the aid of both the Russian proletarian revolution as well as the Russian bourgeois revolution, and thus as a result of the dual nature of its purpose as well, the Third International was transformed into an organization which was partly proletarian and partly capitalist.

3. Insofar as it called for revolution and the expropriation of the capitalists, it was a proletarian organization oriented towards the suppression of capitalism; insofar as it preserved parliamentarism, the trade unions, and the dictatorship of the party and of its leaders, it was a bourgeois organization, created to conserve and to reconstruct capitalism: parliamentarism, the trade unions, and the dictatorship of the party or its leaders do not lead to communism, but to the preservation of capitalism.

¹ Published in the *Kommunistische Arbeiter Zeitung (Essener Richtung)* (Essen Tendency), 1922, No. 1.

4. The Third International was thus, from its very inception, a partially counterrevolutionary organization.

5. In the European countries, this organization led not to victory, but to the defeat of the proletariat.

6. Now that, after the spring of 1921, the Bolshevik Party which exercises its dictatorship in Russia has gone over to capitalism, it has rapidly compelled the Third International to return to capitalism, and the Third International has effectively become completely capitalist and bourgeois since the summer of 1921. The revolution was abandoned, the Third International no longer sought anything but reforms, and its goal has become the reconstruction of capitalism.

7. Since Russian capitalism must be reconstructed, and since this capitalism cannot be reconstructed without the repair and reconstruction of European capitalism, the Third International was forced to abandon the revolution and to turn to reformism, that is, to propose the reconstruction of capitalism as its goal.

8. And in order to reconstruct capitalism, the Third International just as the Russian Bolshevik Party, now capitalist, forges links with European capitalist governments and with European capitalism in order to reconstruct Russian capitalism now forges links with the Second International, and with the Two-and-a-Half International,² for the reconstruction of European capitalism.

9. The purpose of the Second International, of the Two-and-a-Half International, and of the Third International, is the same as that of the capitalist States and their governments. The united front of these three Internationals is a united front with capitalism.

10. When capitalism is in the midst of a death crisis and no longer sees any way out, the Soviet government and the Third International offer to save it.

11. This is why the Third International, like the Russian Bolshevik Party, has become a completely counterrevolutionary organization, an organization which is betraying the proletariat. It must be put into the same bag with the Second International and the Two-and-a-Half International.

12. Just as the proletariat in all countries is a tool in the hands of the social democratic, bourgeois and reactionary parties for preserving capitalism, for rebuilding it and spreading it throughout the world, delivering government power to these parties and their leaders, so the proletariat is now, in turn, becoming an instrument in the hands of the Third International, and for the same objective. The goal of the Third International is not revolution and the liberation of the proletariat, but personal power in the bourgeois State and the enslavement of the proletariat.

² The name humorously given to the Vienna Bureau, led by Otto Bauer, Bernstein, Kautsky, the Russian Mensheviks... , which, from 1921 to 1923, was a group bringing together what remained of the centrist parties after the core of their rank and file had joined (for the most part, temporarily) the Third International. Almost all of these individuals and groups would later return to the social democracy.

The Communist Workers International

1. To the degree that the situation of the whole international proletariat, within a world capitalism which is undergoing its death crisis, requires the proletarian revolution as the realization of its current practical task, to that same degree the intellectual groundwork and organizational relations of the world working class fail to measure up to the occasion of this historical challenge. The overwhelming majority of the world proletariat is a prisoner of the ways of thought of bourgeois private property and the forms of international class collaboration between capitalism and the proletariat, forms which, each playing its part within a unified process, are supported with every available means by all the existing organizations of the proletariat; this places before the revolutionary proletarians of every country the historically inevitable consequence of founding a new proletarian International.

2. This new proletarian International, the *Communist Workers International* (KAI), represents the pure proletarian class struggle, and has the practical task of abolishing bourgeois-capitalist private property and transforming it into proletarian-socialist property in common. Beyond this goal, it carries out a basic struggle for the realization of the communist society.

3. Recognizing that the objective preconditions for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the rule of the proletariat currently exist, it places at the forefront of its activity the principle of the development of the class consciousness of the proletariat, that is, it wants to help the proletariat recognize that it is historically necessary to immediately do away with capitalism; for that same reason it wants to awaken within the proletariat the effective will to carry out the proletarian revolution.

4. The achievement of these goals requires as a precondition the openly anti-capitalist character (from the perspective of content as well as form) of its organization and the leadership of all its struggles. Its highest point of reference is not the particular interest of national associations of workers considered in isolation from one another, but the common interest of the entire world proletariat: the world proletarian revolution.

5. As a first step on the road to its goal, it strives to make the proclamation of the class dictatorship of the proletariat understood as the destruction of capitalist State powers and the installation of proletarian State administrative bodies (Council States). It rejects all methods of reformist struggle and it fights with the anti-parliamentary and anti-trade union weapons of the revolutionary proletarian class for the creation of revolutionary workers councils and revolutionary Factory Organizations (Workers Unions).

6. It especially directs its battle against the existing international organizations of the proletariat (the London, Vienna and Moscow Internationals) which, as accomplices of the bourgeoisie in their mutual efforts to reconstruct world capitalism, are trying to forge a united front of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat against the world proletarian revolution and consequently represent the most dangerous obstacles standing in the way of the liberation of the proletariat.

“The future will show which of us is right”

--Lenin to Gorter, during their discussion in Moscow, November 1920.

Epilogue

The Workers Revolution and Beyond

The publication of an anthology is a sign that a movement no longer exists. Publishing another anthology thirty years later is a confession that a new movement has not arisen. Leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions from the texts and the facts assembled here, we would only like to set forth the perspective which informed the production of this work.

There can be no doubt that there have never been so many history books sold, but the “duty to record” evidently does not apply to revolutions. Of the three great attempts at emancipation which marked the first half of the 20th century, two are known well-enough despite the layers of hagiography and calumny with which they are covered: Russia after 1917 and Spain in 1936. For these two series of events, the interested reader may avail himself of a minimum of contradictory accounts, documents and analyses.

Such is not the case for the third attempt: the German revolution, which, without any doubt, had too much power and meaning for the world to accept looking at it face-to-face. It remains the only revolution to have broken out in a “modern” country, that is, one which was highly industrialized and enjoyed a (relatively) democratic political life, and thus the one which was most similar to the revolutionary uprisings we may live to see.

To the slight extent that they show any interest in it, historians retain, first of all, one name, that of Rosa Luxemburg, sometimes in association with that of Karl Liebknecht. The bourgeoisie likes dead revolutionaries. In the 1970s, the same German State that murdered Luxemburg issued a postage stamp in her memory. As for the workers movement, for a long time the Stalinists made “Rosa” into one of their icons, and the Social Democrats selectively preserved, for their own benefit and in a merely democratic sense, Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin. In the best cases, the Bavarian experience and Kurt Eisner would eventually be added. Basically, however, interest has been restricted to one group: the Spartacists. The memory of one of Lenin’s famous books is evoked in *Obsolete Communism, the Left-Wing Alternative*, written by the Cohn-Bendit brothers after 1968,¹ whose title is a kind of reversal of *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (the title of the English version of the book loses the flavor of the original French title, which can be literally rendered as *Leftism, the Remedy for the Infantile Disorder of Communism*), but Hermann Gorter’s response remained almost totally unknown. Furthermore, just as current opinion holds that the refusal of the German Communist

¹ *Obsolete Communism, the Left-Wing Alternative* appeared in France after May 1968. Lenin’s book was for a long time one of the books most widely distributed by the Stalinist parties, especially in East Germany.

Party in 1930 to enter an alliance with social democracy was one of the principal causes of Hitler's rise to power, similarly the lively antiparliamentarism of the years 1918-1923 arouses distrust.²

Even the basic history of the period 1917-1921 (without focusing on the "leftists") in Germany remains barely accessible. Taking just France into account (and the situation is no more brilliant elsewhere), at the time when we began putting this book together, only one Parisian bookstore was selling the last copies of *The Revolution in Germany* by the Trotskyist P. Broué (1973).

The avatars of the little world of publishing reflect, in their own way, the tectonic shifts of "real" history. After decades of oblivion, it required the social disturbances of the sixties and a renaissance of workers self-organization and the critique of bureaucracy to reawaken interest in council communism (reflected in the Situationist International) and to create the need to once again take up the thread of time.

Towards the Unitary Organization

The fact that, at the beginning of the 21st century, the basic accusations hurled at the world in 1919 are still current is nothing to be proud of: it means that the world has not changed basically since 1919. Far from it: the rule of capital is more deeply entrenched and has assumed a planetary scale. Even when the outward appearance has changed, the structures of capitalist society, such as the State, parliament, and the trade unions, have remained and preserve their essential functions. The great practical and theoretical merit of the German revolutionaries was that they counted parliament and the trade unions among their adversaries, at a time when these institutions had until then been the very structure of the workers movement in the advanced capitalist countries.

The repudiation of the trade unions in 1919 in Germany was not mere rhetoric, but reality. Not a renunciation, but an act of creation. "*Get out of the trade unions*" expressed the real activity of hundreds of thousands of workers who abandoned them to form unitary organizations, the *unionen*.

"Union" must be understood here in its two meanings: the reunion of the proletarians, but also the single organization, combining economic and political functions. It did not involve the resurgence of a more or less Proudhonian "economism", concerned above all with managing the workshop in a different way, and then the factory and finally the whole industry. In the fall of 1919, the AAU of Bremen declared that it was not a trade union, not even a "revolutionary syndicalist" type of trade union, and that it was fighting for political power.

Unionism was the tendency to break down all trade barriers: when workers abandoned their trade unions, they did so by entire factories, rather than by this or that trade. It also signified the will to organize beyond the boundaries of each industry: the unions operated on the scale of whole economic regions.

In a negative sense, unionism is a reaction against the institutions which accepted the war, collaborated with the Sacred Union in order to increase production, and then broke the war-time strikes. In a positive sense, it was solidarity, a community of action. Workerism? The criterion for membership in the AAUD was to declare that one is favor of the dictatorship of the

² The situation is different in Germany (where historical books and collections of documents are available at bookstores), but is hardly any better in the English-speaking countries than in France.

proletariat. A worker in favor of sectional struggles by trade category would not have been admitted. Unionism does not reduce the proletariat to a producer.

In practice, and especially in Hamburg and Bremen, where this tendency was most vigorous, the communists attacked the trade union offices and distributed the contents of the trade union treasuries to the unemployed, and the rank and file members of the trade union did nothing to defend an institution which they no longer considered to be theirs. This tendency would persist in the KPD even after the purge of its leftists. In 1919, the Heidelberg Congress, which excluded the left, still did not preclude the possibility that “if it becomes necessary”, “the destruction of the trade union form and [...] the creation of new forms of organization”³ would be undertaken.

Antiparliamentarism

Here, too, we are not confronted by a merely theoretical position, but by the systematization of concrete experience. In 1919, the electoral mechanism, in the Constituent Assembly as well as in the official councils dominated by the social democracy, was revealed to be an obstacle to the revolutionary dynamic. If in 1916 Pannekoek did not exclude the subversive use of parliament,⁴ events would later clarify democracy’s function: “Universal suffrage has been... a sign that the bourgeoisie has defeated the working class”, Johann Knief maintained in January 1919.⁵

At its founding congress (December 30, 1918 to January 1, 1919), the KPD voted 62 to 23 against participation in the elections to the Constituent Assembly. To Rosa Luxemburg, advocate of utilizing a tribune even though she rejected it, those who would still comprise the party majority for a few more months retorted: elections and electoral institutions are some of the most effective ways to detour revolutionary energy, and to drown the radical minority under the opinions of proletarians who are still under social democratic influence. The only way to free them from that influence is action in the factory and the streets, not the utilization of an institution which is alien to the revolutionaries and in which they will always be sure to end up losing, no matter how many delegates they elect.

The problem became more complicated when parliamentarism ceased to operate solely in a visibly “bourgeois” arena, but also within the forms which the social movement against the war assumed. In the same article cited above, J. Knief asserts: “The soldiers councils, which were originally class institutions of the proletariat, have become institutions of bourgeois democracy... The same thing is happening to the workers councils.”

In fact, in December 1918, the communists were a tiny minority at the Reich Congress of Workers and Soldiers Councils, and neither Liebknecht nor Luxemburg was allowed to be listed as a candidate... because they were not registered with an economic enterprise! Dozens, hundreds of salaried bureaucrats took their seats as *workers* in an assembly from which incontestable representatives and defenders of labor were excluded. This was neither the first nor the last time workerism was used for an anti-working class purpose.

³ *The Communist Left in Germany, 1918-1921*.

⁴ *Imperialism and the Tasks Facing the Proletariat* (1916), in *(Dis)Continuité*, No. 3, 1998.

⁵ *From the Collapse of German Imperialism to the Beginning of the Revolution, Invariance, Texts of the Revolutionary Workers Movement*, No. 4, 1996.

We must point out that many people at that time, including some on the communist left, still conceived of anti-parliamentarism as a tactical and non-essential position. In 1919, Pannekoek thought that although parliament could no longer be the instrument of either revolution or the administration of the future society, it was not out of the question that it could be used in a pre-revolutionary period.⁶

In 1919, however, participation in the elections was rejected by a considerable number of those who would later become well-known figures in the KPD, such as Paul Frölich and W. Münzenberg, who were at that time “Leftists”, at least in regard to this essential point.

It was not the parliamentary road to socialism that was in question, since all the KPD’s militants of that period saw the soviets or councils, and not parliament, as the political form of the revolution. In 1919-1920 the debate revolved around the possible use of bourgeois democracy *before* the revolution. In the years prior to 1914, the left wing within the Second International attacked *Nur-Parlamentarismus* (“Parliament Alone”), the idea, and its practical application, according to which the bourgeois electoral mechanism would be sufficient for the socialist transformation. For the left, what were also required (above all) were the strike and mass mobilizations in the streets, without rejecting the established representative institutions in principle. This was just what the left communists rejected in 1919: the tactical use, even for propaganda, even as a tribune, of bourgeois democracy.

Bordiga, for his part, declared that he was always opposed to systematic abstentionism, which was of anarchist inspiration, according to him. Nonetheless, the future founders of the Communist Party of Italy proclaimed “the incompatibility of communist principles and methods with participation in elections to bourgeois representative bodies.”⁷ His abstentionism was therefore not only bound to the circumstances of 1919, and was indeed very close to a rejection “in principle”. By calling themselves the “Abstentionist Fraction”, they clearly demonstrated the essential importance which they granted to this question.⁸

⁶ *Social Democracy and Communism*, *op. cit.* (Invariance No. 4, 1996).

⁷ *Resolution of the Conference of the Abstentionist Fraction of the Italian Socialist Party*, May 1920, reproduced above.

⁸ Every reader of *Left-Wing Communism* knows that Lenin gave the German Left a good hiding and treated the “Italian” Left with kid gloves. Forty years later, in “*The Infantile Disorder*”, a *Condemnation of Future Renegades* (available from the International Communist Party), Amadeo Bordiga would take pains not to see what he had in common with the German Left, and how he differed from Lenin. Here, for instance, is how his journal, *Il Soviet* (Naples), announced its publication in 1920 of Pannekoek’s text *The World Revolution and Communist Tactics* (see *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism*, ed. and tr. by D. A. Smart, Pluto Press, London, 1978, for an English translation which includes Pannekoek’s April 1920 “Afterword”):

“As is known, comrade Lenin, in his admirable activity, has finally found time to devote himself, in a special pamphlet written on the eve of the Moscow Congress, to the radical movement within international communism, defining it as an infantile disorder of communism. In this pamphlet our infantilism, along with our journal, are the objects of particular attention and we have resigned ourselves, after having endured father’s whip, to patiently bear the gibes of our dear brothers at home, which shall not fail to be heard.”

“But just as impertinent children who have been punished never lack a protective uncle who consoles them with some candy, we also have received some candy in the form of a long article — which shall in turn be published as a pamphlet — published under the title given below, by comrade Pannekoek, in No. 28-29 of *Kommunismus*.”

“We think it is fitting to recall that in 1912 Pannekoek, before Lenin, clearly asserted what has since become the touchstone of international communism: the destruction of the parliamentary-democratic State as the first task of the proletarian revolution. We also recall that a competent and unimpeachable witness, Karl Radek, has defined Pannekoek as *the most perceptive mind of international socialism*.” (Quoted in *(Dis)Continuité*, No. 7, 1999, p. 46)

As it turned out, post-1918 Germany deprived the distinction between “tactical” and “principled” anti-parliamentarism of any meaning: endemic rebellion, assassinations, pro- and anti-revolutionary armed gangs, reactionary conspiracies, preparations for *coups d’État* (from the Kapp Putsch in 1920 to the 1923 Munich coup attempt in which Hitler participated), etc. Even disregarding the assassinations of many revolutionary militants and cadres, crime became a part of political life: the assassinations of Haase, the USPD leader (1919), of Erzberger, leader of the *Zentrum*, the moderate Catholic party, and Foreign Minister (1921), of Rathenau, a leading liberal industrialist, and also Foreign Minister (1922). All of these assassinations constituted efforts to eliminate the center, which comprises the pivot of every democracy. Fighting for revolution in such circumstances rules out having any illusions about or participating in a parliamentary democracy which functioned in such a defective manner. From a broader perspective, however, those individuals were rare who, like Otto Rühle, looking forward beyond those turbulent years, proclaimed the definitive end of an era, and declared parliamentarism, whether feasible or not, as well as trade unionism, whether effective or not, to be henceforth inherent characteristics of the functioning of capitalist society.

In his critique of the Dutch Communist Party (written in the summer of 1919), Gorter showed how democracy strengthens capital.⁹ While it is true that council communism enthusiastically contrasts “workers” democracy to the “bourgeois” variety, it is also clear that it fully grasped the role of the latter, as would be further demonstrated ten years later, after Mussolini had come to power and the Nazis were mobilizing huge crowds. We offer two quotations from among the dozens available:

“Democracy is being fascistized, it is calmly making alliances with the dictatorships; and the dictatorships are covering themselves with a democratic cloak.” (1931)

“Fascism is not opposed to bourgeois democracy; to the contrary, it is its continuation by other means.” (1932)¹⁰

For the council communists, the social democrats and the Stalinists helped the Nazis take power not by refusing to unite, but by uniting against the revolution. In 1933, Hitler only completed the counterrevolution begun by the SPD in 1919 and acquiesced in by the KPD over the following years, due to the social democracy of its origins and its unconditional defense of the Russian State.

The Workers Revolution

The addition of the word “workers” in the KAPD’s name (*Kommunistische Arbeiter Partei Deutschlands*) signaled the intention to found a party upon the basis of its rank and file, and was an appeal to self-organization.

It was an affirmation of *class*: the workers versus the rest of society. As Gorter emphasized, the workers stand alone. Not only must the factory workers prevail over the other classes, but “the obligation to work must be implacably enforced” (Program of the KAPD, Section II.8), which, under the prevailing conditions of that era, would have amounted to the widest possible extension of blue-collar type work.

⁹ *Opportunism in the Dutch Communist Party*.

¹⁰ Quoted from *The Dutch Communist Left* (P. Bourrinet), International Communist Current, 1990, p. 173. The publication of the complete version in English of this important study has been undertaken by Brill Publishers (The Netherlands).

Such insistence may seem surprising. Let us consider the situation of a schoolteacher who is disgusted by the butchery of 1914-1918, aware of the death of ideals in the trenches, of the collapse of political structures, and who is looking for solutions. How could he follow the revolutionaries, whose program appeared to imply sending his son, and perhaps even his wife, into the factory? This is what communism promised him: a proletarian fate, which appeared to him to be the least enviable of all possible fates. In short, instead of proclaiming the need to supersede the proletarian condition, the KAPD program sought to generalize it. Is this not an excellent way to turn the petit-bourgeoisie against the workers, and to push them into the arms of the parties of order, if not into the arms of the Freikorps...?

Posing the question in this manner is anachronistic. By doing so, one overlooks the fear and the scorn, if not the class hatred, for the factory workers which were then characteristic of tradesmen, shopkeepers, officials and members of the liberal professions. The *workers* revolution was then presented as the only historically possible kind of revolution. Only with the benefit of being able to look back at history are we now capable of understanding how Gorter and the KAPD went so far theorizing a state of affairs which in no way depended upon them, and therefore reinforced, contrary to their own intentions, the obstacles to the revolution they were trying to bring about. The class hatred of the petit-bourgeoisie grew more acute as they contemplated their “demotion” to the status of manual workers.

Hence the insistence on “the worker”:

“The worker is a proletarian in the Marxist sense only in production, in his role as a wage worker.” Outside the factory, “he lives, acts, and feels like a petit-bourgeois,” wrote Rühle.

And Gorter wrote, in 1921: “In the factories, the proletarian means something. There he is a fighter because he is a worker. There he can exist as a free man... There, since the revolution comes from the factories, he can fight... with weapons in hand.”¹¹

It is true that other texts called for an infinitely more expansive notion of emancipation. The communist left was not closed to the multifarious aspirations which coursed through Germany prior to 1914, which were reinforced by the social collapse provoked by the war: rejection of mechanical and commercial civilization, flight from the cities, the beginnings of a non-antagonistic relation to nature, the search for another way of living, of eating, of loving, for a poetry “made by all”... The activities and personalities of the diverse range of people who opted for council communism testify to this surpassing of the domain of the worker.

The same Rühle whom we have just seen theorizing workerism, posed the need to go beyond all cultural values and practices. Against the social democracy (which was soon to be imitated in this respect by Stalinism), which presented itself as the continuator of the “good” conquests of bourgeois civilization, he said:

“The bourgeoisie has bequeathed an evil legacy to the ascendant social class, the proletariat. In the domain of culture, the proletariat faces an essential task. It must have the courage to reject all bourgeois concepts relating to culture, morality, ethics and esthetics.”¹²

¹¹ Rühle, quoted in “The KAPD and the Proletarian Movement”, *Invariance*, Second Series, No. 1, 1971. Gorter, quoted in *The Dutch Communist Left*, p. 115.

¹² *Die Aktion*, September 4, 1920. Years later, his *Psychology of the Proletarian Child* (1925) echoed a demand which cropped up throughout this whole period: to think and to organize for oneself, against the established authority, against the designated or self-proclaimed leader, in the world of work as in politics, but also in the family and the school. Rühle expresses a will to autonomy, and the rejection of institutional power (especially among the youth). “Society must be the community, and the community is the opposite pole of domination, of authority and of violence. By keeping authority at the greatest possible distance is the way one gets closer to socialism.” Theorizing the rank and file against the leaders, self-organization against hierarchy, announcing a

Schwab, a former *Wandervogel* (“migratory bird”; one who embraces a back-to-nature lifestyle), would later devote himself to architecture. In Germany and in Holland, non-conformist and dissident artists like H. Roland-Holst, Gorter and F. Jung played a pioneering role. It was not by chance that F. Pfempfert, a leading figure in Expressionism, made his famous journal *Die Aktion* a focal point for the revolutionary movement. We could even cite Traven, and his broadsheet *Der Zeigelbrenner* (the Brick-burner), which, in December 1918, was distributed by the thousands in the streets of Munich with a lead article entitled *The World Revolution Begins*.¹³ (Traven was to go on to participate in the Bavarian Council Republic and would narrowly escape execution). Such trends, of course, indicate a degree of openness to other demands distinct from self-management of production, however radical this self-management may be.

In 1920, the German group known as the Dadaist Revolutionary Central Council put the following demands in the first lines of its program: the end of property, the suppression of labor by mechanization, a new urbanism, and the fusion of art and life. The *Manifesto of Proletarian Art* declared:

“The proletariat is a condition which must be overcome. The bourgeoisie is a condition which must be overcome.”

We shall add this precocious note of lucidity seldom encountered at that time:

“The bourgeoisie is using the communist apparatus, which is not an invention of the proletariat but of the bourgeoisie, to help renovate its decomposing culture (Russia).”¹⁴

Such claims, however, remained implicit and occupied the margins of the movement “which transforms the conditions of existence”, that is, of the masses in their struggle in the factories and the streets. For the revolutionary organizations, even the artists who had joined the proletariat were still a little too “artistic”, and their esthetic too advanced. And in the eyes of the vanguard artists, the most radical of the workers were still a little “bourgeois” in their esthetic preferences. If Gorter was a poet, he was a poet *outside* of his theoretical texts, in which there is little evidence of poetic creation. (It is in Otto Rühle where theory attempts a new kind of writing, as in *The Revolution is Not a Party Matter*.) Separation reigns. Everything which is presented as positive, everything positive which is done, finally revolves around work. The aspiration for other ways of life transmitted a subterranean impulse to the movement, but could not assert itself in that movement, and did not transcend the “workers” character of the movement’s activities and program.

It was certainly true that, on occasion, it was thought that the Council would go beyond workerism, integrating “all those who must be considered as proletarians, the street vendor or the teacher as well as the artist or the white collar employee”. (K. Schröder, *On the Future of the New Society*, 1920).

rebellion of the youth, Rühle here anticipates the themes which would constitute the strength as well as the weakness of the revolts which would break out forty or fifty years later.

¹³ Traven, *Dans l'Etat le plus libre du monde*, L'Insomniaque, 1994.

¹⁴ Quoted by M. Dachy, *Dada & les dadaïsmes*, Gallimard, 1994. In 1966, after Raoul Hausmann (1886-1971), one of the most prominent figures of Dadaism and one of the editors of *Die Aktion*, translated the article “Captive Words” (I.S. No. 10) into German, Guy Debord wrote to him on April 25, 1966:

“We are of course aware of your role in German dadaism; so that no approval of our theses on this central issue could be as precious to us as yours. After such organized forgetting, the current acknowledgement does not seem to us to be anything but a moment of a foreseeable process, a moment which arrives with the reduction to rubble of the culture and the ideologies which have reigned over forty years of generalized reaction. The next revolutionary crisis, which could spell the judgment day of the world which you then (and later) confronted, will vindicate the entire truth of dadaism.” (Debord, *Correspondance*, Fayard, Vol. III, 2003. See also Vol. II, pp. 203-205).

By enrolling these categories, Schröder explains, the General Workers Unions will unite them with the factory workers. This position is all the more significant in that it comes from the principal leader of the KAPD. But this perspective thereby universalizes a proletarian condition which it does not suppress, and is limited to the sphere of labor: society is a society of production, and the proletarians are producers. The critique of work as a separate activity (which presupposes an entirely different vision of society and of human life) does not emerge as a specific point, and even less as an essential one.

This “class against class” position does not perceive that the social classes and, first of all, the two fundamental ones, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, are complementary moments, forms and functions of the reproduction of capital, and that the mere fact of having based a mode of activity, and of having theorized the most radical activities of the time based upon these categories, indicates the limit of this perspective: one remains within capitalism if one clings to the class struggle without going any further.¹⁵

The German communist left was the left current which best understood the nature of the *mediations* standing between the proletarians and their emancipation, mediations which go by the names of parliament, trade union, and political party, and it fought them. But here we come upon the paradox. Gorter, undoubtedly the most “workerist” German left communist, quite correctly included the reformism of the *worker* himself among the enemies of communism. Not illogically, in 1923 he would count among the enemies of communism... almost all the world’s workers.¹⁶ In fact, at the end of 1918, the workers who were most firmly rooted in the world of labor, the revolutionary shop stewards (especially among Berlin’s metal workers) refused to join the newborn Communist Party, preferring to remain instead within the “centrist” party, the USPD, which emerged from a split within the SPD in 1917. They would later join the Unified Communist Party (VKPD), without ever connecting with the council communists.

In addition, it was among those workers rather than among the communist left where the *dream of self-management* appears to have been most deeply-rooted, embraced by the workers in the skilled trades who still fulfilled an indispensable function in the organization of production during those pre-Fordist times, workers who were conscious of their specialist skills, and who possessed a highly-developed sense of their value and their role in the enterprise, a role played along with the technicians and engineers, but in rivalry with the latter.

The strength of the USPD, the amalgamation of the Kautskyist old guard and authentic working-class cadres, resided in the fact that it represented a certain kind of labor autonomy within the parliamentary republic born in November 1918. Its implicit program involved transforming the institutionalized workers councils into counter-powers capable of improving the living conditions of the workers by gaining a preponderant influence within bourgeois democracy, even (in the most extreme conception) going so far as to convert the bourgeois democracy into a labor democracy. The fact that this aspiration was quickly shown to be groundless by the ensuing events is evident. In 1917-1921, however, this did not prevent these ideas from holding sway over a significant part of the German working class.

The KAPD therefore situated the revolutionary wellspring (and the guarantee against possible deviations) in a profound working-class nature whose emblematic figure (the metal worker) slipped from their grasp. Gorter came close to an understanding of this paradox, but

¹⁵ Invariance, *Textes du mouvement ouvrier révolutionnaire*, No. 4, 1996.

¹⁶ *L'Internationale Communiste ouvrière*, in *Invariance*, Second Series, No. 5, 1974.

did not succeed in doing so. One cannot fight except on the basis of one's own situation, but when one's struggle rests *solely* on one's situation, one furthers its development without surpassing it. The KAPD delegates to the Third Congress of the International emphasized the power of capital, which was not only capable of absorbing what the proletarians create (trade unions) and utilize (elections) but was also capable of absorbing their demands (reforms). After 1921, during the phase of reflux, some KAPists would question the pertinence of all wage struggles, calling upon the *unionen*, soon to be drained of most of their members, to restrict their activities to revolutionary action.¹⁷

The National-Bolshevik Aberration and its Meaning

It is most unfortunate that the only people who tried to find social means to go beyond workerism did so from a national basis.

In 1915, in *Democracy and Organization*, Laufenberg and Wolffheim explained that the bourgeois State could be neither national nor democratic: only the proletariat would create a "pan-German" republic, that is, it would unite the various German-speaking countries (the voluntary merger of Austria and Germany was, let us recall, a classic watchword of social democracy). For this reason they advocated progressive action: it was not by the classical socialist road (parliament) that an economic democracy could be built, but by the councils which administer vast industrial associations. They thus defended the councils for very different reasons than Pannekoek and Rühle. For Laufenberg and Wolffheim, the councils were the instruments of a transition which would not necessarily be violent thanks to the control exercised over all levels of society by the workers.

But the labor which they wanted to incorporate into the councils was by no means the same labor intended by Gorter: beyond the walls of the factory, it included all the trades and professions which take part in the production of wealth and, ultimately, almost the entire population, the body of which forms what they called *the people*.

The anticapitalism of Wolffheim and Laufenberg was soon (at least as of 1915) set upon a national foundation. Their classless society is the national totality. The fact that, after the war, they formed alliances with reactionaries was a logical, although not inevitable, consequence of this view. To want to create a classless society before the end of classes is, necessarily, to organize *this* society from above by smothering the class contradictions within it.¹⁸

Wolffheim and Laufenberg are of course to be numbered among the promoters of the councils, but in their view the councils were a means to organize a fusion of classes led by the proletariat in alliance with social groups which are allegedly anti-bourgeois due to their pre-capitalist characteristics, especially the in the army. In this manner they invented a *non-revolutionary* councilism.

Unlike the communist left, but fully within the social democratic tradition, Wolffheim and Laufenberg renounced the critique and destruction of the State. The State, Laufenberg wrote, has two functions: one of exploitation, the other being the framework necessary for the life of

¹⁷ *The Dutch Communist Left*, p. 145.

¹⁸ "The national idea has ceased to be a means in the hands of the bourgeoisie and has turned against it... The great dialectic of History has made the national idea a means of power for the proletariat against the bourgeoisie." *Ibid.*, p. 114. The Stalinists would later give this great dialectic, dreamed up on the coast of the North Sea, a planetary dimension.

the community, and what needs to be done is to make the second role prevail over the first. Bernstein and revisionism had been saying the same thing.

Wolffheim and Laufenberg advocate a peaceful road to a socialism that would be national.

Nor were they the first to want to rouse the nation against a supposedly weakened and discredited bourgeoisie that was ready to sell its population to international capitalism. From then on their goal was to forge a popular alliance, which would in turn join an alliance with Russia in a revolutionary war against France, England and the United States, countries which had been equated with the real heart of world capitalism, that is, the banks, whose representative within world communism was Paul Levi (former Spartacist, leader of the Communist Party and the incarnation of anti-leftism), “agent of international Jewish finance”. All their uses of anti-semitism (even though it was not a central issue for them as it was for the Nazis) and all their contacts with reactionaries (which the two Hamburg militants were soon to make) were enough to drive them far from the proletarian movement and even into the arms of their declared adversaries. The enemies of our enemies are not our friends. Nonetheless, we may observe that the strategy of Laufenberg and Wolffheim prefigured those strategies which would later launch numerous anti-imperialist national fronts in the Third World, with the intermittent support of western progressives. We lose count of the “communist” parties in Africa or Asia which formed alliances with the military (no matter how murderous) in the name of the construction of national socialism.

National Bolshevism never “took root” in the KAPD as a whole: its audience remained restricted to Hamburg and, to a much lesser extent, to Frankfurt. Nonetheless, even on this small scale, this new marriage of the nation and the proletariat (which had finalized their divorce in the blood and filth of 1914-1918) is certainly one of the monstrosities produced by an era that was not short on monstrosities.

It would fall to the Nazis to reap the fruits of this perspective, in a very different way. The community of proletarian labor solidarity advocated by the KAPD had failed. The National-Bolshevik popular community of the producers was stillborn. A racial-national community would prevail after 1933.

* * *

Our selection of texts begins with the description of the prosaic activities of a workers council and concludes with the founding of a new International doomed to failure. The full range of the movement’s activities is embraced in this selection. The revolutionaries do not need to be glorified.

On the other hand, nothing would be more false than to reduce the movement featured in this book to “Revolution or Nothing!” Precisely because, in 1919-1920, Pannekoek perceived the revolutionary process, despite all appearances, to be a long-term undertaking and today we know that he was not mistaken only activity faithful to a minimum of principles was capable in his eyes of contributing to that movement. For this reason in particular he mistrusted the faith in a small party which was to radicalize the masses.

There is no lack of contradictions among the texts we publish here, and it is tempting to pin labels on them, which would in some cases be deserved: “activism”, “workerism”, “anti-parliamentarism”... so many real tendencies whose vigorous emergence was not the result so much of a current of ideas as they were brought about by two or three crucial years of the century. The German communist left did not practice “politics” and did not seek a mass “base” by making demands on its behalf. It is undoubtedly for this reason that it has been forgotten by official history and, though only later, became a collection of groupuscules. Its supersession

presupposes nothing less than another course of history. Its continuation therefore remains to be imagined and lived...

Gilles Dauvé
(February 2004)

“A dead conviction leaves the worst aftertaste of disappointment... Today, as much as yesterday, I permit no excuses for those who have abandoned their convictions.”

--Franz Jung
Le Scarabée-Torpille, 1961.

Some Websites of Interest

In English

AK Press

www.akpress.org/

Antagonism (left communism)

www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Lobby/3909/

Aufheben (U.K. communist theoretical journal)

www.geocities.com/aufheben2/

Break Their Haughty Power (Loren Goldner)

home.earthlink.net/~lrgoldner/

Class Against Class (communist archive)

www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/

Collective Action Notes (very large council communist archive)

The Commoner (autonomist)

Eclipse and Re-Emergence of the Communist Movement (website for this text by Dauvé and Martin, originally published in the 1970s)

www.skatta.demon.co.uk/

For Communism (extensive communist archive)

www.geocities.com/~johngray/

Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution (website hosting the translation of this classic text of council communism originally published in 1930)

www.geocities.com/Athens/Aegean/6579/

Infantile Disorder (Left Communist site with material in many languages)

International Communist Current

www.internationalism.org/

Internationalist Perspective (split from ICC)

Kurasje (council communist archive)

Libcom.org (libertarian news and communist archive)

www.libcom.org/

Marxist Internet Archive

www.marxists.org/index.htm

Midnight Notes (autonomist)

No War But the Class War

Practical History (autonomist)

Prole-position (communist struggle news)

www.prole-position.net/

Prole.info (communist theory)

www.prole.info/

Red and Black Notes (Canadian council communist/anarchist project)

Situationist International Online

www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/

Spunk Press (anarchist archive)

Subversion (archive; group defunct)

www.geocities.com/Athens/Acropolis/8195

Tarantula Distribution (libertarian and communist distribution out of Portland, Oregon)

Wage Slave X's Revolutionary Anti-Capitalist Homepage (former Internationalist Perspectives)

XPDNC Political Links

www.xpdnc.com/links/politics.html

Other Languages

Ab Irato (French communist site)

Almaty Libertaria (Kazakhstan, libertarian communist)

Antorcha: Biblioteca libertaria (eclectic anarchist and left communist archive; Spanish)

Archivo Situacionista (Spanish language situationist archive)