



BRILL

Paul Levi and the Origins of the United-Front Policy in the Communist International

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Abstract

During its first four congresses, held annually under Lenin (1919–22), the Communist International went through two distinct phases: while the first two congresses focused on programmatic and organisational aspects of the break with Social-Democratic parties (such as the ‘Theses on Bourgeois Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat’, adopted by the first congress, and the 21 ‘Conditions of Admission to the Communist International’, adopted by the second), the third congress, meeting after the putsch known as the ‘March Action’ of 1921 in Germany, adopted the slogan ‘To the masses!’, while the fourth codified this new line in the ‘Theses on the Unity of the Proletarian Front’. The arguments put forward by the first two congresses were originally drafted by leaders of the Russian Communist Party, but the initiative for the adoption of the united-front policy came from the German Communist Party under the leadership of Paul Levi. This article explores the historical circumstances that turned the German Communists into the pioneers of the united-front tactic. In the documentary appendix we add English versions of two documents drafted by Levi: the ‘Letter to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Germany’ on the Kapp Putsch, dated 16 March 1920, and the KPD’s ‘Open Letter’ of 8 January 1921, which gave rise to the united-front tactic.

Keywords

German Revolution – Paul Levi – Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD) – Communist International – united-front tactic – Kapp Putsch – ‘March Action’

Introduction

The First Congress of the Communist International, held in March 1919, codified in the ‘Theses on Bourgeois Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat’, which summarised the contents of Lenin’s famous book *The State and Revolution*, the differences separating the revolutionaries from the parliamentary reformism of the Second International.

This split between socialist and communist parties, historically necessary because most of the Social-Democratic organisations had passed over to the camp of bourgeois nationalism with the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, attracted to the camp of the revolutionaries, however, a series of political trends which, despite their internationalism, had little in common with Bolshevism – calling, among other things, for the boycott of elections and the abandonment of reformist unions on principle. Those ultra-left tendencies were expelled from the Communist Party of Germany (Spartacus League) during its second congress, held at Heidelberg from 20 to 24 October 1919, which adopted the ‘Guiding Principles of Communist Precepts and Tactics’ (also known as the ‘Heidelberg Theses’) at the request of Paul Levi, the political heir of Rosa Luxemburg after the assassination of the latter in January 1920. Five months later, Lenin undertook an international campaign against those trends in his book, *‘Left-Wing Communism’: An Infantile Disorder* (April 1920). The ‘Heidelberg Theses’ are now available in English, together with 25 other documents by Paul Levi, in a recently published anthology edited by David Fernbach and published in Brill’s *Historical Materialism* Book Series.¹ The Levi anthology, called *In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg*, is a major addition to the growing number of works in English on the crucial events of the German revolution,² whose miscarriage was, along with the failure of the Italian revolution, the ultimate cause of the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union.

The enormous enthusiasm that the Bolshevik revolution aroused among the working masses led some mass organisations, such as the Italian Socialist Party [*Partito socialista italiano*, PSI] and the Independent Socialist Party of Germany [*Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, USPD], to apply for membership in the Communist International. In his book *Moscow under Lenin*, Alfred Rosmer recalled that, in 1920, ‘the Italian Socialist Party and the German Communist Party were, apart from the Russian Communist

1 Levi 2011, pp. 67–9.

2 Notably, Broué 2005.

Party, the two great parties in the International'.³ This, however, gave rise to the problem of expelling the leaders of the reformist wing of those organisations, such as Eduard Bernstein, Rudolf Hilferding and Karl Kautsky in the USPD and Filippo Turati in the PSI. This policy was codified in the 21 'Conditions of Admission to the Communist International', written by Lenin and Zinoviev and adopted by the Second Congress of the Communist International in July 1920.

The purge from the Communist International of opportunistic and sectarian elements, however, was but a precondition for its primary task, which was the conquest of the majority of the working class for the cause of communism. It was necessary to develop a tactic that would enable the masses to discover the true nature of their traditional leaderships and approach communism through their own experience. The initiative in developing the united-front tactic was not taken by the Russian Communist Party but by the German Communist Party at the behest of Paul Levi. In this paper we analyse the events leading to the development of the united-front policy by the Communist Party of Germany in the period between March 1920 and January 1921, as well as the reasons for Levi's subsequent expulsion from the KPD and the International.

The German Revolution, the KPD Founding Congress, the Spartacist Uprising and the Bavarian Soviet Republic

The German revolution went through three major phases from November 1918 to October 1923. The first phase started in November 1918, with a series of events that began with the Kiel mutiny of the sailors of the German navy, the collapse of the German army and the end of the First World War, the formation of councils [*Räte*: soviets] of workers' and soldiers' delegates, the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II and the proclamation of the republic. A National Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils [*Reichskongress der Arbeiter- und Soldatenräte*], held from 16 to 21 December 1918, disbanded after the leader of the German Social-Democratic Party [*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD], Friedrich Ebert, persuaded it to hand over power to a bourgeois provisional government, ironically called, after the Soviet example, Council of People's Commissars [*Rat der Volksbeauftragten*]. To this latter body also belonged, until 29 December 1918, the USPD, a centrist-pacifist split from

³ Rosmer 1972, p. 80.

the SPD created in April 1917, which originally included also Rosa Luxemburg's Spartacus League [*Spartakusbund*].

The founding Congress of the Communist Party of Germany (Spartacus League) [*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (Spartakusbund)*, KPD(s)] created by the split of the Spartacus League from the USPD, took place from 30 December 1918 to 1 January 1919. In this Congress, at the request of Rosa Luxemburg, Paul Levi gave a speech that called for the participation of the KPD(s) in the elections to the Constituent Assembly that drafted the Weimar Constitution, not because he harboured parliamentary illusions, but in order to reach the workers with a message that would break with the counterrevolutionary consensus around a bourgeois-democratic republic as an alternative to the council movement then under way in Germany. The founding congress of the KPD(s) unfortunately rejected this position, condemning itself to political isolation at a crucial moment in the history of Germany and the world.⁴

Four days after the KPD Founding Congress, on 5 January 1919, the abortive Spartacist Uprising [*Spartakusaufstand*] in Berlin resulted in the assassination of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht by paramilitary bands [*Freikorps*] on 15 January 1919. Four days later, on 19 January 1919, there took place the elections to the Constituent Assembly, finally convened in Weimar, a provincial town removed from the revolutionary agitation of the capital, which confirmed Ebert's position as *Reichspräsident*.

An aftereffect of the Spartacist Uprising was the series of revolts known as the Bavarian or Munich Soviet Republic [*Münchner Räterepublik*], which broke out between 7 April and 2 May 1919, culminating in the brief Communist regime led by Eugen Leviné and Max Levien. The repression of the Bavarian Soviet Republic, which closed the first phase of the German revolution, turned Munich into a breeding ground for all sorts of right-wing organisations, including Adolf Hitler's *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP). Levi sharply criticised the Bavarian Soviet Republic and the Communists' role in its second phase as an act of political adventurism detrimental to the interests of the proletariat.⁵ This document, as well as the polemic with Karl Radek over 'The Lessons of the Hungarian Revolution',⁶ casts Levi in the role he mostly played during this period: that of the scourge of ultra-left (Levi called it

4 See the English version of the speech in Levi 2011, pp. 35–42. The late historian Hermann Weber considered his discovery of the minutes of the KPD's founding congress to be his main contribution to historical scholarship. See his edition of the documents in Weber (ed.) 1969.

5 'The Munich Experience: An Opposing View', in Levi 2011, pp. 47–53.

6 Levi 2011, pp. 70–8.

‘syndicalist’) tendencies within the KPD and the International. The KPD ultra-lefts would ultimately split from it and form the Communist Workers’ Party of Germany [*Kommunistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands*, KAPD] on 3 April 1920, after the adoption, at Levi’s initiative, of the ‘Guiding Principles of Communist Precepts and Tactics’ by the Second Congress of the KPD.

Paul Levi and the ‘Heidelberg Theses’ (24 October 1919)

On 20–24 October 1919 the KPD held its Second Congress at Heidelberg. The congress approved, at Paul Levi’s initiative, the so-called ‘Heidelberg Theses’, officially called ‘Guiding Principles of Communist Precepts and Tactics’ [*Leitsätze über kommunistische Grundsätze und Taktik*].⁷

Levi’s criticism of the syndicalist left of the KPD(s) is developed at length in a speech from October 1919 called ‘The Political Situation and the KPD’, made by him during the second KPD(s) Congress.⁸ The Heidelberg Congress expelled the ultra-left tendency around Heinrich Laufenberg and Fritz Wolffheim, whom Levi called ‘the Hamburgers’ – a group which after their expulsion would drift towards ‘national Bolshevism’ and ultimately towards the left wing of the Nazi Party. Interestingly for American readers, in this section Levi sharply criticises the ‘general workers’ union’ idea, ‘which the Hamburgers have imported as something brand-new from America’⁹ – a reference to the fact that Wolffheim had been in contact with the Industrial Workers of the World in California in 1912–13. Actually, Levi argued, ‘the idea of “one big union” arose in England with the Chartist movement, and fell into oblivion along with the Chartist movement itself’.¹⁰ Syndicalist leanings led the Hamburgers to ‘preach federalism as the form of political organization’. Federalism, however, ‘means death for the unity and determination of the Party and for the resolute political action of the proletariat’. That was, in Levi’s opinion, precisely what the Hamburgers wanted to do – to replace the political party as a revolutionary instrument with ‘one big union’. The document concludes with the seven ‘Guiding Principles of Communist Precepts and Tactics’, usually known as the ‘Heidelberg Theses’,

7 English version in Levi 2011, pp. 67–9.

8 The proceedings of the Second Congress of the Communist Party of Germany (Spartacus League), held from 20 to 24 October 1919 at Heidelberg, can be found in KPD 1919.

9 Levi 2011, p. 59.

10 Levi 2011, p. 60.

aimed against 'the view that an economic revolution leads to a political one' and arguing for 'the strictest centralisation' of the party.¹¹

Pierre Broué highlighted the significance of the 'Heidelberg Theses' in the following words:

The Founding Congress of the KPD (Spartacists) on 1 January 1919 presented the spectacle of an organisation which bore little resemblance to a party, and had nothing in common with what a Communist Party in Germany could and should have been. In other words, the KPD(S) when it was formed was effectively both Spartacist and [ultra-]leftist, a living contradiction. However, the Second Congress, in Heidelberg in October 1919, showed a profound transformation, at least in the attitudes of the leading team. *The resolutions were the first systematic attempt to secure adoption of the principles and tactics of the Bolsheviks in Russia.* This was a considerable step forward in comparison with the First Congress.¹²

The adoption of these theses, which indicated that the party could not renounce on principle participation in parliamentary elections, called to form Communists sections in the bureaucratised unions, and condemned any kind of federalism in party organisation as proposed by the syndicalist wing of the KPD(S), led to the split of these elements to form the *Kommunistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands* (KAPD) on 3 April 1920. The KAPD leader Otto Rühle thought that the 21 Conditions of admission to the Communist International, drafted by Lenin and Zinoviev, were a refurbished version of the theses adopted by the Heidelberg Congress: 'They were only slightly more generously put, a little coiffured theoretically and somewhat strengthened in the direction of centralism and dictatorship'¹³ – although it should be pointed out that, while the '21 Conditions of Admission' were mainly aimed against the centrist leaders of the parties that had been accepted into the International or had requested admission to it (such as Turati, Kautsky, Hilferding, etc.), the 'Heidelberg Theses' were aimed against the ultra-leftists.

The Heidelberg split was a serious bloodletting for the KPD: according to Helmut Gruber 'membership fell from 107,000 to less than half that number'¹⁴ – a heavy price Levi was willing to pay for the sake of fighting sectarianism.

11 Levi 2011, pp. 67–9.

12 Broué 2005, pp. 854–5, emphasis mine.

13 Quoted in Bock 1969, p. 255.

14 Gruber (ed.) 1967, p. 395.

Clearly, it would be a mistake to attribute to Levi any half-baked idea about 'Luxemburgist spontaneism'.

Karl Radek had supported the same arguments as Levi before the Heidelberg Congress, calling the ideas of the opposition 'that jumble of anarchism and syndicalism',¹⁵ but opposed Levi's initiative to eliminate the anarcho-councilist left from the KPD(s). Radek was seconded in this by Lenin, who supported the retention of the KAPD as a 'sympathetic member of the Communist International', although he later described this decision as a mistake, stating on 10 June 1921: 'I clearly see my mistake in voting for the admission of the KAPD. It will have to be rectified as quickly and fully as possible.'¹⁶

The Kapp Putsch and the 'Nine Points of the Unions' (19 March 1920)

On 13 to 17 March 1920 there took place the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch, a military coup triggered by the demand of the Versailles Treaty to dissolve the *Freikorps*, especially the Baltic ones which had fought against the Red Army and taken Riga in May 1919. The coup failed due to a general strike declared at the initiative of Carl Legien, the eternal President of the Social-Democratic Union Federation.

As a result of the general strike organised against the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch, Germany was covered in March 1920 by a network of executive councils [*Vollzugsräte*] formed by the workers' parties and trade unions. In the struggle against the putsch, those committees played the role of revolutionary centres, posing in a practical way, in the course of the general strike itself, the problem of power in general, and the more immediate question of the nature of the government. The leader of the Social-Democratic union bureaucracy, Carl Legien, argued that there was an immediate possibility of forming a (reformist) workers' government with representatives of the trade unions and the two Social-Democratic Parties. In the event, neither the USPD nor the KPD seized the opportunity, and no such government was formed.

In his history of the German revolution, which remains the main work on the subject, Pierre Broué offers a condensed version of the 'nine points of the trade unions', supported by Legien's General Federation of German Trade Unions [*Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund*, ADGB], the Federation of General Unaffiliated Employees [*Allgemeine freie Angestelltenbund*, AfA] and the Federation of General German Civil Servants [*Allgemeine Deutsche*

15 Radek 1919, p. 9.

16 Lenin 1977, p. 319.

Beamtenbund, ADB],¹⁷ which Legien imposed as a condition to the government for ending the general strike on 19 March 1920.¹⁸ This is the complete version, taken from *Die Kommunistische Internationale*, the German-language organ of the Executive Committee of the Communist International:

The representatives of the government parties gathered here will advocate in their parliamentary groups:

1. That, in the impending formation of governments in the Reich and Prussia, the personnel shall be selected by the parties after consultation with the trade-union organisations of workers, employees and civil servants that took part in the general strike, and that those organisations shall be granted a decisive influence on the reorganisation of economic and social legislation, while respecting the rights of parliament.
2. Immediate arrest and punishment of all those guilty of the putsch or the overthrow of constitutional governments, as well as of the civil servants who have placed themselves at the disposal of illegitimate governments.
3. Thorough cleansing from the entire public administration and company managements of counter-revolutionary individuals, especially those in senior positions, and their replacement by reliable people. Reinstatement of all the organisational representatives in public service persecuted for their political and trade-union activity.
4. The expeditious implementation of administrative reform on a democratic basis, with the participation of the economic organisations of the workers, employees and officials.
5. Immediate extension of the existing social laws and passage of new ones, which shall ensure full social and economic equality for the

17 The General Federation of German Trade-Unions [*Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund*, ADGB] was founded on 5 July 1919 in Nuremberg, after the first postwar congress of free (Social-Democratic) trade unions, as the new umbrella organisation to succeed the *Generalkommission der freien Gewerkschaften Deutschlands* [General Commission of the Free German Trade Unions]. Legien was elected as the first chairman. It was a federation of 52 unions and was affiliated with the *Allgemeiner freier Angestelltenbund* [Federation of General Unaffiliated Employees] and the *Allgemeiner Deutscher Beamtenbund* [Federation of General German Civil Servants].

18 Broué 2005, p. 365.

- workers, employees and state officials. The most rapid introduction of a liberal civil-service law.
6. Immediate commencement of socialisation in all the mature industries, on the basis of the decisions of the Socialisation Commission, in consultation with the professional associations. Immediate convening of the Socialisation Commission and taking-over of the coal syndicate and of the potash syndicate by the Reich.
 7. Effective gathering and, if necessary, expropriation of all the available foodstuffs, and intensified fight against usury and profiteering in rural and urban areas, ensuring the fulfilment of delivery obligations through the establishment of delivery organisations and the imposition of sensible penalties for malicious violations of those obligations.
 8. Dissolution of all the counterrevolutionary military formations unfaithful to the Constitution and their replacement by formations recruited from the ranks of reliable republicans, particularly the organised workers, employees and civil servants, without affronting any estate [*Stand*]. In this reorganisation, the legal rights acquired by the troops and security forces which have remained loyal shall be left untouched.
 9. Resignation of [the ministers] Noske and Heine, who have already submitted their resignation requests.¹⁹

The crucial issue was the arming of the workers and the disarming of the counter-revolution, as stated in point 8.

Paul Levi's Criticism of the KPD's Sectarian Positions during the Kapp Putsch (16–17 March 1920)

When the Kapp Putsch broke out, Levi was serving time in the Moabit prison, from where he was released on 24 March 1920. While in prison he learned of the *Zentrale's* reaction to the declaration of the general strike by the trade unions: it had argued that 'the working class is unable to act' and that 'the proletariat will not lift a finger for the democratic republic'. Levi sent it a furious letter denouncing the content of the flyers written by the leadership of the KPD(S) on 13 March 1920, which was later published in *Die Kommunistische*

¹⁹ Spartakus 1920, p. 157.

Internationale. These are the main excerpts from this very interesting document, translated in its entirety in the documentary appendix to this article:

My verdict: the KPD is threatened by moral and political bankruptcy. I cannot understand how people can write in this situation sentences like the following one: 'The working class is unable to act at this moment. It is necessary to say so clearly.' 'The mere fact that Lüttwitz and Kapp have taken the place of Bauer and Noske . . . changed nothing immediately . . . in the state of the great class struggle.' [...] After having on the first day denied the ability [of the working class] to act, the next day the party puts out a leaflet [which reads]: 'Now the German proletariat must finally take up the struggle for the proletarian dictatorship and the communist Soviet Republic.' The leaflet then talks about . . . the general strike (the working class had been deemed incapable of action). At the same time (when the general strike had brought the masses out of the factories) [the flyer calls for the] elections of soviets [*Räte*], [and the convocation of a] central soviet congress. In short, our 'big shots' break the neck of the general strike organisationally and politically. They also do it morally. I consider it a crime, to now break up the [strike] action by stating: 'The proletariat will not lift a finger for the democratic republic.' Do you know what that means? This is a stab in the back of the biggest action of the German proletariat!²⁰

Levi then proceeded to make some general observations on the attitude to adopt in this kind of event, which are reminiscent of the attitude adopted by the Bolsheviks before the attempted coup by General Kornilov:

I had always thought that we were clear and in agreement about the following: If an action breaks out – even for the most stupid goal! (the November Revolution had no reasonable goal, or rather no goal at all) – we must support that action, and raise it above its stupid goal by means of our slogans, [so as to] bring the masses closer to the real goal through the intensification of the action! And not cry at the beginning 'we will not lift a finger' if we do not like the goal. In between, *concrete* slogans must be found. Say to the masses what needs to happen in the nick of time! The slogans must, of course, be stepped up, [but] gradually *stepped up*. The soviet republic comes *last*, not first. It seems to me that no-one thinks

20 Levi 1920a, pp. 147–8.

now about the election of soviets. The slogan at the present moment can only be: the arming of the proletariat.²¹

Against the *Zentrale's* metaphysical conviction that a Social-Democratic government would always remain equal to itself, Levi indicated that its character would be determined by the social forces on which it relied:

There should be no doubt that if, after the suppression of the military coup, a Bauer-Ebert-Noske government comes into being again, it would no longer be the old one, because it would have lost its support from the right, just as it was no longer the old one in January 1919, after losing its support from the left. Therefore, it is imperative now to do everything to intensify the action, in order to crush the putsch without compromise! If we are successful, any future 'democratic republic' will slide to the left, because it will lose its right footing. Only then comes the time where we can develop ourselves! Now we must [undertake] the action jointly – also with the SPD – [while keeping] the slogans separately also from the USPD. [...] The coup in any case [must be] crushed, because everything else must follow almost by necessity [from its defeat]. Immediate slogan: Against any compromise [between the government and the coup leaders]!²²

In a letter written the next day, Levi specified this slogan ('Immediate arrest of the leaders of the coup and their sentencing by a proletarian court, because a military court [would be] a joke'), adding:

What the *Zentrale* of the Communist Party writes in its pamphlet of 16 March [1920] is useless. 'Soviet Republic' and 'Congress of Soviets' are not demands, as long as people do not work for their fulfilment; the more so since those are not demands [directed] against our opponents. 'Down with the military dictatorship!', 'Down with bourgeois democracy!', are likewise not strike demands, but phrases. What was included as positive demands in the flyer, then (why?) has been deleted again, was also useless. Not the 'resignation' of the Kapp government, but its 'arrest! High traitors do not 'resign'! The 'disarmament of the army'! At the moment this is nonsense, because that demand drives over those parts of the army which are against the coup to the other camp. That demand is directed

21 Levi 1920a, p. 148.

22 Ibid.

against a part of the forces on which the proletariat must count at present. Immediate confiscation of the weapons of the bourgeoisie, formation of a working-class military, are both demands which cannot be met overnight, their implementation needs weeks – therefore [they are] not strike demands.²³

Levi concludes his letter with a series of practical indications on the activities that the party had to carry out:

(1.) Once daily, or twice, depending on the situation, a general leaflet – not a ‘Communist compendium’, but four sentences on the situation, one sentence containing the conclusion, and the strike demands. In particular, [the flyer should include] criticism of the strike leadership, which will want to reach a deal [with the putsch leaders]. [We should also issue] a leaflet to the soldiers. A leaflet to the SPD. A leaflet to the civil servants, written in an explanatory way. A leaflet to the railway, postal and telegraph workers. (2.) Intensification of the action. Demonstration meetings at Treptower Park [in Berlin]. No clashes. (3.) [Military] drilling of cadres, albeit without weapons. When troops coming from outside clash with local troops, the city should not remain quiet.²⁴

The publication of Levi’s letter in *Die Kommunistische Internationale* clearly indicates that the leadership of the Communist International was then willing to adopt a lax position on violations of party discipline provided that they served to combat sectarian tendencies in its national sections. This support of the leadership of the Communist International in his fight against ultra-left tendencies in the KPD certainly encouraged Levi to take his next step, which would generate much opposition in his own party and in the International itself.

Paul Levi and the KPD’s ‘Declaration of “Loyal Opposition”’ (23 March 1920)

At Levi’s prompting, on 26 March 1920 the KPD(s) published in *Die Rote Fahne* a Declaration of ‘Loyal Opposition’ to the (reformist) workers’ government proposed by Legien in the aftermath of the Kapp Putsch. The Declaration was

23 Levi 1920a, p. 149.

24 Levi 1920a, p. 150.

a pioneering attempt to apply a central transitional slogan, namely support, under certain conditions, for the creation a government of reformist workers' parties and organisations – a tactic that would be formally adopted by the Communist International at its fourth congress in 1922.²⁵ The Declaration has not hitherto been published in English; this is the full translation, based on 'Erklärung der Zentrale der KPD', *Die Rote Fahne*, 23 March 1920:²⁶

1. The Kapp-Lüttwitz military putsch means the collapse of the bourgeois-socialist coalition.²⁷ The proletarian struggle against the military dictatorship was a struggle against the bourgeois-socialist coalition and its purpose is to increase the political power of the working class until the bourgeoisie is totally eliminated.
2. The proletarian dictatorship can be erected only as a dictatorship of the crucial parts of the proletariat, and it requires a strong Communist Party, supported by the revolutionary consciousness of the working population, which is committed to the dictatorship of the proletariat.
3. The present stage of the struggle, where the proletariat still does not have at its disposal sufficient military power, where the Majority Socialist party has a strong spiritual influence on public officials, employees and certain sections of the workers, where the USPD has behind it the majority of the urban working class, is an indication that the objective foundations for the proletarian dictatorship do not currently exist.
4. For the further conquest of the proletarian masses for communism, a state of affairs in which political freedom can be enjoyed without restriction, and bourgeois democracy cannot operate as the dictatorship of capital, is, from the viewpoint of the development of the proletarian dictatorship, of the utmost importance in further winning the proletarian masses over to the side of communism.
5. The KPD considers the formation of a socialist government excluding the bourgeois-capitalist parties a desirable condition for the self-affirmation of the proletarian masses and their maturation for the exercise of the

25 Riddell (ed.) 2011.

26 Reprinted in Spartakus 1920, p. 161.

27 A reference to the government presided over by Gustav Bauer of the SPD, a coalition of the SPD, the Catholic *Zentrum* and the liberal *Deutsche Demokratische Partei* (DDP) known as *Kabinett Bauer*, which lasted from 21 June 1919 to 27 March 1920. It fell ten days after the collapse of the Kapp Putsch and was replaced by the government presided over by Hermann Müller. The *Kabinett Müller I* was also a coalition of the SPD, the Centre Party and the DDP.

proletarian dictatorship. It will play towards the government the role of a loyal opposition, as long as the government provides guarantees for the political activity of the working class, as long as it combats the bourgeois counter-revolution with all the means at its disposal and does not hinder the social and organisational strengthening of the working class.

By 'loyal opposition' we mean: no preparation for a violent revolution, obviously retaining the party's freedom of political agitation for its goals and slogans.

The 'Declaration of "Loyal Opposition"' to the reformist workers' government proposed by the leader of the Social-Democratic union bureaucracy Carl Legien was rejected by the KPD(s)'s *Zentrale* by twelve votes to eight,²⁸ and it was also opposed in the Communist International by Béla Kun, Nikolai Bukharin and Karl Radek.²⁹ It was, however, critically endorsed by Lenin in his work *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, as we will immediately see.

The reasons for the adoption of this tactic are laid out in an article on the Kapp Putsch published in *Die Kommunistische Internationale* under the pseudonym Spartakus, but written by the Polish Communist Miechislaw Bronski, who supported Levi's position.³⁰ He argued that the controversy over the 'Declaration of "Loyal Opposition"' within the KPD was 'a dispute over tactics':

28 Broué 2005, p. 371.

29 See Radek's ultra-left article condemning the 'Declaration of "Loyal Opposition"', where he ominously declared that 'an activation of the policy of German Communism is a vital question for the International', closing with a warning 'against the danger of communist possibilism' (Radek 1920, pp. 165, 173).

30 The biographical note in Broué's *German Revolution* reads: 'Braun, M.J. (Miechislaw Bronski, 1882–1937). Polish, Social Democrat in 1902, took part in 1905 Revolution, served a year in prison. Emigrated to Switzerland in 1907, active in Swiss Social-Democratic Party and, in opposition to Luxemburg and Jogiches, supported Warsaw Committee, which Radek also supported. Close to Lenin, took part in Zimmerwald and Kienthal Conferences, a leader of Zimmerwald Left. Accompanied Lenin in "sealed train" in April 1917, took part in Russian Revolution. Appointed consular representative in Berlin in 1918, made contact with German revolutionaries. Deported in November. Returned to Germany in 1919, was member of Western European Secretariat and leadership of KPD(s) under a pseudonym. Sharply criticised for *Zentrale's* position at beginning of Kapp Putsch and recalled to Moscow shortly afterwards. Lectured at University of Moscow, active in Polish Communist Party, joining its Political Bureau. Arrested and executed during purges' (Broué 2005, p. 961).

It is about the question: can it be the task of the Communist Party to agree in a struggle to a compromise proposal, which represents an improvement compared with the previous situation, but which is far from meeting the goals and slogans of the party? To the critics who say that the timing of the Declaration of the *Zentrale* was inappropriate, namely premature, we can only say: the Declaration was not an initiative of the KPD, but is the answer to a question that was asked of the Communist Party by the left-wing of the USPD.³¹

As regards the best possible outcome of the initiative – the replacement of the Ebert-Bauer government by ‘a Hilferding-Legien government’³² – Bronski explained Levi’s political logic as follows:

If the right wing of the USPD had formed, together with the left wing of the Majority Socialists [the SPD], a purely socialist government, that would by no means have meant a curbing of the masses under the influence of the left wing of the USPD by the leadership of the right wing, as has been asserted, but on the contrary, the result would have been a systematic pushing of the workers now under the aegis of the USPD into the orbit of the KPD. It would have been an opportunity to let the Hilferdings and Kautskys ruin themselves in the eyes of the masses by their practical activity, as the Majority Socialist Party has actually been compromised and ruined by its government activity.³³

The document reassured those party activists who feared that the KPD would bind its hands by ‘playing the midwife in the development of such a purely socialist government’ and even ‘pledging loyalty’ to it:

Should it thus be said that we behave uncritically towards the so-called purely socialist government, that we expect from it the solution to all problems, that we think that this government is able to realise socialism, as we understand it? Not at all! On the contrary! The socialist government which tries to do away with the opposition between capital and labour in a democratic way, is placed in a situation where its bankruptcy is inevitable. It will be unable to seriously carry out socialisation. It will be unable to thoroughly and seriously ward off unemployment and inflation.

31 Spartakus 1920, p. 164.

32 Spartakus 1920, p. 165.

33 Ibid.

But what it can and must do thoroughly is *set an example for the impossibility of reaching socialism without the dictatorship of the proletariat*. This teaching is so valuable for the thorough ideological preparation of the working class for the soviet dictatorship that we have every reason to bring about this political state of affairs, precisely from the standpoint of the party which consistently stands on the ground of the proletarian dictatorship.³⁴

The logic of the ‘purely socialist government’ tactic was exactly the same as that of the Bolshevik slogan, ‘Down with the Ten Capitalist Ministers!’, during the Russian Revolution:

Also in Russia, after the Kornilov putsch, there was a situation where the Bolshevik Party called on the Kerensky government to break up the coalition with the bourgeoisie, in which case the party promised not to overthrow the government by violent means. However, Kerensky and the Mensheviks refused to abandon the coalition with the bourgeoisie, and then they had to accept the consequences of their policy.³⁵

Interestingly, the document uses the expression ‘United Front [*Einheitsfront*]’, which reappears in Clara Zetkin’s article on the Kapp Putsch, written shortly afterwards.³⁶

Lenin on Levi’s ‘Declaration of “Loyal Opposition”’ (April 1920)

In the Appendix to his work *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*, Lenin wrote:

This statement is quite correct both in its basic premise and its practical conclusions. The basic premise is that at present there is no ‘objective

34 Spartakus 1920, pp. 166–7, emphasis in the original.

35 Spartakus 1920, p. 167.

36 ‘Die einmal geschaffene Einheitsfront, die Machtentfaltung der Arbeiterschaft in nie dagewesener Tiefe ermöglichte, kann durch gegenrevolutionäre Maßnahmen der bürgerlich-sozialistischen Regierung nicht ausgetilgt werden’ (Spartakus 1920, p. 169). ‘Die sozialpatriotischen Drahtzieher suchten die Bedeutung der revolutionären Einheitsfront des Proletariats geflissentlich zu verwischen und zu verhüllen’ (Zetkin 1920, p. 157).

basis' for the dictatorship of the proletariat because the 'majority of the urban workers' support the Independents. The conclusion is: a promise to be a 'loyal opposition' (i.e., renunciation of preparations for a 'forcible overthrow') to a 'socialist government if it excludes bourgeois-capitalist parties'.

In the main, this tactic is undoubtedly correct. Yet, even if minor inaccuracies of formulation should not be dwelt on, it is impossible to pass over in silence the fact that a government consisting of social-traitors should not (in an official statement by the Communist Party) be called 'socialist'; that one should not speak of the exclusion of 'bourgeois-capitalist parties', when the parties both of the Scheidemanns and of the Kautskys and Crispiens are petty-bourgeois-democratic parties; that things should never be written that are contained in section 4 of the statement, which reads: '... A state of affairs in which political freedom can be enjoyed without restriction, and bourgeois democracy cannot operate as the dictatorship of capital is, from the viewpoint of the development of the proletarian dictatorship, of the utmost importance in further winning the proletarian masses over to the side of communism.'

Such a state of affairs is impossible. Petty-bourgeois leaders, the German Hendersons (Scheidemanns) and Snowdens (Crispiens), do not and cannot go beyond the bounds of bourgeois democracy, which, in its turn, cannot but be a dictatorship of capital. To achieve the practical results that the Central Committee of the Communist Party had been quite rightly working for, there was no need to write such things, which are wrong in principle and politically harmful. It would have been sufficient to say (if one wished to observe parliamentary amenities): 'As long as the majority of the urban workers follow the Independents, we Communists must do nothing to prevent those workers from getting rid of their last philistine-democratic (i.e., "bourgeois-capitalist") illusions by going through the experience of having a government of their "own"'. That is sufficient ground for a compromise, which is really necessary and should consist in renouncing, for a certain period, all attempts at the forcible overthrow of a government which enjoys the confidence of a majority of the urban workers. But in everyday mass agitation, in which one is not bound by official parliamentary amenities, one might, of course, add: 'Let scoundrels like the Scheidemanns, and philistines like the Kautskys and Crispiens reveal by their deeds how they have been fooled themselves and how they are fooling the workers; their "clean" government will itself do the "cleanest" job of all in "cleansing" the

Augean stables of socialism, Social-Democracy and other forms of social treachery'.³⁷

We have quoted Lenin's passages on Levi's 'Declaration of "Loyal Opposition"' in full to show his critical endorsement of Levi's political initiatives during 1919 and 1920.

Paul Levi at the Second Congress of the Communist International (July–August 1920)

The opportunity to turn the Kapp Putsch into a step forward for the German revolution was missed by the left organisations; nonetheless, the mass general strike against the putsch marked the beginning of a new wave of workers' militancy. The months of March–April 1920 also witnessed the struggle of the so-called 'Red Ruhr Army [*Rote Ruhrarmee*]' against the *Freikorps* and the Army. At the Reichstag elections held in June 1920, Levi and Zetkin were elected and the KPD polled more than 442,000 votes. According to Helmut Gruber:

The USPD, which Levi considered the future source of communist strength, received 4.9 million votes. The SPD vote declined to 5.6 million from the 11.5 million polled in 1919. In July [1920] Levi left for the Second Congress of the Comintern in Moscow with high hopes of winning approval for his program. Four representatives of the USPD were invited as observers. In the discussion of Levi's report to the Congress, his actions were accepted as sound.³⁸

At the Second Congress of the Communist International, Levi personally intervened six times, the first in the opening session of 19 July and the last in the closing session of 4 August. He defended the tactics adopted at the Heidelberg Congress in the following words:

The Party must wither and become a sect if it neglects to find ways by which it can penetrate into the life of the revolutionary masses. [...] The main question for us is how we find the way to the masses, and I am of the opinion that we must try all the ways that lead to the masses. These are the trades unions, workers' councils where such organisations arise,

37 Lenin 1976a, p. 110.

38 Gruber (ed.) 1967, p. 397.

the parliamentary battlefield and even non-party organisations to the extent, at least, that they grow out of the subsoil of social life, out of the social and economic stratification of society. It is because of these reservations that I think I must differ from the main speaker when he says in point six of the Theses: 'The Communists support in every way the formation of broad, non-party organisations of workers besides the Communist Party.'³⁹

Levi was worried that this would lead to the revival of attempts to set up 'red unions' like the ones sponsored by his former rivals, now gathered in the KAPD:

It seems to me that something on these lines must be said, so that the formation of factions of workers and non-party workers' organisations does not simply become a game, and so that we do not make up new organisational forms that do not grow purely and simply out of economic and social necessity. We must be careful in the highest degree in the formation of new organisations, and where such organisations exist we must avoid spreading them arbitrarily and unconditionally. In saying this I am thinking particularly of Germany, where the trades unions have grown to almost 9 million members and where despite that there were comrades who went so far in the drive for new types of organisation that they tried to mislead us communists into abandoning this big field of work.⁴⁰

On the other hand, in his polemics with the representatives of the USPD, Levi pointed out that the party could not merely stand with the masses, but had to lead them to the revolutionary seizure of power:

What really is the deep meaning of the controversies with Dittmann and Crispien that took place yesterday? It is the fact that was repeated until we were tired of it: 'We had a relationship with the masses, we stood where the masses stood, our attitude was approved by the masses.' This is a fundamental error concerning the role of the party towards the masses. For, true as it is that the party cannot wage the revolutionary struggle without the masses, it is just as fatal for a party to confine itself all the time to asking 'What are the masses doing?' and at every point to say only what will flatter the masses. That has anyway up till now been the political method of the USPD, which has even boasted about the fact that at every point it

39 Comintern 1977, p. 65.

40 Comintern 1977, p. 66.

has only represented what the masses want. Thus its history is a history of mistakes and failures, the history of the failure of the German masses in general. Where the masses failed the German Independents also failed. Where the masses were not conscious of their strength the Independents did not call on them to be strong but became weak with the masses.⁴¹

Levi criticised the USPD's 'Action Programme' for being so broad that anyone could 'agree' with it, adding: 'instead of an Action Programme that can stretch to include Hilferding and Stöcker and consists only of phrases, give us a real political programme.' The Communist International had to force the leaders of the right wing of the USPD to tell the masses clearly what they wanted:

And I think that that will be the main task of the Congress, to talk in clear and comprehensible words to the German workers who are in sympathy with us and to tell them what, where and how the right wing is that up to now has been hiding itself so skilfully by finding revolutionary phrases as the masses needed them. It is in this framework that I have, up until now, conceived the struggle against the German Independents. We must express in clear words the criticism that people in the ranks of the USPD have not yet found the courage and the strength to utter, the feeling of gloomy dissatisfaction, of striving beyond the framework that the USPD has provided up to now. This is how we must serve our party and the USPD masses and continue our criticism. We must tell the masses what they have not yet heard from their own leaders, even the lefts.⁴²

In his polemics with the Dutch delegate Wijnkoop, who had opposed the fact that four representatives of the USPD had been invited to the Congress, Levi made a statement whose full significance would only become clear in the aftermath of the 'March Action':

He takes up the argument of the left wing of the USPD, which we have continually fought. This wing is also always saying: 'We do not want to lay bare our differences; we do not want to say anything about them when others are present.' We say that this position involves a fatal misunderstanding of the significance of the controversies in the German proletariat.

41 Comintern 1977, p. 278.

42 Comintern 1977, pp. 283–4.

If mistakes have been committed they have to be laid bare, whether enemies are present or not.⁴³

The publication in *Die Kommunistische Internationale* of a report by Paul Levi on the German political situation in September 1920 is a clear indication that the leadership of the Communist International, at Lenin's initiative, continued to back his political line immediately before the Congress of the USPD held in Halle, which was Levi's greatest political triumph.⁴⁴

The Halle Congress of the USPD (October 1920) and the 'Open Letter' of the *Zentrale* of the VKPD (8 January 1921)

From 12 to 17 October 1920, the USPD held a congress in Halle which resulted in a split between its left and right wings and the birth of the Unified Communist Party of Germany [*Vereinigte Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, VKPD] after the unification of the USPD left with the Spartacus League in December 1920. The USPD, with its 700,000 members and over 50 daily papers, was the largest centrist formation in the world labour movement. Would this huge contingent of militant workers choose to join the Third International or would they remain wavering between Communism and Social Democracy? That was the crucial question which the Halle Congress had to decide upon. At the congress spoke not only the representatives of German Social Democracy and Communism, but also Martov and Zinoviev, which demonstrates the international significance of the event.⁴⁵ The result of the tactics deployed by Paul Levi was the formation of the world's largest Communist Party outside the borders of Russia: the VKPD, which had Paul Levi and Ernst Däumig as co-chairs, grew to 350,000 members before the 'March Action' of 1921.

Levi's next political move was the 'Open Letter [*Offener Brief*]' published on 8 January 1921 in the party organ *Die Rote Fahne*. The 'Open Letter' was the first public statement of what would later come to be known as the *Einheitsfrontpolitik* or 'United-Front Policy'. As Broué points out, the first important initiative in the direction of the policy which Levi outlined came from the rank-and-file of the VKPD, more specifically from the metalworkers' union in Stuttgart. According to Broué's account:

43 Comintern 1977, p. 277.

44 Levi 1920b.

45 See the documents in Lewis and Lih 2011.

In Stuttgart, the Party had won solid positions in the metalworkers' union, over which one of its members, Melcher, presided, and in the local trade-union federation. The local Communists were sensitive to the demands that were raised amongst the non-Communist workers, in particular, their yearning for working-class unity. They secured the agreement of the trade-union bodies which they led for putting a demand to the national leadership of the metalworkers' union, the DMV, and the ADGB that they undertake immediately a joint struggle for concrete improvement in the workers' living conditions. A general meeting took place, in the course of which Melcher and his comrades received more support than Robert Dissmann, the right Independent, who appeared in person. The meeting demanded, in the name of the 26,000 members of the metalworkers' union in Stuttgart, that a joint struggle be organised around five basic demands:

- Lower prices for food.
- Opening the capitalists' books, and higher unemployment benefit.
- Lower taxes on wages and higher taxes on the rich.
- Workers' control of supply and distribution of raw materials and food.
- Disarming of reactionary gangs, and arming of the workers.

The Zentrale approved this initiative, and published the appeal of the Stuttgart metalworkers (*Die Rote Fahne*, 2, 10 December 1920). Moreover, it encouraged the organisation in every locality and workplace of workers' meetings to formulate common demands in this way, and to decide on means by which to fight for them. A new tactic was taking form.⁴⁶

In the 'Open Letter', the VKPD proposed to all the workers' organisations, parties and trade unions to undertake joint action on the points on which agreement was possible. Their programme of joint action included: demands for higher pensions for disabled war veterans; elimination of unemployment; improvement of the country's finances at the expense of the monopolies; introduction of factory-committee control over all stocks of food, raw materials and fuel; restarting of all closed enterprises; control over sowing, harvesting and marketing of all farm produce by the Peasants' Councils together with the agricultural labourers' organisations; immediate disarming and disbanding of all bourgeois militarised organisations; establishment of workers' self-defence;

46 Broué 2005, pp. 468–9.

amnesty for all political prisoners; immediate resumption of trade and diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia.

Though the 'Open Letter' was rejected by the right-wing leadership of the organisations to which it was addressed, Lenin called it '*perfectly correct tactics*', adding: 'I have condemned the contrary opinion of our "Lefts" who were opposed to this letter'.⁴⁷ Elsewhere Lenin expressed himself even more forcefully on this issue. In a letter to Zinoviev dated 10 June 1921, he wrote:

The tactic of the Open Letter should definitely be applied everywhere. This should be said straight out, clearly and exactly, because waverings in regard to the 'Open Letter' are extremely harmful, extremely shameful and *extremely widespread*. We may as well admit this. All those who have failed to grasp the necessity of the Open Letter tactic should be *expelled* from the Communist International within a month after its Third Congress. I clearly see my mistake in voting for the admission of the KAPD. It will have to be rectified as quickly and fully as possible.⁴⁸

Given the historical significance of the Open Letter, we have translated it in full for the documentary appendix to the present article.

The Livorno Split (15–21 January 1921) and the Creation of the Italian Communist Party

On 21 January 1921 there took place the split of the Italian Socialist Party at its congress in Livorno. Fuelling the split were two envoys of the Comintern: the Hungarian Mátyás Rákosi and the Bulgarian Hristo Kabakchiev. The Livorno Congress of the PSI led to the formation of the Italian Communist Party by the former PSI left wing, led by the sectarian Amadeo Bordiga – a measure to which Levi, who attended the congress as a representative of the VKPD, objected so much that it led to his resignation from the VKPD's Central Committee. Levi's position merits careful examination, because he had a sustained interest in the Italian left,⁴⁹ and because it cannot be argued that he was a faint-hearted man

47 Lenin 1976b, emphasis in the original.

48 Lenin 1965, p. 319, emphasis in the original.

49 See Levi's position on the occupation of the factories (September 1920) in the interview he gave to *Avanti!* on 14 and 15 September 1920, his opening statement at the Livorno Congress reproduced in *L'Ordine Nuovo* on 16 January 1921, his report to the Executive Committee of the Communist International on the Congress of Livorno, written soon

who shrank at the prospect of *any* split. Indeed, during the previous four years he had taken part or been instrumental in no less than four splits: that of the USPD from the SPD in 1917, of the KPD from the USPD in 1918, the expulsion of the ultra-lefts from the KPD at the Heidelberg Congress in 1919, and finally the split between the left and right wings of the USPD at its Halle Congress in October 1920.

Levi was present at the Livorno Congress and even appeared on the platform, as a representative of the Unified Communist Party of Germany, to open the debate, asking to expel the reformists. Levi asserted that ‘in the history of the proletariat, the time arrives when we must recognize that yesterday’s brother is not today’s, nor will he be tomorrow’s.’⁵⁰ Palmiro Togliatti, who was publishing *L’Ordine Nuovo* in Gramsci’s absence, had Levi’s statement printed in bold letters on the first page of the paper for 16 January 1921.⁵¹ However, Levi opposed the clumsy and sectarian way in which the split was carried out under the influence of the ECCI’s envoys Mátyás Rákosi and Hristo Kabakchiev – namely through the expulsion, not only of the right wing led by Filippo Turati, but also of the centrist wing led by Giacinto Serrati, who carried with him most of the organised Italian proletariat.

On 20 January 1921, one day before the split, Levi sent a report on the Livorno Congress to the Executive Committee of the Communist International. At that moment Levi was not addressing the Executive Committee as an opponent, even less as a dissident, but as the leader of the German Communist Party and as a member of this same Executive Committee to which he had been elected by the Second Comintern Congress. According to the editors of the English version of the report:

Paul Levi grasped from the beginning that the Leghorn (Livorno) affair was not purely an Italian concern but had implications for the Comintern as a whole. His interventions at Leghorn, his strong reactions upon his return to Berlin, and his speech on the same subject the following month (February 1921) before the German Communist Party’s ‘Zentrale’, can be understood only in this light.⁵²

Levi subscribed to the Comintern’s aim at both of the French Socialist party congress in Tours twenty days earlier and the Congress of the German

after his return to Berlin, reproduced in Drachkovitch and Lazitch (eds.) 1966, pp. 271–82, and his article on the Livorno Congress in *Die Rote Fahne*, 23 January 1921.

50 Cammett 1967, p. 144.

51 Cammett 1967, p. 258, n. 8.

52 Levi 1966, p. 272.

Independent Socialists in Halle in October 1920 – namely to provoke a split in two parties that were not Comintern members and to attract their majorities into the Comintern (an aim which was achieved in both cases). But the aim at Livorno was ‘to provoke a split in a party that had belonged to the Comintern since 1919 and, besides, to attract only a minority to the Comintern and lose the large mass of adherents, who had previously been in the Comintern. This tactical error seemed unforgivable to Levi’, because he ‘recognized that the majority of the Socialist proletariat would not follow the Communist dissidents.’⁵³ He also wondered ‘what effect this split will have in other countries, where we already must bear the onus of splitting the proletariat’.⁵⁴

Levi believed that ‘the nucleus of the left of the USPD in Germany is equivalent to the Serrati group’, and that therefore it had been ‘a serious mistake on the part of the Communist International to push that nucleus to the right by stubbornness and by force’.⁵⁵ Levi believed that ‘the comrades would complicate their task immeasurably if, under the conditions prevailing in Italy, they excluded not only the reformists but also the Serrati camp’.⁵⁶ He concluded that ‘without the left wing of the Serrati group the party will lack a core’ and that ‘if this left wing can be won only by paying the price of accepting Serrati, Serrati must be taken in the bargain, even if one views his person with more distaste than I do.’⁵⁷

Mátyás Rákosi, Karl Radek, Béla Kun and the Resignation of Paul Levi from the VKPD’s Central Committee (22 February 1921)

Levi developed these ideas in a speech delivered at the meeting of the Central Committee of the VKPD⁵⁸ on 24 February 1921⁵⁹ convoked at the request of the

53 Levi 1966, p. 273.

54 Levi 1966, pp. 281–2.

55 Quoted in Cyr 2012, p. 148.

56 Levi 1966, p. 278.

57 Levi 1966, p. 281.

58 ‘The Central Committee or *Zentralausschuss*, composed of delegates from each of the party’s twenty-eight districts, was a new leadership instrument created by the KPD at the end of 1920. Thereafter, major policy decisions were made at joint meetings of the Central Committee and the *Zentrale*, which evolved into an executive organ. Not only did the Central Committee serve as a watchdog over the *Zentrale*, but, given its broader representation, it also became the breeding ground for dissenting factions’ (Gruber (ed.) 1967, p. 313).

59 Later published under the title ‘The Beginning of the Crisis in the Communist Party and the International’ and reproduced in Levi 2011, pp. 92–112.

ECCI delegate Mátyás Rákosi, stopping in Berlin en route from Italy to Russia. Rákosi was helped in his endeavours by Karl Radek, who, after initially opposing the Livorno split, had switched sides. Radek attacked Levi for his attitude in Livorno and organised an anti-Levi faction within the VKPD.⁶⁰

Levi's discussion of the Livorno split in *Die Rote Fahne*, on 22 January 1921, led to a public argument with Radek, who defended the ECCI's position in the paper four days later and personally clashed with him at a stormy meeting of the *Zentrale*. Radek accused Levi of supporting the centrist Serrati (who, in turn 'refused to break with the reformist trade union bureaucracy'), and of helping him 'to sabotage the very same resolutions of the Second Congress of the Communist International in the drafting of which he himself cooperated'.⁶¹ However, prominent members of the *Zentrale* such as Clara Zetkin and co-chair Ernst Däumig supported Levi.

On 22 February 1921 Mátyás Rákosi (later known as 'Stalin's best disciple') addressed the full Central Committee of the German Communist Party, defending the Livorno decision and insisting on the need to apply the splitting tactics against the centrist leaders.

In his speech before the Central Committee, Levi was critical of the 'mechanical' way in which the Livorno split had been carried out, which meant that the Communist International had dumped not only Serrati, but also the masses that stood behind him. This raised 'the fundamental question: how are we to proceed with the construction of a Communist party in Western Europe?'⁶² According to Levi:

one thing should be crystal-clear: there exist two ways in which to achieve a higher degree of communist experience in these masses organisationally connected with the Third International. One way to carry out this education involves new splits; the other way implies that we train politically the masses who have found their way to us, experience with them the present age, the revolution, and in this way reach a higher stage together with and within the masses.⁶³

The Communist International had raised to the level of a principle the idea of creating parties 'not through organic growth with the masses but through

60 See the documents in Gruber (ed.) 1967, pp. 346–50.

61 Radek 1967, pp. 310, 312, emphasis in the original.

62 Levi 2011, p. 103.

63 Levi 2011, p. 106.

deliberate splits'.⁶⁴ On the contrary, Levi argued, 'splits in a mass party . . . cannot be carried out on the basis of resolutions, but only on the basis of political experience'.⁶⁵ Debates had to turn on political questions, not on organisational ones, in order to result in a process of political education. Levi predicted that 'if the Communist International functions in Western Europe in terms of admission and expulsion like a recoiling cannon' it would experience 'the worst possible setback'.⁶⁶

Rákosi obtained the support of the Central Committee by a small majority. Levi and Däumig resigned from the *Zentrale* together with Clara Zetkin, Otto Brass, Adolf Hoffmann and Curt Geyer (who was then in Moscow), with Heinrich Brandler – one of the leaders of the anti-Levi faction organised by Radek in the VKPD – emerging as the party's effective leader.

Lenin, who valued Levi's judgement highly, criticised his attitude in the following words:

I consider your tactics in respect of Serrati erroneous. Any defence or even semi-defence of Serrati was a mistake. But to withdraw from the Central Committee!!!! That, in any case, was the biggest mistake! If we tolerate the practice of responsible members of the Central Committee withdrawing from it when they are left in a minority, the Communist Parties will never develop normally or become strong. Instead of withdrawing, it would have been better to discuss the controversial question several times jointly with the Executive Committee.⁶⁷

Now that Radek's '*Leviten*' were excluded from the party leadership, it was possible to deploy a strategy based on the 'theory of the offensive' then sponsored in the Comintern by Zinoviev. According to Gruber:

Heinrich Brandler, August Thalheimer, and Paul Frölich had taken over the leadership after Levi resigned in February, and were intent upon a program of action. They branded Levi's united front policy as opportunist and sought to counteract it with a 'theory of the offensive'. [. . .] This view of events seems to have been shared by Zinoviev and the Comintern Executive; in the first days of March [1921], Béla Kun, Pogany, and Guralski

64 Levi 2011, p. 108.

65 Levi 2011, p. 109.

66 Levi 2011, p. 108.

67 Lenin 1976b.

were dispatched from Moscow to galvanize the German left into action.⁶⁸ With the aid and advice of Kun, plans were made by the VKPD leaders for an offensive to begin sometime after Easter.⁶⁹

Levi's Letter to Lenin on the Origins of the 'March Action'

According to a letter sent by Levi to Lenin on 27 March 1921, i.e. after the putsch, the 'March Action' was engineered by the ECCI's delegate Béla Kun in order to 'relieve' Russia from the crisis of War Communism:

You know that four weeks ago a comrade from the Communist International [Béla Kun] was sent to Germany. I myself had an interview with him only about 10 days ago – so far the only one. Before meeting me he had had meetings with the members of the Central Committee, whose contents I do not know, but can only deduce from the conversation that he had with comrade Clara [Zetkin], which preceded the interview with me by 9 days. The content of the conversations with me and with comrade Clara, who immediately reported it to me, was as follows: The comrade [Béla Kun] declared: Russia is in an extraordinarily difficult situation. It is absolutely necessary that Russia should be relieved by movements in the West, and for this reason the German party should instantly spring into action. The VKPD counted now 500,000 members, with whom one could bring around 1,500,000 workers, which is enough to overthrow the government. He was therefore for the immediate beginning of the struggle with the slogan: Overthrow the government! Both comrade Clara and I stressed to the comrade that we also knew the difficulty of the situation in Russia, even if we did not know the details, and that quite apart from the momentarily difficult situation of Russia, we also wanted to abbreviate as much as possible the period in which Russia stands, to a certain extent, alone. But we were both of the opinion that it not only would not help, but would be the most serious blow to Soviet Russia if we launched in Germany actions that do not constitute a victory, but a breakdown of the movement in Germany. The comrade, by contrast, held firmly to the idea that actions should be started immediately, even if

68 August Guralsky was a pseudonym of Abraham Heifetz, and that József Pogány who would later play a disgraceful role in the American Communist Party as John Pepper (see Cannon 1962).

69 Gruber (ed.) 1967, p. 403.

only, as he put it, ‘partial actions’, and on his advice and at his insistence the *Zentrale* convened the meeting of the Central Committee held on 17 March this year, in which ‘the working class’ was asked to start at once actions for a series of demands, at the head of which stood: overthrow the government.

The events now took the following course: On 17 March, the Central Committee meeting was held, in which the suggestions and instructions of the comrades sent from over there were turned into policy. On 18 March, *Die Rote Fahne* adapted to this new resolution and summoned to the armed struggle without first saying for what objectives, adhering to this line for a few days. This and the instructions of the representative of the Executive [Committee of the Communist International, Béla Kun] were the only political preparation for what came later. [...] With this action not only the partial actions, in the best sense of the word, that were feasible in central Germany have been wrecked, but the fruits of a two-year struggle and two years’ work of the Communist Party in Germany have been, in my opinion, destroyed.⁷⁰

According to contemporary political gossip, Kun was following the instructions of Zinoviev, who was frightened by Russia’s internal difficulties (he was President of the Petrograd soviet during the Kronstadt rebellion) and wanted to ‘force’ a revolutionary crisis in Germany in order to prevent the Russian Communists from having to concede the retreat of the New Economic Policy, finally adopted by the Tenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party held at the time of the Kronstadt revolt (7–17 March 1921):

People in Zinoviev’s entourage were freely saying that, even if they were not victorious, great struggles by the international proletariat would permit Russia to avoid having to resort to the New Economic Policy. [...] We can regard it as plausible that those who supported the strategy of the ‘offensive’ in the International sincerely desired to break at all costs

70 Bayerlein and Albert (eds.) 2014, pp. 141–2: Dok. 35: ‘Die Frucht eines zweijährigen Kampfes wird zerstört’: Paul Levis Brief an Lenin zur Kritik der ‘Märzaktion’, [Berlin], 27.3.1921. Béla Kun confirmed that these interviews took place in a letter sent to Lenin from Vienna on 6 May 1921, adding that ‘the old lady’ Cara Zetkin ‘suffered from “dementia seniles” and is the living proof that Lofargne [Lafargue] with his wife acted in a completely correct way’ by committing suicide in old age (Bayerlein and Albert (eds.) 2014, p. 155: Dok. 43: ‘Persönlicher Brief des “Spaniers” (d.i. Béla Kun) an Lenin über die gescheiterte Märzaktion in Deutschland’, [Wien], 6.5.1921).

the isolation which doomed the Bolsheviks to the costly strategic retreat of the NEP, by forcing, if necessary, the development and artificially accelerating the speed of the revolution.⁷¹

The 'March Action' in Germany (17–29 March 1921)

On 16 March 1921, Otto Hörsing, the Social-Democratic governor [*Oberpräsident*] of Saxony, announced that he intended to have several industrial zones, including the mining district of Mansfeld-Eisleben, occupied by the police, clearly in order to disarm the workers (who had kept their weapons after the Kapp Putsch) and to break up a Communist stronghold. The Party leaders at Halle, which incorporated the Mansfeld area, received the order to call a general strike as soon as the police occupied a factory, and to prepare at once for armed resistance. The call for a general strike was issued on 20 March 1921 as an ultimatum to the non-Communist workers. However, on the morning of 22 March, the strike was only partial. Clearly the mass of the workers was not following the Communist avant-garde and therefore conditions were not ripe for the organisation of an uprising. However, that is exactly what the VKPD's leaders did with the support of the KAPD (Kun had arranged in Berlin an agreement for joint action between the two Communist parties), with disastrous results.

On 24 March 1921, the Communists used every means, including force, to attempt to set off a general strike. Groups of activists tried to occupy factories by surprise in order to prevent the entry of the great mass of non-Communist workers, whom they called 'scabs'. Elsewhere, groups of unemployed clashed with workers on their way to work or at the factories. The general outcome was insignificant. Pessimistic estimates reckoned 200,000 strikers; optimistic ones claimed half a million. In Berlin, the strike was practically non-existent, and the joint demonstration of the VKPD and KAPD did not even attract 4,000 people, whereas a few weeks before, in the elections to the Prussian *Landtag* on 20 February 1921, the VKPD had received 200,000 votes. Against the orders of the *Zentrale*, the Communist leaders in the Ruhr gave the signal to return to work, but it was only on 1 April 1921 that a call from the *Zentrale* gave the order to end the strike.

The days that followed the defeat of the March Action revealed the extent of the disaster which the VKPD's leaders had inflicted upon their party. The party was temporarily made illegal; its newspapers were banned and its leaders arrested, including Brandler. Most importantly, the number of party

71 Broué 2005, pp. 494, 532.

members went down from about 375,000 before the 'March Action' to 160,000 in August 1921 and to 140,000 in November 1921.⁷² The massive loss of membership of the VKPD after the 'March Action' marked the end of the second phase of the German revolution – the third and final phase of the German revolution would start with the French and Belgian occupation of the Ruhr in January 1923 and would close with the failed 'German October' of 1923.

Levi's Pamphlet *Our Path: Against Putschism* (3–4 April 1921)

Paul Levi offered a critique of the 'March Action' in his pamphlet *Our Path: Against Putschism*,⁷³ written between 3 and 4 April 1921, as well as in his speech 'What Is the Crime: The March Action or Criticising It?', delivered at a session of the Central Committee of the German Communist Party held on 4 May 1921.⁷⁴ The introduction to 'Our Path: Against Putschism' shows the sharp tone in which Levi's criticism of the VKPD's action, and of the Comintern's role in it, was framed: 'The irresponsible game played with the existence of a party, with the lives and fates of its members, must be brought to an end. It has to be ended by the will of the members, given that those responsible for it still refuse to see what they have done.'⁷⁵

According to Levi, the VKPD had about a fifth of the workers' parties' votes, and its members made up about 1 in 16 of the trade-union organised proletariat. Apart from central Germany, where the VKPD was in a numerical majority, there was no district in Germany where it had such a majority, and it did not control any essential district, such as Berlin or Rhineland-Westphalia, where an action could right away shatter the bourgeois state. Besides, the VKPD had no significant support in the army (it had been turned into a 'professional' army by the Versailles treaty) or among railway workers, and, in general, its influence was much greater among the unemployed than among union-organised workers. It was thus bound to collaborate and work together with the proletariat at large, and could only act as a vanguard if the working class itself came into action. Finally, the VKPD had no significant support among the middle classes, which tended to flock behind the nationalist right-wing parties and armed groups. Under those circumstances, Levi argued, it was sheer lunacy to launch an uprising as the VKPD did in March 1921.

72 Bayerlein and Albert (eds.) 2014, p. 156, note, citing Koch-Baumgarten 1986, pp. 315–444.

73 Levi 2011, pp. 119–65.

74 Levi 2011, pp. 166–205.

75 Levi 2011, pp. 119–20.

‘What should the relation of the Communists to the masses be in an action?’, Levi asked.

An action that corresponds simply to the political needs of the Communist Party, and not to the subjective needs of the proletarian masses, is ruined in advance. The Communists do not have the ability to take action *in place* of the proletariat, *without* the proletariat, and ultimately even *against* the proletariat, especially when they are still such a minority in the proletariat. All they can do is create situations, using the political means described above, in which the proletariat sees the necessity of struggle, does struggle, and, in these struggles, the Communists can then lead the proletariat with their slogans.⁷⁶

Ultimatums like the one delivered to the non-Communist workers during the ‘March Action’ (‘Who is not *with* me is *against* me!’) were completely out of the question. A writer in *Rote Fahne*, under the authority of the *Zentrale*, had

declared war on the workers at the start of the action, *as a way of drumming them into action*. And the war began. The unemployed were dispatched in advance as assault columns. They occupied the factory-gates. They forced their way into the plants, started fires in some places, and tried to drive the workers off the premises. Open warfare broke out between the Communists and the workers.⁷⁷

The ‘anarchistic features of this March uprising,’ Levi argued, ‘the struggle of the unemployed against those in work, the struggle of Communists against proletarians, the emergence of the lumpenproletariat, the dynamite-attacks’, were all logical consequences of that basic attitude. ‘All this characterises the March movement as *the greatest Bakunist putsch in history to date*. [...] To call it Blanquism would be an insult to Blanqui.’⁷⁸ Levi drew the following political conclusion from this debacle: ‘*Never again in the history of the Communist Party must it happen that the Communists declare war on the workers*. [...] *The Communist Party is only the vanguard of the proletariat, and never a bludgeon against the proletariat*; it cannot march out if it has lost its connection with the main force’.⁷⁹

76 Levi 2011, p. 146.

77 Levi 2011, p. 148.

78 Ibid.

79 Levi 2011, p. 157, Levi’s emphasis.

Levi blamed the ECCI emissaries in Germany for the uprising. In a clear reference to Zinoviev, he argued that ‘certain ECCI circles showed a certain misgiving about the “inactivity” of the German Party. Apart from serious mistakes in the movement against the Kapp Putsch, however, the German Party could not be accused of actual failures. There was thus a certain strong influence on the *Zentrale* to embark on action *now, immediately and at any price*.’⁸⁰

Levi rejected Bukharin and Zinoviev’s ‘theory of the offensive’, backed by the argument that Soviet Russia stood at a critical juncture and that it was in urgent need of relief from outside. According to Levi, it was necessary to put an end to ‘the system of confidential agents’ that had brought such harm in Italy and Germany. Western Europe and Germany had become ‘a test-bed for all kinds of *duodecimo* statesmen’ like Mátyás Rákosi, the ECCI’s plenipotentiary at Livorno. ‘I have nothing against these Turkestanis,’ Levi argued, mocking Béla Kun – whose executions of White prisoners in the Civil War infuriated Lenin, who had him sent off on a mission to Turkestan – but ‘they would do less harm with their tricks in their own country.’⁸¹

Levi called ‘the method of dispatching irresponsible people, who can later be approved or disavowed as need be’, a ‘frivolous game’ that would be ‘fatal for the Third International’. A still more damaging effect of the ‘delegate-system’ was ‘the direct and secret contact between these delegates and the Moscow leadership’. Those ECCI delegates

never work with the *Zentrale* of the country in question, always behind its back and often even against it. *They* find people in Moscow who believe them, others do not. It is a system that inevitably undermines all confidence for mutual work on *both* sides, that of the ECCI as well as the affiliated parties. These comrades are generally unsuitable for *political* leadership, besides being too little trusted. The hopeless situation that results is that a centre of political leadership is lacking.⁸²

Levi’s immoderate language foreshadows his coming split with the Comintern: ‘The ECCI works more or less like a Cheka projected beyond the Russian frontiers – an impossible state of affairs. The clear demand that this should change, and that the leadership in certain countries should not be taken over

80 Levi 2011, p. 138, Levi’s emphasis.

81 Levi 2011, p. 18.

82 Levi 2011, p. 163, Levi’s emphasis.

by incompetent delegates with incompetent hands, the call for a political leadership and against a party-police, is not a demand for autonomy.⁸³

Levi's Speech before the Central Committee of the German Communist Party on the 'March Action' (4 May 1921) and his Break with the Communist International

In his speech at the meeting of the Central Committee of the VKPD on 4 May 1921 (called 'What Is the Crime: The March Action or Criticising It?') Levi developed the ideas contained in his pamphlet *Our Path: Against Putschism*. He contrasted the development of communism in Russia and Western Europe, arguing that, because of the widely divergent historical paths followed by both societies, different organisational forms were called for. Whereas Bolshevism had developed in a mostly feudal society, with a very weak bourgeoisie, in Western Europe 'the proletariat faces a fully developed bourgeoisie, and confronts the political consequences of the development of the bourgeoisie, i.e. democracy, and, under democracy, or what is understood as democracy under the rule of the bourgeoisie, the organisational form of the workers takes different forms from under the state-form of agricultural feudalism, which is absolutism.'⁸⁴ In Western Europe, therefore, the organisational form could only be 'that of a mass-party which is not closed in on itself. Mass-parties of this kind can never be moved at the command of a central committee, the command of a *Zentrale*, the only way they can be moved is in the invisible fluid in which they stand, in psychological interaction with the whole proletarian mass outside.'⁸⁵

There was, moreover, another fundamental difference: while Marxism in Russia had developed among a politically virgin working class, in Germany and Western Europe a large section of the proletariat was already organised. This created the dangerous possibility of a separation between the organised workers, who remained attached to the old reformist parties and unions, and the unorganised or unemployed ones, who embraced Communism. In such scenario, 'the Communist Party is not what it should be, the organisation of a part of the proletariat – the most advanced part, but a part going through the whole proletariat – but, instead, becomes a part vertically divided according to socially differentiating aspects.'⁸⁶

83 Levi 2011, p. 164.

84 Levi 2011, pp. 182–3.

85 Levi 2011, p. 183.

86 Ibid.

Germany was thus a kind of historical laboratory in which the tactics necessary to win over the proletarians grouped around the reformist mass organisations had first to be developed and tested. In order to do that, Communists had to reach ‘in political terms some kind of connection with these organisations’, to ‘win political influence over them.’ The KPD had embarked on this path with the ‘Open Letter’, which had raised the slogan of unity because ‘it is only possible to approach organised masses of workers if one does not just fight against them, but if one relates to their own ideas, even if these are mistaken, and helps them to overcome the error by their own experience.’⁸⁷

Levi closed his speech denouncing the dirty tricks employed in the polemics against him, particularly by Radek: ‘if someone has made a mistake, then attack three times harder the person who criticises the mistake while satisfying them in substance. It is the tactic you use to maintain your own infallibility.’⁸⁸ He denounced all the attempts to reach a private agreement, arguing that ‘the errors and mistakes of the Communists are just as much a component of the political experience of the proletarian class as their achievements. Neither the one nor the other can or should be withheld from the masses.’⁸⁹

In a letter to Paul Levi and Clara Zetkin dated 16 April 1921, Lenin reiterated his endorsement of the united-front policy initiated by Levi, stating that the Open Letter ‘is *perfectly correct* tactics (I have condemned the contrary opinion of our “Lefts” who were opposed to this letter)’, and recognised the correctness of Levi’s criticism of the March Action, stating: ‘I readily believe that the representative of the Executive Committee [Béla Kun] defended the silly tactics, which were too much to the left – to take immediate action “to help the Russians”: this representative is very often too Left.’⁹⁰ However, Lenin’s attempt at a compromise between the VKPD’s factions failed.

Levi’s Expulsion from the VKPD and the Communist International

On 15 April 1921, the *Zentrale* voted to expel Levi from the VKPD for indiscipline, and demanded that he give up his seat as a deputy in the Reichstag. Levi immediately appealed to the Central Committee against the *Zentrale*’s decision. On 16 April 1921, eight well-known leaders and Party members holding responsibilities declared their solidarity with him, and offered themselves as

87 Levi 2011, p. 184.

88 Levi 2011, p. 203.

89 Levi 2011, p. 204.

90 Lenin 1976b.

guarantors that he was stating the truth – Ernst Däumig, Clara Zetkin, Otto Brass and Adolf Hoffman, who had resigned with him from the *Zentrale* in February 1921; Curt Geyer, the delegate of the Party in Moscow; and three leading figures in the trade-union commission, former leaders of the revolutionary delegates [*Revolutionäre Obleute*], Paul Neumann, Heinrich Malzahn and Paul Eckert. A whole sector of the German Communist leadership thus refused either to accept the expulsion of Levi or the reasons advanced for it.

In its session of 29 April 1921, the Executive Committee of the Communist International adopted a motion approving Paul Levi's expulsion from the VKPD and thus from the Communist International. In an appeal addressed to the Presidium of the Third World Congress and dated 31 May 1921, Levi asserted: 'my critique of the Communist Party of Germany's March Action is Communist', arguing that he had only criticised the Communist Party's March Action because it was 'a break from the party's entire past'.⁹¹ Levi believed that 'these "new principles" actually represent an abandonment of Communist conceptions'.⁹² He defended the contents both of his pamphlet *Our Path: Against Putschism* and of his 4 May speech, pointing out that 'the facts have not been seriously contested by anyone anywhere'.⁹³ He also offered a nuanced assessment of the Executive Committee's role in the whole shabby affair:

I also stand by what I said regarding the influence of the Executive, although there are several things that must be said in the Executive's defence that I did not stress sufficiently in what I wrote. In reality, the Executive merely provided a *stimulus*. (This does not apply to their representatives in Germany, who went much further.) The Executive assumed that this stimulus would be reviewed in Germany, and possibly amended or rejected, by independent and competent people capable of reaching their own decision. I concede that the Executive perhaps did not reckon with the possibility that the VKPD *Zentrale* would *indiscriminately* swallow everything that was offered them in the name of the Executive. But as to the fact that the Executive's representatives exerted an influence of the type that I described, indeed, that they intervened independently beside the *Zentrale* or even behind its back – there is no doubt about that whatsoever.⁹⁴

91 Riddell (ed.) 2015, pp. 1094, 1090.

92 Riddell (ed.) 2015, p. 1092.

93 Riddell (ed.) 2015, p. 1094.

94 Riddell (ed.) 2015, pp. 1094–5.

As for the accusation that the pamphlet appeared at a moment when Germany was gripped by the white terror and provided evidence for the prosecution, Levi argued that he felt compelled to publish it because the VKPD 'had far from regained insight into the lunacy of such an action', and therefore 'there was a danger of renewed follies'. He also recalled that 'not a single case has been cited where the prosecution took action because of the pamphlet', and went further to raise a question of principle:

We have all recognised from the start that the well-being of the party cannot be sacrificed to prevent comrades from losing their freedom or more. This conception guided the Zentrale as well, when it set in motion the March Action, which cost many comrades their freedom and their lives. If it is true that the March Action was a disastrous error and that it was politically essential for the party to correct that error, then that had to be done even at the risk that those responsible would be forced into illegality. I cannot accept any rule for the Communist Party according to which the consequences of disastrous errors are borne *only* by the members and *not* by the leaders who made the errors in the first place.⁹⁵

Levi believed that, as a result of the March Action, 'the German party's *Zentrale* and, along with it, the party as a whole were compromised before the German and international proletariat', concluding:

If the party had summoned the courage to admit the errors publicly, accept all the consequences, and repair the damage done, this would have eliminated a large part of the harm caused by the March Action. This damage can be expressed with statistics but reaches far beyond that. The damage is expressed in a loss in prestige and moral authority among the proletarian masses; a loss suffered by Communists, the Communist Party, and the Communist International – a loss beyond measure or calculation. How much of the loss can be made good is now up to the congress. It can achieve a great deal, provided that it freely and openly identifies the errors and those responsible, while taking political distance from them. That is why I consider it my duty to present my 'case' as well to the congress.⁹⁶

Unfortunately his hopes were to be disappointed.

95 Riddell (ed.) 2015, p. 1095.

96 Riddell (ed.) 2015, p. 1096.

The Compromise at the Third Congress of the Communist International (22 June–12 July 1921)

The ‘Theses on Tactics and Strategy’ adopted by the Third Congress of the Communist International incredibly read: ‘The Third Congress of the Communist International considers that the March Action was a step forward.’⁹⁷ This was written, let us remember, after an attempted coup, carried out against the will of most of the German working class, as a result of which the Communist International lost 200,000 working-class militants in the industrial heartland of Europe in the course of a few weeks. The resolution on ‘The March Events and the United Communist Party of Germany’, adopted by the same Congress, in turn states:

The Third World Congress is pleased to note that all important resolutions, and particularly the portion of the resolution on tactics and strategy that takes up the much-disputed March Action, have been adopted unanimously. The representatives of the German opposition, in their resolution on the March Action, share for the most part the point of view of the congress. [...] The congress expects of the *Zentrale* and the VKPD majority that it will treat the former opposition leniently, provided that it carries out the Third Congress decisions in a loyal fashion. The congress is convinced that the *Zentrale* will do everything possible to draw together all the forces in the party. The congress instructs the former opposition to immediately dissolve any factional structure within the party, to fully and completely subordinate the parliamentary fraction to the *Zentrale*, to completely subordinate the press under the relevant party committee, and to immediately cease any political collaboration (in their publications, etc.) with those expelled from the party and the Communist International.⁹⁸

Why did the Third Congress adopt this attitude? Let us recall that after the Kapp Putsch, the Executive Committee of the Communist International published in its official organ, *Die Kommunistische Internationale*, the furious letter addressed by Paul Levi to the KPD *Zentrale* from Moabit Prison (which was a breach of discipline no less serious than the publication of *Our Way: Against Putschism*), accompanied with a note that read:

97 Riddell (ed.) 2015, p. 941.

98 Riddell (ed.) 2015, p. 951.

Our enemies will naturally try to exult over the disagreements inside the KPD. Then let them! We Communists have never feared self-criticism. The editors of *Kommunistische Internationale* concur with the main thrust of the critics in the three letters [the issue also included letters by Clara Zetkin and Ernst Meyer] and in the article of comrade Radek printed immediately following them.⁹⁹

The question of discipline, then, was secondary. The reason for the refusal of the Communist International to draw up a critical balance sheet for the 'March Action' was the adoption of resolutions '*unanimously*', i.e., in the framework of a compromise between existing factions within the Communist International. While the sectarian position of the KPD during the Kapp Putsch had been the sole responsibility of the *Zentrale*, the entire leadership of the Communist International was compromised in the 'March Action', and drawing up a serious balance sheet for it would have involved cleaning the Augean stables of the International. This would have had a devastating effect on the reputation and authority of people like Zinoviev, Bukharin, Karl Radek, Béla Kun, Mátyás Rákosi and August Thalheimer, who, in turn, were supported by important national sections. Given the disruptive effect that this would have had on the International, Lenin and Trotsky considered that the lesser evil was to rescue the tactic of the united front (the slogan adopted by the Third Congress was 'To the masses', indicating the need to conquer most of the working class before contemplating the conquest of political power), even at the price of sacrificing the person who originally developed it.

Even after Levi's expulsion from the Comintern, Lenin argued that '*essentially* much of Levi's criticism of the March Action in Germany in 1921 was *correct*', though he had 'couched his criticism in an impermissible and harmful form. . . . I defended and had to defend Levi, insofar as I saw before me opponents of his who merely shouted about "Menshevism" and "Centrism" and refused to see the mistakes of the March Action and the need to explain and correct them.'¹⁰⁰

Levi's *Kommunistische Arbeitsgemeinschaft* (Summer of 1921–2)

The German Communist Party congress held in Jena on 22–26 August 1921 expelled Curt and Anna Geyer, precipitating the departure of three deputies

99 Levi 1920a, p. 147.

100 Lenin 1965, emphasis in the original.

who had been up until then undecided, Ernst Däumig, Marie Mackwitz and Adolf Hoffmann, who joined Levi in forming a short-lived Communist Working Collective in the Reichstag [*Kommunistische Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, KAG]. The split was a severe bloodletting for the party's parliamentary representation because Levi took with him the majority of the party's Reichstag delegation.

The KAG's demands, reproduced in Fernbach's anthology, included five points, which, besides rejection of putschism and irresponsible outside interference with the leadership of the Communist parties, underscored Levi's hostility to the Red International of Labour Unions (Profintern), formally established in July 1921. They are worth quoting in full:

- 1) Complete material independence from the Communist International;
- 2) All literature appearing from foreign Communist organisations (including organs of the Communist International and the Red Trade-Union International) to be placed under joint control of the German party-leadership;
- 3) Security from all open or concealed organisational interventions by the ECCI alongside, outside or against the organs of the German section;
- 4) Establishment in its programme of a policy that makes possible the collaboration of all revolutionary workers in Germany, with express renunciation of all putschist attempts along the lines of the March Action;
- 5) Establishment of a trade-union policy that, irrespective of all revolutionary aims, maintains the organisational unity and coherence of the German trade-unions.¹⁰¹

This plea for 'national autonomy' could be read as a shift from a defence of the united-front policy against Zinoviev and Kun's putschist tactics to an early version of 'Eurocommunism', paving the way for Levi's return to the Social-Democratic fold.

Conclusion

Paul Levi was a talented political tactician, forced against his will to shoulder a historical task for which he was neither theoretically nor temperamentally suited, who played a distinguished role as a Communist leader for a couple of years until he decided to break with the Comintern. According to

101 Levi 2011, p. 213.

Trotsky's report: 'During the intimate conferences on the events of March 1921 in Germany, Lenin said about Levi, "The man has lost his head entirely." True, Lenin immediately added slyly, "He, at least, had something to lose; one can't even say that about the others"'¹⁰²

Levi's eventual political drift towards Social Democracy, however, does not exonerate the Communist International from its responsibility for the catastrophe that overtook the German proletariat during the 'March Action' of 1921. First, because it allowed Zinoviev and Bukharin to develop in its midst the ultra-left 'theory of the offensive',¹⁰³ whose logical culmination was the March putsch in Germany. Second, for sending Mátyás Rákosi (in the words of Pierre Broué, 'one of the most limited and brutal persons ever produced by the communist movement')¹⁰⁴ to wreak havoc in Livorno and then in Berlin, forcing the resignation of Paul Levi, Ernst Däumig, Clara Zetkin, Otto Brass, Adolf Hoffmann and Curt Geyer from the *Zentrale* of the Unified Communist Party of Germany. Third, for having allowed Karl Radek to form an anti-Levi faction within the KPD, which included Paul Fröhlich, August Thalheimer, Walter Stöcker and Heinrich Brandler, the person who replaced Levi at the head of the party leadership after Rákosi's intervention.¹⁰⁵ Fourth, by sending another limited and brutal person, Béla Kun, and a political adventurer like József Pogány, to organise the coup in Germany. And, finally, because of the way in which the Communist International avoided drawing up a serious balance sheet of the disastrous German experience.

We have mentioned that at the Third Congress of the Communist International Lenin and Trotsky reached a compromise with the ultra-leftists by which the tactic of the united front was rescued at the price of sacrificing the person who originally developed it. It is reasonable to ask whether this was a sensible decision, given the message it sent to the Communist militants: people obedient to Moscow's directives, even if these were harmful to the interests of the working class, were rewarded, while critics were vilified and expelled (Zinoviev would later systematise this practice in the so-called

102 Trotsky 1932, p. 103.

103 'La surestimation des états d'esprit "nationaux" de la classe ouvrière correspond au cri des opportunistes sur les insurrections dites prématurées' (Boukharine 1921, p. 220; originally published as Bukharin 1920).

104 'Rákosi était l'un des plus bornés et des plus brutaux individus qu'ait jamais produit le mouvement communiste' (Broué 1997, p. 207).

105 Rosa Luxemburg's opinion of Radek: 'Radek belongs in the whore category. Anything can happen with him around, and it is therefore much better to keep him at a safe distance' (Nettl 1969, p. 317).

'Bolshevisation' policy, which led to the expulsion of Trotsky's supporters from the Communist International and its national sections). Moreover, the new leadership of the German Communist Party, established at the cost of such a sacrifice, was unable to rise to the occasion when history gave it a second chance, in October 1923.¹⁰⁶ However, the positive elements of the German experience were embodied in two resolutions adopted by the Fourth Congress of the Communist International: the December 1921 'Theses on the Workers' United Front',¹⁰⁷ valid for the imperialist countries, and the 'Theses on the Eastern Question', whose Section 6 outlines the tactics to be followed in the semi-colonial countries, 'The Anti-Imperialist United Front'.¹⁰⁸

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106 Broué 1997, pp. 293–349.

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