



BRILL

The Comintern in 1922

The Periphery Pushes Back

John Riddell

Independent Researcher

jriddell63@gmail.com

Abstract

The Fourth Congress of the Communist International, held in November–December 1922, shows evidence of member parties outside Soviet Russia taking initiatives and exerting significant influence on central political questions before world communism. On at least three issues, all related to united-front policy, non-Russian delegates' pressure substantially altered Comintern Executive Committee proposals to the Congress. A central role in this process was played by leaders of the German Communist Party. The record of the Congress, newly available in English, also contains many calls for increasing the authority of the Comintern Executive. Still, the influence of non-Russian delegations, in a context of frequent division among leading Bolsheviks, suggests that influence of front-line parties was significant and possibly growing in 1922, little more than a year before the Comintern took a sharp turn toward Russian-dominated bureaucratisation.

Keywords

Communism – Communist International

The Fourth Congress of the Communist International, held in Petrograd and Moscow between 5 November and 5 December 1922, was the last to take place in the lifetime of V.I. Lenin. Held only a year before the first signs of Stalinist degeneration took hold, the Congress provides the most mature expression of the world movement that Lenin had led in founding three and a half years earlier. The proceedings of the Congress appeared in 2011 in a *Historical Materialism* Book Series edition, thus enabling an English-language readership to have a close look at the often-fractious Congress

debates.¹ The record shows that, in comparison with previous congresses, front-line parties played an increased role in revising Executive Committee proposals and shaping the Congress's outcome. Although the Congress heard many appeals to heighten the Comintern Executive Committee's authority, the course of debates reveals a significant counter-current, through which decisions were shaped by experiences in national struggles.

This assessment of the Fourth Congress runs counter to the opinion of many Comintern historians, who hold that the Russian Communist leadership had decisive and overriding influence in shaping the world movement from its earliest days. Many writers concur with Jürgen Rojahn's view that 'the changing relationship between the Soviet Party and the rest of the Communist International could be regarded as the crucial aspect of the history of the CI'. Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew comment that historians' 'obsession with the directing role of the Bolsheviks is quite understandable. . . . Between 1920 and 1922, an organisational structure emerged that undoubtedly facilitated the subsequent bureaucratic degeneration of the Stalinist Comintern'.²

Bolshevik domination emerged early as the focus of mainstream Comintern histories, establishing what we may call, adopting the term used by Lars Lih in another context, the 'textbook interpretation'.³ Milorad Drachkovitch and Branko Lazitch see this takeover as inevitable: the only alternative to a 'mail-box' International was 'a central directorate with dictatorial powers over all the sections'. For Helmut Gruber, 'Bolshevism of the Comintern and of its members began in 1920', which 'precluded the existence of strong national leaders who desired to initiate rather than implement policy'. Julius Braunthal views the turning point as the Fourth Congress, which 'turned the Communist International into an organ of the Soviet state'. In Franz Borkenau's view, the adoption of united-front tactics required erecting an 'infallible authority' and 'mechanical obedience to orders from above', given that 'the Russians themselves seriously disagreed on every important step'. His view is echoed by Werner Angress. E.H. Carr, by contrast, emphasises the impact of a decline of revolutionary activity in the Comintern's early years. However, Carr stresses

1 See Riddell (ed.) 2011, hereafter *TUF* (*Toward the United Front: Proceedings of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International*). Major portions of this paper originated as part of the Introduction to *TUF*.

2 Rojahn 1996, p. 38; McDermott and Agnew 1997, pp. 14–15.

3 Lih 2005.

the Comintern's increasing reliance on the Soviet republic during this period and the strengthening of central control at the time of the Fourth Congress.⁴

Support for this approach is also found among some of those writing from a Marxist perspective, providing what may be called, again using Lih's term, an 'activist interpretation' of Bolshevik domination. Fernando Claudín, citing a Comintern resolution from 1920, declares, 'From top to bottom, an iron discipline and a most rigorous centralisation were established'. Tony Cliff, writing of the 1921–2 period, contends that 'in practice administrative fiat did play a crucial role in the working of the Comintern'. He ascribes this to 'the extreme comparative backwardness of communist leaders outside Russia', their 'uncritical attitude towards the Russian party', and their 'passive submission'. The Russian party was 'a giant among dwarfs', such that '[e]ven when the Russian leaders spoke complete nonsense, they were not criticised by other communist leaders'. Writing of the same period in a more positive tone, Duncan Hallas still stresses 'the overwhelming authority . . . of all the Russians'. They 'had eventually been seen to be correct in the eyes of the most responsible militants' in all disputes in the Comintern since 1919, leaving an unfulfilled task: 'to emancipate the pupil from excessive dependence on the teacher'.⁵

Other 'activist' writers present a different picture. Pierre Frank's Comintern history focuses on issues of strategy and tactics without asserting pervasive Bolshevik dominance. The same is true of Pierre Broué's volume on this topic, although he notes the shortcomings of Comintern leadership in the Lenin years. Broué's history of the German revolution provides ample evidence of German Communists' initiative and independence, while concluding that ultimately, in the revolutionary crisis of 1923, their party fell victim to a 'congenital weakness' of its leadership. 'The men who controlled the policy of the KPD were not in Berlin, but in Moscow', he writes. Hermann Weber's analysis of the KPD differentiates sharply between its autonomy in the Lenin years and the Stalinisation process that followed after Lenin's death. As late as the end of 1922, he says, 'debates between Grigorii Zinoviev, the Comintern's President, and Ernst Meyer, chair of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD), were conducted in the language of partners'.⁶

In the years following the collapse of Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe, the textbook interpretation was reasserted with vigour. 'Paradoxically, at the very moment in which the end of the Cold War was proclaimed,' writes Aldo Agosti,

4 Drachkovitch and Lazitch 1966, p. 175; Gruber (ed.) 1967, pp. 177–8; Braunthal 1967, p. 255; Borkenau 1962, pp. 230–1; Angress 1963, p. 228; Carr 1966, pp. 440–5.

5 Claudín 1975, p. 106; Cliff 1979, pp. 54–7; Hallas 1985, pp. 70–1.

6 Frank 1979; Broué 1997; Broué 2005, pp. 906–7; Weber 1969, p. 32.

'we witnessed the rebirth of the approach to [Comintern] history typical of the Cold War'. Agosti cites works by François Furet (1995), Stéphane Courtois (1997), and Robert Service (2007). In addition, the opening of major portions of the Comintern archives in the early 1990s has enabled historians such as F.I. Firsov to provide new documentation of the mechanisms of Moscow control over Comintern member parties, reaching back into the early years.⁷

Yet during the last two decades, many studies of the Moscow Executive's relationship with individual parties have demonstrated a greater degree of national autonomy, especially in the early years, than that allowed for in the 'textbook interpretation'. Many of these writings are referenced in recent bibliographic essays by Richard Croucher, Norman LaPorte, and Marcel Bois and Florian Wilde, all of which have a German focus.⁸ A number of influential recent works on German communist history, although diverse in analytical approach, have directed attention to the experience of the working-class ranks as a causative force in Comintern history.⁹

Relevant essays are gathered in recent collections by Mikhail Narinsky and Jürgen Rojahn; Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe; and Norman LaPorte, Kevin Morgan, and Matthew Worley. Many of these contributions share McDermott and Agnew's viewpoint, in their recent history of the Comintern, that 'strategy was defined in Moscow, but tactics, to a certain extent, could be elaborated on the ground by the parties themselves'.¹⁰

McDermott and Agnew are even-handed regarding the early years. A 'drift toward greater bureaucratisation was evident', they say, but 'it is inaccurate to talk unproblematically of "Russian dictatorship"'. There is much evidence of 'communist pluralism' at the early congresses, they add, although it was not formally institutionalised.¹¹

Luigi Cortesi's recent account cites both the Comintern's efforts in and after 1921 to 'reach the masses' and the stronger trend to centralise increased powers in the Executive Committee, which 'hardened the alignment between the International's policies and those of the Soviet state'.¹²

The Russian historian Aleksandr Vatlin describes how the early Comintern's united-front policy was constrained by the character of Soviet state policy, but

7 Agosti 2009, p. 18. Firsov 2007.

8 Croucher 2003; LaPorte 2000; LaPorte 2003, pp. 19–38; Bois and Wilde 2010.

9 See, for example, Peterson 1993; Mallmann 1996; Weitz 1997; Kinner 1999.

10 Narinsky and Rojahn (eds.) 1996; Rees and Thorpe (eds.) 1998; LaPorte, Morgan and Worley (eds.) 2008; McDermott and Agnew 1997, p. xxii.

11 McDermott and Agnew 1997, pp. 24–6.

12 Cortesi 2010, p. 466.

he does not argue that this constraint was imposed by Moscow control of the International.¹³

In his recent monograph on Comintern history, Serge Wolikow states that following its foundation, its 'world aspirations were soon to enter into contradiction with the international priorities of the Soviet state'. However, his examples of such a clash relate to the mid-1920s and after.¹⁴

Introducing his recent collection of essays on the Comintern, Agosti appeals to us to reread the Communist debates of the 1920s as 'participatory observers', so as 'better to understand the hopes and tragedies of the participants without the obligation of ruling on who was right and who was wrong'. He warns against the 'danger of reading Comintern history as one-way transmission from centre to member parties'.¹⁵

As Rees and Thorpe note, the diversity of arguments on this topic shows that 'availability of new material does not necessarily lead to closure of debate'. In McDermott's opinion, 'recent research which places Communist activity firmly in its national, as well as international, context, and which analyses the interaction between centre and periphery' is a vital corrective to earlier 'top-down studies'.¹⁶

The proceedings of the Fourth Comintern Congress are not a new archival discovery. They have been in plain view for ninety-two years, in the form of a published 1,060-page German-language stenographic transcript. This record has been utilised extensively in several major Comintern histories. There is much in the proceedings to sustain the textbook interpretation regarding Bolshevik dominance, particularly with reference to Comintern organisational structure. Yet when read from the vantage point of policy decisions, rather than assertions of organisational principle, this record shows substantial evidence of front-line parties' influence on strategic policy decision.

The Origin of United-Front Policy

At the close of the Communist International's Fourth Congress, held in Petrograd and Moscow between 5 November and 5 December 1922, Zinoviev, the world movement's president, summed up the gathering's achievements in modest terms: it had made the decisions of the International's previous congresses

13 Vatlin 1993a and 1993b.

14 Wolikow 2010, p. 22. See also Wolikow 2000.

15 Agosti 2009, pp. 23, 21.

16 Rees and Thorpe (eds.) 1998, p. 10; McDermott 1998, p. 32.

'more specific, more precise, more differentiated'.¹⁷ In fact, the gathering's focus on the united front was new; the concept had not been raised in previous congresses. Discussion of this issue wound through all Congress debates, revealing differences in interpretation that were sometimes subtle, sometimes profound. Often, leaders of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) did not take a common stand; instead, they divided along the same lines as delegates from outside Russia. In the course of the Congress, many recommendations of the Comintern's Executive Committee (ECCI) were substantially modified.

United-front policy had been adopted by the ECCI a year earlier, on 18 December 1921. The united-front proposal was placed before the ECCI by the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), but the policy itself had been developed by the German Communist Party during the previous year.¹⁸ The stimulus for this policy came not from theoretical considerations or from the many precedents in Russian revolutionary history but from the impetus of workers' struggles in Germany. As Edwin Hoernle of the KPD explained during the Fourth Congress, united-front policy found initial expression in initiatives by German workers during 1920. Hoernle did not comment on its most successful application: the united action against a rightist putsch led by Wolfgang Kapp in March 1920. Curiously, the united-front character of this resistance was rarely cited in Comintern discussion of the united front and was mentioned only once in the Fourth Congress, in remarks on China by ECCI member Karl Radek. Perhaps this was because unity against Kapp did not conform to the conditions cited by the ECCI's December 1921 statement: the Kapp struggles took place at the peak of the postwar revolutionary upsurge, before the opening of a general capitalist offensive, and the call for action came not from the revolutionary wing of the working class but from Social-Democratic labour leaders.¹⁹

Workers' unity against the Kapp putsch contrasted with the pattern of events in Germany since January 1919, where the majority Social-Democratic leadership had been in open war against revolutionary workers. During this time, the Comintern had campaigned to drive through a split in the Social-Democratic movement between revolutionary workers and the pro-capitalist Social-Democratic officialdom. Many Communists denied that the united action against Kapp was a useful model for the future. This view was developed most forcefully by Béla Kun and other émigré leaders of the failed Hungarian

17 *TUF*, p. 1109.

18 For a fuller discussion of the origins of united-front policy, see Riddell 2011.

19 See Hoernle's remarks, *TUF*, p. 457; the ECCI's December 1921 theses, Point 8, in *TUF*, p. 1167; Radek in *TUF*, p. 731. The united-front concept was also advanced in the Czechoslovak party before its adoption by the ECCI; see Firsov 1980, pp. 406–7.

revolution of 1919, which had been compromised, in the Comintern's view, by a fusion of Communist and Socialist parties. Writing in the German-language journal *Kommunismus*, Kun scored the '“unity” ideal' expressed in the Kapp actions as 'counterrevolutionary'. Communists should not try to persuade centrist parties to join in united action but rather act alone, Kun said.²⁰

The contrary view was expressed in an initiative of Stuttgart metalworkers in December 1920, acting on suggestions by local KPD activists who were influenced by Clara Zetkin. The metalworkers adopted a resolution calling on the leadership of their union, and of all unions, to launch a joint struggle for tangible improvements in workers' conditions. This campaign, the resolution stated, should raise simple demands shared by all workers, ranging from lower food prices to arming workers for defence against right-wing gangs. Although the Social-Democratic leaders rejected this appeal, the Communist campaign in its favour won wide support from local union councils. A month later, in January 1921, the KPD as a whole published a more comprehensive appeal for united action to all workers' organisations, including the Social Democrats. This 'Open Letter' reflected the views of party co-chair Paul Levi, working in collaboration with Radek. The appeal won wide rank-and-file support, to the point where the Social-Democratic leaders of the main national union confederation felt compelled to issue counterproposals.²¹

The Stuttgart and Open Letter initiatives marked a change in direction for the KPD. The Communists, instead of merely denouncing the Social Democrats' pro-capitalist course, were now proposing to test in action the latter's capacity and willingness to struggle for progressive demands consistent with their formal programme. This shift alarmed many Communists, who felt their party was playing down the goal of overthrowing the government and, instead, concentrating on moderate demands more acceptable to Social Democrats. Criticism of the Open Letter took shape in a left-opposition rooted in the KPD's Berlin organisation; it was also expressed by the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD), a sympathising organisation of the Comintern. Opponents of the Open Letter also received support from abroad. The Moscow-based ECCI initially opposed the German party's Open Letter. Lenin expressed support, however, and the matter was referred to the Third World Congress, held July–August 1921.

The months before the congress were eventful. Ultraleft forces took the helm of the KPD, repudiating the Open Letter. They led the party into a disastrous defeat in the 1921 'March Action', expelled Levi, and generalised their error in

20 Kun 1920, pp. 349, 441.

21 Broué 2005, pp. 468–72; Reisberg 1971, pp. 50–62.

the form of a 'theory of the offensive'. The Third Congress rejected this ultraleft theory, approved the Levi expulsion, and simultaneously endorsed the Open Letter policy.²²

This outcome opened the door to the ECCI's adoption of the united-front policy in December 1921. The ECCI called on Communist parties everywhere to struggle for a 'united front', that is, for the 'greatest possible unity of all workers' organisations in every *practical action against the united capitalists*, while preserving their 'absolute autonomy' and 'freedom in presenting their point of view'. This goal was to be pursued, when appropriate, through negotiations and agreements with the leaderships of non-Communist workers' organisations. The ECCI resolution introducing this policy called on Communist parties 'to strive everywhere to achieve unity of [the] masses, as broad and complete as possible, in practical action'. Communists should 'accept the discipline required for action', the resolution added, without relinquishing 'the right and the capacity to express . . . their opinion regarding the policies of all working-class organisations'. It also specified that the Comintern's national sections should seek agreements with 'parties and associations of the Second and Two-and-a-Half Internationals' – the two wings of international Social Democracy.²³

The resolution was endorsed – over opposition by the French, Spanish, and Italian Communist parties – by an expanded conference of the ECCI in February – March 1922.

During 1922, the united front was put to the test. The Comintern took part in a 'Conference of the Three Internationals', which brought together representatives of the Second, Two-and-a-Half, and Communist Internationals in Berlin between 2 and 5 April 1922.²⁴ The conference issued a communiqué and named a continuing committee, but the initiative broke down the following month, with little achieved. In Germany, the KPD undertook many united-front initiatives, with varying results. Nowhere was a durable alliance achieved with the Social-Democratic Party and union leaders, but there was tangible progress toward unity at the rank-and-file level, accompanied by an encouraging rise in the KPD's membership and electoral support.²⁵ Elsewhere, efforts to implement the new policy were still at an early stage.

22 For a detailed and even-handed account of this tumultuous story, see Broué 2005.

23 The ECCI decision of December 1921 was annexed to the Fourth Congress Theses on Tactics; see *TUF*, pp. 1167–73.

24 For proceedings of the Berlin conference, see International Socialist Congress 1967.

25 Dues-paying membership rose to 224,389 in September 1922, compared with 180,443 in the summer of 1921. However, it was still far below its pre-March Action level of about 350,000. In elections in the state of Saxony in November 1922, the KPD vote was 2.5 times

Divergent Interpretations

Doubts regarding united-front policy lingered on into the Fourth Congress in the form of criticisms of its implementation. Such reservations were expressed by Amadeo Bordiga (leader of the Italian party majority), Ruth Fischer, Jean Duret, Henryk Domski, Emanuel Vajtauer (representing minorities in Germany, France, Poland and Czechoslovakia, respectively), and others. Bordiga, reasserting a thesis of ultraleft forces at the Third Congress, questioned the Comintern's policy of seeking to win support of the majority of the working class, a goal that he termed 'vague and arbitrary'. Fischer, referring to attempts to reach agreements with Social-Democratic leaders, complained of a tendency 'to place too much emphasis on these sacred negotiations at the top', stressing that unity at the leadership level was by no means indispensable to the united front.²⁶

Although Bolshevik leaders stood together in resisting these criticisms, their comments revealed a difference of emphasis. Radek was adamant in rejecting the German opposition's concerns about dealings with the reformist leaders as 'mechanical' and based on a 'schema'. He insisted that Communists not 'abandon our efforts to establish the united front not only from below but from above', and instead 'redouble our efforts to bring [this plan] to reality'. Yet statements by other Bolshevik leaders, particularly Zinoviev, were closer to Fischer's approach. Thus Zinoviev's closing words to the Congress offered little hope of agreement with reformist leaders. He stressed instead that the 'main task' was to constantly keep 'whipping them in the eyes of the working class' and restated the united front's goal as unity 'with all workers that want to fight' without mentioning their organisations.²⁷

This difference found expression in the editing of the 'Theses on Tactics', which took up the united-front policy. Passages in the initial draft, written under Zinoviev's supervision, labelled the Social Democrats as the main obstacle to workers' victory, asserting that their exposure was the only goal of the united front. In the course of the Congress, these passages were removed. However, the final text downplayed the prospect of agreements on the leadership level. Noting that 'the real success of the united-front tactic arises from "below", from

higher than two years earlier (Angröss 1963, p. 250). For surveys of the KPD's united-front experiences in 1922, see Broué 2005, pp. 585–625; Reisberg 1971, pp. 317–613; Thalheimer 1994.

26 *TUF*, pp. 180–2 (Bordiga), 145–8 (Fischer), 169–73 (Duret), 238–41 (Domski), 133–4 (Vajtauer).

27 *TUF*, pp. 165 and 396–7 (Radek), 1117 (Zinoviev).

the depths of the working masses themselves', the theses proposed merely that 'Communists cannot abstain from negotiating, under certain circumstances, with leaders of opponent workers' parties'.²⁸

A difference of emphasis was also expressed over whether the Communists were proposing a united front only to expose the treachery of Social-Democratic policies or whether they believed that fruitful alliances were possible. The former interpretation was implied by harsh dismissals of Social Democracy as a purely reactionary force. For example, Zinoviev's description of the Second International as 'the worst enemy, the accomplice of the international bourgeoisie' was not balanced by acknowledgment of its component parties' roots in the working class. Such one-sided characterisations, which occurred frequently in the Congress discussion of fascism, encouraged provocative statements such as the notorious comment of French Communist Albert Treint that 'the united front is a way to pluck the chicken', that is, to pull members out of Social-Democratic organisations. Émile Vandervelde, a Belgian leader of the Second International, seized on such statements to compare the Comintern with the villainous Mime in Wagner's *Siegfried*, who betrays his intention 'to stifle us and poison us, after embracing us'.²⁹

Communists' response to the charge that 'you want to embrace us in order to crush us', Radek said, should be to tell the Social-Democratic leaders, 'That depends on you. Show that you want to fight, and then we will travel at least a part of the road with you'. The reformist officials are 'based on a party of millions' of working people, he noted. 'They often betray these workers', Radek said, but 'when it is necessary for their salvation, they can also betray the bourgeoisie'. Radek's reply was in the spirit of Lenin's comments on the draft ECCI united-front resolution adopted in December 1921, in which he called for removal of a reference to Social-Democratic leaders as 'evident accomplices of the world bourgeoisie', warning that they could use this statement as a pretext to refuse negotiations. Lenin argued that the text should concentrate, instead, on the workers' insistence on the need for unity in action, despite fundamental political differences.³⁰

No one at the Fourth Congress invoked Lenin's 1916 description of Social-Democratic organisations as examples of a 'bourgeois labour party', which is

28 Firsov 1980, pp. 145, 147; *TUF*, pp. 1158–9 (Theses on Tactics).

29 *TUF*, p. 70 (Zinoviev); Humbert-Droz 1971, p. 81; Rosmer 1971, p. 150; International Socialist Congress 1967, p. 23. Vandervelde's opinion is widely echoed in Comintern studies; see Claudín 1975, pp. 145–51; Firsov 1980, p. 114, n. 3.

30 *TUF*, pp. 395 (Radek); Firsov 1980, pp. 115–16; Lenin 1960–71g, pp. 400–1; also compare 'Theses on Workers' United Front', p. 1165.

'inevitable and typical in all imperialist countries'. Lenin's formula, derived from a statement by Engels, captured these parties' dual character: bourgeois in programme and orientation, yet working-class in composition and social roots – an appreciation not articulated in Fourth Congress discussions.³¹

Divergent approaches were also evident with regard to the scope of united-front policy. Zinoviev's ECCI report contended that the united front was required because workers had been placed on the defensive by capitalist attacks. Another reporter, the Hungarian Communist Eugen Varga, went further, stating that *only* this shift had made it 'necessary to draw in the broad masses as auxiliary troops to expand the Communist Party's attacking army'. Such statements suggested that united-front alliances were temporary, to be set aside when workers moved to the offensive. Yet Zinoviev also said that the united-front tactic 'will endure for an entire period, perhaps an entire epoch', and Leon Trotsky called it a 'banal truism' that, wherever the proletariat is deeply divided, 'it is impossible to develop our activity in any way other than under the slogan of the united front'.³²

This more inclusive view of the united front's applicability was expressed in the suggestion that even a workers' government – an expression of a revolutionary bid for power – could take the form of a coalition between Communist and non-Communist parties. This proposition was much debated in the Congress. The resulting Theses on Tactics viewed such a coalition as possible only in the period leading up to the final goal of 'a genuinely proletarian workers' government, which in its pure form can be embodied only in the Communist Party'.³³

Given the Russian Bolsheviks' leading role in the Comintern, it might be thought that their revolutionary experience would have been cited in support of the different interpretations of united-front policy. In fact, however, there was no mention in the Congress sessions of the many imaginative tactics utilised by the Bolsheviks in the revolutionary year of 1917 in their effort to achieve workers' unity. These included their demand for the ousting of capitalist ministers in Russia's Provisional Government; their call on reformist-led soviets to take governmental power; their appeal for a democratic peace without

31 'Imperialism and the Split in Socialism', in Lenin 1960–71a, pp. 113, 116. Lenin explains that he took the formula 'bourgeois labour party' from a 14 September 1891 letter of Frederick Engels. The term used by Engels, 'bürgerliche Arbeiterpartei', is better translated as 'bourgeois workers' party'. See Marx and Engels 1961–8, p. 155; Marx and Engels 1975–2004, p. 238.

32 *TUF*, pp. 96–7 and 126 (Zinoviev), 739–40 (Varga), 966 (Trotsky). See also Trotsky 1972b, pp. 91–109.

33 *TUF*, p. 1161.

annexations or indemnities; their adoption of the peasant movement's agrarian programme, which had been drafted by the rival Socialist-Revolutionary Party; and their militant defence of Alexander Kerensky's pro-capitalist government against the attempted right-wing coup of General Lavr Kornilov. However, the Congress did reaffirm the ECCI's December 1921 resolution on the united front, which had included, on Lenin's insistence, mention of how the Bolsheviks applied this policy in the years prior to the 1917 revolution.³⁴

In the Fourth Congress united-front discussions, Radek almost always presented views he shared with the German majority leadership, represented there by August Thalheimer, Meyer, Zetkin and others. A Polish-born revolutionary, most of whose political experience had been in Germany, Radek joined the Bolshevik party only in 1917 and was a junior but nonetheless prominent member of its leadership. As the ECCI member most concerned with the KPD, he assisted its leaders in developing the united-front policy in 1920, while simultaneously encouraging the leftist forces who overturned the leadership and the united-front course early in 1921. In late 1922, however, this ambiguity was not present. On one issue, defence of the German bourgeois republic against fascist/monarchist overthrow, Radek, like Zinoviev, endorsed criticisms made by Fischer and the KPD minority. On other united-front issues, however, Radek acted as the agency through which the German majority leadership could win the Bolshevik delegation and the Congress to its positions.³⁵

The viewpoint expressed by Radek was also advanced by the majority leaderships in Poland and Czechoslovakia, a minority in Italy, and the British delegation. Zinoviev's views, while sharing much common ground with Radek, stood somewhat closer to those of the Italian majority leadership and to minority currents in Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and France. There is no evidence that the differences between the Bolshevik leaders expressed any underlying dispute in the Bolshevik party. Rather, a close reading of the congress record indicates that both Zinoviev and Radek were responding to political impulses from parties in the countries where the challenge of united-front action was most urgently posed.

34 *TUF*, p. 1171; Lenin 1960–71f, pp. 552–4 and p. 706, n. 615. Lenin's proposal included mention of the rightist revolt of General Lavr Kornilov in August 1917, just weeks before the October Revolution. The united front against Kornilov was not mentioned in either the ECCI resolution or the Fourth Congress debate. Some years later, it was often cited as the model for united-front activity, as in 'For a Workers' United Front against Fascism' (1931) (Trotsky 1971, pp. 135–6).

35 For a discussion of Radek's contradictory role, see Fayet 2004, pp. 359ff.

The Rise of Italian Fascism

In contrast to the Congress's general debate on the united front, where most delegates achieved a measure of agreement, the discussion of Fascism in Italy was incoherent. An abrupt shift, near the end of the Congress, produced a final decision that, while not fully expressed in Congress documents, was quickly elaborated after it closed. Judging from the Congress record, this shift resulted from insistent urging by delegates in Germany and other countries close to Italy that were menaced by the threat of Fascism.

Fascist chief Benito Mussolini took power in Italy on 31 October 1922, five days before the Congress began. During the previous two years, a Fascist campaign of systematic violence had shattered working-class organisations across the country. The Fascist offensive grew out of the failure of the great metalworkers' strike movement of September 1920, and the subsequent ebb of the Italian workers' movement. The Fourth Congress devoted major attention to the rise of Italian Fascism but, except for a late remark by Zinoviev, did not review the response of the Italian Communist Party (CP).³⁶

The Fascist movement in Italy was historically unprecedented, and it took time for the Communist movement to understand that it represented a new kind of threat. Prominent leaders of the Italian Communist Party (CP) denied any fundamental difference between Fascism and bourgeois democracy, viewing the Fascist drive for power as the internal business of the ruling class and of no special concern to working people.³⁷

Neither the CP nor the SP attempted to build a broad and effective defence against the Fascist rampage. The newly founded CP focused on building its party in a contest with its Socialist rival, while the SP relied on the formal protections promised by a state apparatus that was, in fact, complicit in Fascist violence.

In June 1921, a fighting organisation for anti-Fascist defence, the Arditi del Popolo [People's Commandos], sprang up in Rome, independently of the workers' parties. The Arditi won broad support among working people, including among Communists, Socialists, and anarchists. The movement grew into a national organisation with some 20,000 members and scored initial successes

³⁶ See *TUF*, pp. 1053–4.

³⁷ For assessments of the Italian CP's conduct during the rise of fascism, see Spriano 1967, pp. 135–8, 181–6; Agosti 2009, pp. 65–91; Natoli 1982; Luks 1985, p. 36; Behan 2003, pp. 91–9; Bellamy and Schecter 1993, pp. 60–1.

against the Fascists.³⁸ The Communist and Socialist parties responded to the Arditi with hostility. The CP leadership, which favoured self-defence against the Fascists only when conducted by organisations under Communist control, barred its members from joining the Arditi, on pain of expulsion.

On 3 August 1921, the SP signed a 'peace' agreement with the Fascists that included a clause repudiating the Arditi. Nonetheless, even without significant CP or SP assistance, the Arditi and their allies were able to deal the Fascists a resounding defeat in November 1921, neutralising their first 'March on Rome'.

At first, the Comintern leadership was poorly informed about developments in Italy. Thus, when Lenin wrote on 14 August 1921 in praise of a successful anti-Fascist demonstration of fifty thousand in Rome the previous month, he described it as a united action in which 'the entire proletariat – the reformist proletariat of the trade unions and the centrists of Serrati's [Socialist] party – followed the Communists against the fascists'. In fact, although many rank-and-file Communists took part, the protest was spearheaded by the Arditi.³⁹

The ECCI held its first full discussion of the Italian situation on 24 January 1922, a month after it recommended a united-front policy for general application, including in Italy. In the discussion, Bolshevik leader Nikolai Bukharin said the CP had 'made a great error in the Arditi del Popolo affair, which had offered the best chance of bringing broad masses under our leadership'. A commission of Bukharin, Francesco Misiano and Mátyás Rákosi wrote to the Italian party along these lines.⁴⁰ But the ECCI then effectively dropped the matter. At the expanded conference of the ECCI held in February – March, the Italian delegates remained adamant. The ECCI then wrote a more sweeping letter criticising the Italian CP on many issues, including the united front, but the letter did not pose the question of resistance to the Fascists. A subsequent ECCI appeal, written on 22 July, struck a different note, blaming the Socialists for Fascist gains and omitting the call for a united front.⁴¹

On 3 October, the Socialist Party, which still had 74,000 dues-paying members, expelled its reformist right wing, called for unity with the Comintern and selected delegates to attend its world congress. The ECCI called on the SP

38 For accounts of the Arditi, see Balsamini 2002; Francescangeli 2000; Spriano 1967, pp. 139–51; and Behan 2003.

39 Lenin 1960–71d, p. 522; Behan 2003, p. 106.

40 Comintern 1922c, p. 394. The letter, apparently written by Bukharin, was not published until 1924. For excerpts, see Spriano 1967, pp. 150–1; Behan 2003, pp. 107–8.

41 'Zum Programmwurf der Komm. Partei Italiens', *Die Kommunistische Internationale*, 23 (November 1922), pp. 142–5; 'ECCI Manifesto to the Workers of Italy', Degras (ed.) 1956, pp. 362–5.

and CP to form a joint action committee as the first step to fusion, but in vain: Bordiga declared the SP's left turn to be without significance.⁴²

Fourth Congress discussion of Italy focused on the proposed CP-SP fusion. The majority of Italian CP delegates were opposed, and the SP delegates were sceptical. The lengthy hearings of the commission and sub-commission established to study the Italian question talked of little else. With strenuous effort, the Comintern leadership convinced 16 of the 21 Italian delegates to support a detailed fusion protocol, in which Comintern emissaries were to wield decisive power. After the Congress, with both parties reeling from Fascist repression, a majority of the SP rejected the deal. Only in 1924 did a minority of the SP, led by Giacinto Serrati, join the Comintern.⁴³

Throughout most of the Fourth Congress, the pursuit of a united front in Italy was expressed solely in the effort to bring about an SP-CP fusion. The Comintern's long-standing disagreement with the Italian party majority on the united front was again aired, but was not linked to the challenge of Fascism.⁴⁴ Zinoviev's opening report from the ECCI denounced the errors and weaknesses of the Italian Socialist Party that had contributed to Fascism's rise, while hailing to the CP's conduct there as worthy of 'the most important chapter' in a 'policy manual for Communist parties'. Radek avoided the topic, and even Bukharin made only a fleeting and enigmatic reference to the *Arditi del Popolo*. Apparently, the ECCI had resolved to avoid any specific criticisms of the Italian party's default on Fascism, thus providing cover for this disastrous policy.⁴⁵

Zinoviev, who was also the main reporter on Italy, aimed his fire against the Socialist Party. The situation in Italy from the start of the War in 1914 to 1919, he said, was 'characterised by the counterrevolutionary role of the old Social-Democratic party'. Yet these were years in which the Italian SP opposed the War, took part in the Zimmerwald movement to build militant opposition to the War, and joined the Comintern.⁴⁶

More than once, Zinoviev coupled Mussolini and German Social Democrat Gustav Noske as agents of white terror against the working class. On one occa-

42 Spriano 1967, pp. 223–7.

43 See the Italian commission proceedings, Comintern 1994, 491/1/303/1531–5 and 491/1/306/1535–9; Kunina 1980, p. 365; and the resolution on the Italian question, pp. 1138–42.

44 See especially speeches by Bordiga for the party majority and Antonio Graziadei for its pro-united-front minority, *TUF*, pp. 178–90.

45 *TUF*, pp. 105–8 (Zinoviev), 388–9 (Radek), 213 (Bukharin).

46 *TUF*, p. 1032.

sion he pointed to the similarity of 'Fascist syndicalism' to the reformist ideology of Social Democracy. His final word on Italy was to call for a united struggle against reformism and Fascism.⁴⁷ Such formulations left little scope for united-front initiatives toward reformist-led organisations. It is true that Noske had sent right-wing detachments against revolutionary workers, but he did this in order to secure the position of reformist union and political officials within a bourgeois democracy; in Italy, such reformist union and political organisations had been demolished by Fascism.

Fascism: The Search for a Response

Comintern leaders expressed a range of views on the meaning of the Fascist victory. Early in the Congress, Zinoviev said of the Fascist takeover in Italy that, 'viewed historically, it was a farce. A few months or years will pass and it will turn out favourably'. Yet the following day, Zinoviev predicted that the Fascists would 'hold their own . . . during the coming period', which would probably see similar overturns in Central Europe. Bordiga predicted that the new regime would be 'liberal and democratic', reinforced by occasional Fascist violence. Others were more far-sighted and accurate. Antonio Gramsci described how the Fascists, equipped with a private army of 400,000 men backed by the active or passive support of the majority of state officials, 'held in their hands the entire foundation of the state' even before taking office. Radek called their takeover 'the greatest defeat that socialism and communism have suffered' since 1917.⁴⁸

Concluding his vivid report on Fascist violence and workers' resistance in Italy, Bordiga explained, 'I will not take up the question of our party's position during the course of Fascism's development.' Indeed, none of the major reports discussed how Fascist attacks could be countered. That issue was raised, instead, by delegates from countries near Italy that were probable targets of fascist offensives. On November 3, two days before the opening session, the German KPD's Central Bureau (the *Zentrale*) – its day-to-day leadership – instructed the party's congress delegation to 'urge an international campaign against fascism, in its different forms'. During the Congress, Czechoslovak

47 See Zinoviev's remarks in *TUF*, pp. 69, 124, 1052, 1054.

48 *TUF*, pp. 106, 121 (Zinoviev), 420 (Bordiga), 386 (Radek). Gramsci, although a delegate, did not speak at the Congress; his analysis was printed in the congress newspaper, *Bolschewik*, № 4 and № 12 (November 1922). The first portion of this article is found in Gramsci 1974, pp. 528–30.

leader Bohumir Šmeral sketched out a plan for bringing together diverse forces in an anti-fascist alliance. The following day, Victor Stern of the Austrian party struck a new note by describing efforts to challenge Social Democrats to join a united front in defence of Austrian independence and its 'much-vaunted democracy' against a League of Nations trusteeship. In the same session, Hoernle reported that the KPD had called for 'proletarian self-defence' against fascism the moment that 'the danger is evident and tangible for the masses'. Swiss delegate Franz Welti then expanded this concept into a defence strategy, calling for a 'coordinated effort on the basis of a proletarian united front, utilising both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary methods, in order to erect a wall against fascism'. The KPD's Karl Becker wrote in the Congress daily newspaper that 'the KPD should organise the united front of the working class against the fascist mobilisation'. On 22 November, the Congress sent greetings to a Berlin conference of factory-committee delegates – doubtless drafted by the KPD's representatives in Moscow – calling for 'a united proletarian front of struggle to... resist German fascism through the formation of workers' defence contingents'.⁴⁹

No delegate spoke of Bulgaria, where Communists, applying the united-front policy, had helped in 1922 in achieving significant gains against White-Guard forces striving to overturn the radical peasant-based government. At the time of the Fourth Congress, however, the Bulgarian CP was shifting toward the sectarian rejection of united-front defence of that government, a stand that contributed to devastating defeats the following year.⁵⁰

Despite these appeals, the bulk of Zinoviev's summary address on Italy, delivered the day before the Congress closed, was devoted to reviewing once more the failings of the Socialist Party and the reformist union officials. 'Reformism is our main enemy', he said; the 'first task' of a merged SP and CP must be to 'strike against reformism with our united forces'. Then, without explanation, seven minutes from the end of a 90-minute speech, Zinoviev shifted course radically: 'We must succeed in becoming a vanguard of the entire anti-fascist struggle', he said. Although still not mentioning the concept of united front, he did reassert the position that the ECCI had taken nine months earlier regarding the need for the Italian CP to get involved with 'confused forces' such as the Arditi. Proceedings of the Congress and its Italian commission give no indi-

49 TUF, pp. 402–23 (Bordiga). For November 3 decision, Reisberg 1971, p. 654. See also TUF, pp. 427 (Šmeral), 451 (Stern), 461 (Hoernle), 476 (Welti), 705–6 (Greetings to Berlin conference). Becker wrote in *Bolschewik* № 10, published on approximately 18 November 1922.

50 Rothschild 1959, pp. 103–6; Ponomarev 1984, pp. 649–51; Broué 1997, pp. 333–5.

cation of why the Comintern leadership spoke to this vital issue only at the very end of the Congress, after a month of silence and when all discussion was closed.⁵¹

The Congress discussion on fascism was improvised under the pressure of Mussolini's coup in Italy. Both passages in the convention resolutions that mention fascism were inserted as late amendments. The first of these, an addition to theses on Italy, is not found in the text of this resolution included in the Congress proceedings but is included in a separate edition of Congress resolutions; it concerned only illegal work under Fascism. Otherwise, the resolution on Italy focused on criticism of the Socialist Party, in the same spirit as Zinoviev's opening report. A late addition to the Theses on Tactics defined the distinguishing feature of international fascism as its 'attempt through social demagoguery to achieve a base among the masses – in the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie, and even certain sectors of the working class'. Communists were called on to be 'extremely active in setting up united fronts' on this question, the resolution stated, without elaboration.⁵²

Following the Congress, the Comintern moved swiftly to develop a broad international campaign against the fascist danger. Landmarks in this process included an ECCI appeal of 3 January 1923 for an international united front against fascism; the formation shortly thereafter of the International Provisional Committee against Fascism chaired by Zetkin and French author Henri Barbusse; an international 'week of struggle' against fascism organised for 15–22 April; and the report by Zetkin, discussion, and resolution on fascism at the expanded ECCI conference held 12–23 June.⁵³

Throughout this experience, the Comintern's course on Fascism was set by front-line parties, not by Moscow. Initially, the prevailing line was that of the Bordiga leadership in Italy. When a correction finally came, too late to avert a tragic defeat, there is no sign that Bolshevik leaders pressed for the change. All evidence points to an initiative by delegates of front-line parties in Germany and neighbouring Central European countries.

51 See Zinoviev's remarks in *TUF*, pp. 1031ff., 1047, 1053.

52 For the relevant passages of the resolutions, see *TUF*, pp. 1141–2, n. 19, and p. 1154. See also Firsov 1980, p. 139.

53 Kunina 1980, p. 368; Puschnerat 2003, pp. 283–4; Comintern 1923b, pp. 204–32, 293–8. For Zetkin's role, see Riddell 2009.

Workers' Government – Evolution of a Concept

The demand for a workers' government – an extension of the united front to the governmental level – also originated in the experiences of German workers and was first formulated by the German party. At the Fourth Congress, a division was apparent among leading supporters of the demand, which was resolved – although untidily – in favour of positions advanced by the KPD majority.

Although the ECCI had first raised the workers' government slogan with respect to Germany a year earlier, Zinoviev conceded in his opening report that 'it has not been sufficiently clarified'. The segment of the Theses on Tactics on this topic went through more drafts than any other Congress text, and even after its adoption, three different versions were circulated to Comintern parties.⁵⁴ Most subsequent English-language discussion of this question has focused on a version that differs substantially from the text that the Congress actually adopted.

The debate on this topic began in the days following the workers' defeat of the Kapp Putsch in March 1920. Kapp had fled by then, but workers were still on strike and in arms, demanding effective action against the rightist danger. Carl Legien, head of Germany's Social-Democratic unions, proposed a government of representatives of all workers' parties and trade unions. That proposal foundered on opposition from the USPD, but the KPD responded that formation of such a government would be desirable, subject to certain conditions, a stand that unleashed a storm of controversy in the party and Comintern.⁵⁵

The notion of a coalition regime of workers' parties reminded many Communists of the SPD-USPD provisional government established by Germany's November 1918 Revolution, which had suppressed the revolutionary workers' movement. But conditions had changed in Germany. When the Comintern was formed in March 1919, it set as its goal the transfer of power to the revolutionary workers' councils that then existed, or seemed likely to be formed, in several countries of Europe.⁵⁶ A year later, such councils no longer existed to any significant degree outside the Soviet republics.

It was in this context that leaders of the KPD proposed, during the Kapp putsch, to support a government of workers' organisations, committed to a

54 *TUF*, pp. 1167 (December 1921 ECCI resolution), 129 (Zinoviev), 1159–62 (Theses on Tactics).

55 Broué 2005, pp. 361–71.

56 This prospect underlies the First Congress Manifesto (Riddell (ed.) 1987, p. 229) and Lenin's comment on that occasion (Riddell (ed.) 1987, pp. 301–3; or Lenin 1960–71b, pp. 478–9).

fight to disarm the bourgeois counter-revolution and to strengthen the working class. This, they believed, could help prepare the road for the republic of workers' councils that would embody the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' – a state in which the dictatorship of capitalism would be replaced by the rule of working people. Other Communists, in both the KPD and the ECCI, denied that there could be any middle ground between the dictatorship of the proletariat and that of the bourgeoisie, objecting that such a government would necessarily block a revolutionary transition.⁵⁷

The Comintern debate on KPD tactics during the Kapp events was brought to a close by Lenin's declaration, in an appendix to *'Left-Wing' Communism* (May 1920), that the KPD's conditional support to the workers' government proposal had been 'quite correct both in its basic premises and in its practical conclusions', but the underlying differences remained unresolved.⁵⁸

After the March Action, as the KPD regained its footing, the debate was renewed. In early November 1921, the party's Central Bureau drafted theses that expressed scepticism toward 'socialist governments' – that is, coalition regimes of the SPD and USPD – while noting that the party's attitude would depend on the actions of such a regime. In a response written on 7 November, Radek urged a more positive stance, terming the workers' government 'the only practical and real means of winning the majority of the working class to the idea of a dictatorship of the proletariat'.⁵⁹ The KPD leadership declared on 8 December that, if there were guarantees that a workers' government would represent workers' interests, it would support and even enter such a regime. Ten days later, the ECCI approved this stand.

All these steps were opposed by the minority current within the KPD led by Fischer and Arkadi Maslow. There were different interpretations among the slogan's supporters as well. In the June 1922 Expanded Executive conference, Zinoviev maintained that 'the workers' government is a pseudonym for the dictatorship of the proletariat', denying the possibility of a transitional governmental phase on the road to workers' power. His view was contested by Meyer and other leaders of the German party majority, and the disagreement carried over into the Fourth Congress.⁶⁰

57 Broué 2005, pp. 385–90.

58 Lenin 1960–71c, p. 109.

59 Reisberg 1971, pp. 259–61; Broué 1997, pp. 261–2.

60 Comintern 1922a, p. 123.

Fiction, Pseudonym, or Transition?

Zinoviev's opening report to the Congress for the ECCI included a brief passage on the workers' government slogan. Warning against using the slogan 'in a general way', he restricted its use to situations where 'the relationship of forces brings to the fore the question of power'. (The final text of the resolution on this question, by contrast, endorsed its use 'almost everywhere'.) Zinoviev described the workers' government both as a 'transitional stage' and as an 'application of the dictatorship of the proletariat'. He stressed that a workers' government would not eliminate the need for the seizure of power and civil war.⁶¹

In the subsequent discussion, Bordiga spoke for many delegates who were sceptical of the concept, warning that it could be used to suggest that the working class can take state power 'in some way other than through armed struggle for power'. Meyer, on the other hand, greeted the fact that Zinoviev had moved beyond his previous statement that 'workers' government' was merely a pseudonym for proletarian dictatorship. Achievement of a workers' government, Meyer said, 'will lead to a phase of sharpened class struggles, through which a proletarian dictatorship will ultimately emerge'. Radek was more explicit, defining the workers' government as 'one of the possible points of transition to the dictatorship of the proletariat'. But it is 'worthless unless the workers stand behind it, taking up arms and building factory councils that push this government. . . . If that is done, the workers' government will be the starting point of a struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat.' The Russian delegates were initially divided on this issue, but Radek's viewpoint prevailed, leading to Zinoviev's withdrawal, in his summary, of the 'pseudonym' concept. 'I gladly concede the word to Comrade Meyer', he said.⁶²

The Comintern counterposed its call for a government of workers' parties and organisations to the efforts of Social-Democratic parties to form pro-capitalist coalitions with left-bourgeois forces like the German Centre Party or the French Radicals. In France, the Comintern suggested the formula of a government of Léon Blum and Louis-Oscar Frossard – central leaders, respectively, of the SP and CP – as an alternative to the SP's orientation to a 'Left Bloc' with bourgeois forces. The Comintern's approach aimed to draw a class line between bourgeois and workers' parties. Many Communists regarded this as a breach of Marxism's longstanding principle of refusing to accept governmental responsibility under capitalism. In his summary of the opening congress

61 *TUF*, pp. 129–30, 1159.

62 *TUF*, pp. 182 (Bordiga), 140 (Meyer), 167 (Radek), 270 (Zinoviev); Reisberg 1971, p. 648 (debate in Russian delegation).

debate, Zinoviev concluded that the Blum – Frossard slogan, while not wrong, had been premature in France. ‘Given the traditions of the party there, this was understood to be a parliamentary alliance’, he noted.⁶³ Supporters of the workers’ government concept sought to demonstrate the opposite: that it was an element of revolutionary strategy, not camouflaged reformism.

This interpretation of ‘workers’ governments’ was undermined by the ECCI’s use of the term to describe rule by workers’ parties that, while introducing some reforms, acted as loyal administrators of the capitalist order. In his summary, Zinoviev used the expression ‘liberal workers’ government’ to describe the Labour governments that had administered the Australian capitalist state after 1904 and a future Labour Party government in Britain. Such a regime, he said, ‘could be the jumping-off point for revolutionising the country’, could take many steps ‘objectively directed against the bourgeois state’, and ‘can finish in the hands of the left wing’. Surprisingly, Zinoviev saw a parallel here with the role of Russian Mensheviks in 1917. The notion of joining in efforts to bring Labour into office was rooted in Lenin’s well-known 1920 polemic against ‘left-wing’ communism, but Lenin’s thrust was quite different. Lenin had argued that a pro-capitalist Labour government would enable workers ‘to be convinced by their own experience’ that the Labour leadership was ‘absolutely good for nothing’.⁶⁴

Meyer, by contrast, emphasised the contrast between ‘liberal workers’ governments’ and a true workers’ government, which ‘does not merely carry the label of a socialist policy but actually implements a socialist-communist policy in life’. Such a government will be parliamentary ‘only in a subordinate sense’ and ‘must be carried by the broad masses’. KPD leaders Meyer, Hoernle and Walter Ulbricht, on behalf of the German delegation, submitted an amendment that explained the different types of workers’ governments and distinguished between ‘illusory’ and ‘genuine’ variants, which was incorporated into the final resolution.⁶⁵

Another amendment sought to counter the assertion by the senior Bulgarian delegate, Vasil Kolarov, that ‘the workers’ government is not posed in agrarian countries like the Balkans’. The final resolution referred to the possibility of a ‘government of workers and the poorer peasants’ in regions such as the Balkans and Czechoslovakia.⁶⁶

63 *TUF*, p. 271.

64 *TUF*, pp. 266–7 (Zinoviev); Lenin 1960–71c, pp. 83–5.

65 *TUF*, pp. 139 (Meyer); 1096, 1098–1100, and 1160–2 (amendments); and Reisberg 1971, p. 657.

66 *TUF*, pp. 243 (Kolarov), 1161 (amendment).

The workers' government debate was notable for the richness of the contributions by delegates who had grappled with its complexity in the work of member parties. Ruth Fischer gave voice to the reticence of many left-leaning delegates in warning that the concept of revolution was being watered down by 'styling its hair in "Western" fashion . . . creating democratic transitional stages between what we have now and what we aim for'. Speaking for the pro-unioned-front minority of the Italian CP, Antonio Graziadei called the workers' government 'the result of a united front' – that is, the logical extension of a united front to a governmental level. Adolf Warszawski of the Polish majority likened the workers' government slogan to the demand 'all power to the soviets', raised in Russia in mid-1917 and in Germany in late 1918 – examples of 'a great revolutionary movement at a time when we have not yet won the majority of the working class'. In a rare Fourth-Congress reference to Bolshevik experience, Trotsky drew a parallel with the workers' government formed by the Bolsheviks after the 1917 October Revolution, a coalition with the peasant-based Left Socialist-Revolutionary Party.⁶⁷

Zinoviev's summary did not pick up on Meyer's and Radek's description of the workers' government as a transitional stage to soviet-power. While conceding on the word 'pseudonym', Zinoviev restated his point in another form, arguing that 'to establish a workers' government we must first overthrow the bourgeoisie'. The workers' government represented 'the least likely path' to workers' power. As for the variant of a 'liberal workers' government', perhaps in Britain, '[i]t is right to agitate for such a workers' government', while maintaining a revolutionary perspective.⁶⁸ On this ambiguous note, the discussion moved into the Congress commissions.

Meanwhile, outside the plenary sessions, a sharp debate was under way regarding a proposal that the KPD join a coalition government in the German state of Saxony with the two Social-Democratic parties. A year earlier, elections in the neighbouring state of Thuringia had produced a narrow majority for the Social-Democratic and Communist parties, taken together. The KPD had declined to join in a common government with the SPD and USPD, but its support enabled the two parties to form a state government independent of the bourgeois parties. When the Saxon elections in late 1922 produced a similar result, the now-united SPD invited the Communists to join the government. The KPD posed a number of conditions, of which two were rejected: the arming of the workers and the calling of a congress of factory councils. The KPD majority leadership then proposed to enter the government regardless. The

67 *TUF*, pp. 147 (Fischer), 189 (Graziadei), 197 (Warszawski), 1003 (Trotsky).

68 *TUF*, pp. 272, 269.

Fischer-Maslow current protested. The question was debated in Moscow mid-way through the Congress, on 16 November, at a special meeting of the German delegation with leaders of the Russian party, chaired by Lenin. Bukharin, Lenin, Radek, Trotsky and Zinoviev were unanimously opposed to entry into the government, and the German majority leadership gave way.⁶⁹

A month after this discussion, Trotsky summarised its outcome in a report on the Congress. The Comintern had been prepared to support participation in the government, Trotsky said, if the KPD was 'of the opinion that a revolution is possible in the next few months in Germany' and that ministerial posts in Saxony could be used 'for transforming Saxony... [into] a revolutionary stronghold' during this period of preparation. But, given the actual conditions in Germany, KPD ministers 'will of course play in Saxony the role of an appendage, an impotent appendage because the Saxon government is itself impotent before Berlin, and Berlin is – a bourgeois government'.⁷⁰

Section 11 of the Theses on Tactics, which deals with the workers' government, was the most frequently and thoroughly rewritten text in the Congress resolutions. The first and second drafts affirmed the workers' government to be identical with the dictatorship of the proletariat, while omitting the concept that it can be a fighting instrument to help dismantle the bourgeois state and prepare for insurrection. All this was altered in the much-revised text presented during the final Congress session to Congress delegates.⁷¹

The completed resolution represented a workable synthesis, based on a transitional concept of a workers' government. It labelled a potential Labour regime in Britain as an 'illusory workers' government', stating that it will be supported 'only to the degree that it defends the workers' interests'. The final text described the tasks and character of a workers' government in these terms:

The most basic tasks of a workers' government must consist of arming the proletariat, disarming the bourgeois counter-revolutionary organisations, introducing [workers'] control of production, shifting the main

69 No minutes of the November 16 meeting are available. Reisberg 1971 provides an account based on archival records (pp. 670–2). Broué 2005 presents an account of the meeting by Zinoviev in 1924 (pp. 657–8). For a participant's account, see Trotsky 1972b, pp. 325–6. The meeting also took up relations between the majority and minority factions of the German party. For two widely divergent accounts, see Zetkin 1934, pp. 38–9; Fischer 1948, pp. 183–6.

70 Trotsky 1972b, p. 325.

71 Comintern 1994, 491/1/278–81/1483–91 (first and second drafts); *TUF*, pp. 1096–1100 (late amendments); pp. 1159–62 (adopted text).

burden of taxation to the shoulders of the rich, and breaking the resistance of the counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie. Such a workers' government is possible only if it is born from the struggles of the masses themselves and is supported by militant workers' organisations created by the most oppressed layers of the working masses.⁷²

However, the confusion attending this debate extended into publication of the resolution. The description of 'illusory' or 'false' workers' governments published in the Congress proceedings and translated in *Toward the United Front* was elaborated and strengthened in the German-language edition of the Congress resolutions. Unfortunately, the Soviet edition of the Congress resolutions published in 1933 omitted the amendments adopted in the final session and subsequent changes, and this 1933 version has served as the basis of all published English-language translations.⁷³ As a result, much subsequent discussion of this Congress text has focused on weaknesses that the Congress itself identified and sought to correct.

Unity against Colonialism

The Congress discussion on the 'Eastern question', a Comintern term for struggles in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, displayed considerable assertiveness by delegates from colonial and semi-colonial countries.

Although largely European in its membership and political focus, the Comintern, from its foundation, had broken with the prewar socialist movement's ambiguous record on victims of colonialism, pledging that 'the hour of proletarian dictatorship in Europe will also be the hour of [their] liberation'. The Second Congress, held in 1920, promised the International's support for 'the revolutionary movement among the nations that are dependent and do not have equal rights (for example Ireland, the Negroes in America, and so forth), and in the colonies'. Point 8 in the Twenty-One Conditions for Admission to the Comintern specified each member party's obligation to lend active support to such movements 'not only in words but in deeds' and to 'demand that

⁷² *TUF*, pp. 1159–60, 1161.

⁷³ For the version in the collection of resolutions, see *TUF*, p. 1162, n. 43, and Comintern 1923d, pp. 15–17. The Theses on Tactics are not found in the Russian abridged edition of the proceedings, Comintern 1923a. For the Russian version of this passage, see Kun 1933, pp. 301–2. It is translated in Comintern 1923c, pp. 31–4; Degras (ed.) 1956, pp. 425–7; Adler (ed.) 1980, pp. 397–9; and at: <www.marxists.org>.

the imperialists of its country be driven out of these colonies'. This mandate was expressed in subsequent congresses of the peoples of the East (Baku 1920) and toilers of the Far East (Moscow 1922). The Third World Congress (June–July 1921) held a day of debate on the four draft resolutions submitted by Asian delegates but took no decisions.⁷⁴

At the time of the Fourth Congress, the Communist movement in Asia and North Africa was just beginning to take root. Small Communist parties had been formed in Iran and Turkey, and a revolutionary group in Egypt had applied for membership. The newly formed Communist Party of China was tiny but growing rapidly, and Communists in India, led by M.N. Roy, were taking their first steps. In the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), Communists among the Dutch settlers had led the transformation of their nucleus into a wholly indigenous movement. In contrast, the Communist Party in Algeria was composed of colonial settlers who were uninterested in recruiting native revolutionaries to their movement.

While only a beginning, this initial progress justified the statement by US black delegate Otto Huiswoud (Billings) that 'the Second International is an International of the white workers and the Communist International is an International of the workers of the world'.⁷⁵

Building on the Second Congress's support of national-revolutionary movements in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the Fourth Congress called for an anti-imperialist united front. This concept, not mentioned in the lengthy opening report by the Dutch Communist Willem van Ravesteijn, was introduced during the discussion by Roy as a means to 'organise all the available revolutionary forces . . . against imperialism'. Experience has shown that this cannot be done under bourgeois leadership, Roy said. The anti-imperialist united front, he said, will 'free the movement from the fearful and wavering bourgeoisie and bring the masses more actively into the vanguard, so that the revolutionary social forces can constitute the movement's foundation and thus secure its final victory'. Later, G.I. Safarov, a leader of Comintern work in the East, commented on the barriers posed by feudal and militarist support for imperialism and obstruction of national unity. 'Our first task is to unify all the efforts of the colonial revolutionary movement into an anti-imperialist united front', he said. The Congress resolution stressed that this concept flowed 'from

74 Riddell (ed.) 1987, pp. 227–8; Riddell (ed.) 1991a, p. 286; Riddell (ed.) 1991b, p. 768; Riddell (ed.) 1993 (Baku congress); Comintern 1970 (Far-East Congress).

75 *TUF*, p. 800. Compare Riddell (ed.) 1991b, p. 696.

the perspective of an extended, lengthy struggle against world imperialism, demanding the mobilisation of all revolutionary forces'.⁷⁶

Such formulations were given life by descriptions and discussions of specific struggles. The Turkish independence struggle, which had just won a striking victory against Greece and the occupying imperialist powers, stood out in significance. Orhan (Sadrettin Celal Antel) said that the Turkish CP, viewing the struggle against imperialism as of 'overriding importance', had 'decided to support the government [of Mustafa Kemal] as long as it was combating imperialism', but the party also 'continued to demand democratic reforms for the workers and peasants and endeavoured to organise them'. The government, however, was now seeking an accommodation with imperialism and arresting Communists and worker militants, actions sharply condemned in the Congress resolution on Turkey, he said. A subsequent speech by Orhan concluded with an appeal for a world congress embracing 'all revolutionary organisations engaged in anti-imperialist struggle'.⁷⁷

Ibrahim Datoek Tan Malaka's vivid portrayal of Communist struggle in the Dutch East Indies is among the most-often cited passages of the Congress proceedings. He argued that an unwise condemnation of pan-Islamism in a Second Congress resolution ('It is necessary to struggle against the pan-Islamic movements') was being utilised by enemies of anti-imperialist unity. Pan-Islamism had taken on a new meaning, he said; it 'now means the nationalist freedom struggle'. The importance of unity with Islamist anticolonial forces was proven, in his opinion, by his party's experience working with Sarekat Islam, the pioneer mass nationalist movement of the Dutch Indies. To the Congress delegates' delight, he gave examples of Communist adroitness in parrying religious prejudices: 'Yes, your God is mighty, but . . . on this earth the railway workers are even mightier! . . . The railway workers are God's executive committee in this world.'⁷⁸

Tunisian delegate Tahar Boudengha was even blunter: 'Pan-Islamism means simply the unification of all Muslims against their oppressor. It should be supported.' Ravesteyn, the reporter, also discussed pan-Islamism sympathetically and at length. The Congress Theses on the Eastern Question went some distance to encompass this viewpoint. 'In Muslim countries, the national movement is initially guided by the religious and political slogans of pan-Islamism', the theses stated. Imperialist forces try to thwart this movement by a 'pretence

76 *TUF*, pp. 694 (Roy), 721 (Safarov), 1187 (Fourth Congress resolution); and Riddell (ed.) 1991a, pp. 212–13 (Second Congress).

77 *TUF*, pp. 614, 724 (Orhan), 619–20 (resolution).

78 *TUF*, pp. 261–5 (Malaka); Riddell (ed.) 1991a, p. 288 (Second Congress resolution).

at “Muslim sympathies”, but as the struggle advances, ‘the religious-political slogans of pan-Islamism will be more and more replaced by specific political demands’.⁷⁹

Curiously, the Comintern’s most significant engagement with national-revolutionary movements at that time, with the Kuomintang (the main bourgeois-nationalist movement in China), received only brief mention at the Congress. Earlier that year, the Congress of Toilers of the Far East (January–February 1922), which had included Kuomintang representatives, had laid out a basic policy toward this movement. ‘We are supporting and will continue to support your struggle’, Safarov told Kuomintang delegates, ‘in so far as it is a matter of a nationalistic and democratic uprising for national emancipation. But at the same time we shall independently carry on our Communist work of organising the proletarian and semi-proletarian masses of China.’ In August 1922, the Chinese CP leadership had decided, on the urging of Comintern envoy Henk Sneevliet (Maring), that CP members should join the Kuomintang. Sneevliet had been among the architects of the entry by revolutionary socialists in the Dutch East Indies into Sarekat Islam, discussed in the Congress by Tan Malaka. Chen Duxiu, a delegate at the Fourth Congress, joined the Kuomintang in September, along with other leading Communists. This event, which looms large in Chinese history, was reported briefly by Liu Renjing at the end of his remarks in Session 20. It was otherwise not mentioned, including in the speeches on the Eastern question by Comintern leaders Safarov and Radek. Safarov did say that soviet revolution was not posed in countries like China. Radek went further, stating that ‘in China, neither the victory of socialism nor the establishment of a Soviet republic is on the agenda’. Even national unity was not yet possible, he said, tacitly suggesting that the Kuomintang’s chief goal was illusory.⁸⁰

The resolution on the East did not discuss tasks in China. The archives of the Comintern in Moscow, open for research since 1992, contain an unpublished document on tasks of the Chinese CP labelled ‘Resolution of the Fourth Congress’, but there is no reference to it in the Congress proceedings. This document, drafted by Radek, dismisses the Kuomintang, terming it a force allied with imperialism, and does not propose that CP members join or support it. On 12 January 1923, however, the ECCI adopted a statement hailing the Kuomintang as ‘the only serious national-revolutionary group in China’ and advocating membership in it by Chinese Communists. This fragmentary

79 *TUF*, pp. 704 (Boudengha), 662–85 (Ravesteyn), 1182 (resolution).

80 Comintern 1970, pp. 193–4; Pantsov 2000, p. 57; Carr 1966, p. 527 (entry into KMT); and *TUF*, pp. 711–12 (Liu on KMT), 722 (Safarov), 733 (Radek).

record suggests that Chinese Communists and their Comintern advisors disagreed regarding policy toward the Kuomintang, and that the matter was resolved only after Sneevliet's arrival in Moscow in late December.⁸¹

By contrast, the oppression of black people received close attention. The Congress adopted an unprecedented statement on the world struggle of black people, based on reports and input by two black leaders of the US Communist movement, Huiswoud and Claude McKay. The resolution proclaimed the need for a world movement for black liberation, pledging the Comintern's support for 'every form of the black movement that either undermines or weakens capitalism or places barriers in the path of its future expansion'. It also called for immediate steps toward a world congress of blacks in Moscow.⁸²

Throughout these discussions, many delegates voiced concern that struggles in the East were not allocated appropriate time and attention. Despite the small size of parties in colonial countries, two days of debate seemed insufficient given the complexity of the issues. Appeals for more speaking time were common during the Congress, but, even so, the complaints regarding handling of the Eastern question were unique in frequency and vehemence. Both Ravesteyn and Roy pointed to the lack of speakers from the East during the Congress's main political discussions. Orhan found the Western parties' failure to devote attention to the colonial question 'inexplicable'. Tan Malaka appealed eloquently for adequate time: 'I come from the Indies; I have travelled forty days.' Karim Nikbin (Iran) and Harry Webb (Britain) noted the scanty attendance at discussions on the East. Delegations from thirteen countries, including three in Europe, presented a collective protest. Even Safarov, a Bolshevik leader, protested the 'passivity' displayed by 'a considerable sector' of the Congress. Responses from the Presidium (responsible for organising the Congress agenda) were dismissive: Kolarov said that, for Eastern issues, discussions in the commission were enough, implying they were of no great import.

81 *TUF*, pp. 1180–90 (resolution on East); Titarenko *et al.* (eds.) 1994, pp. 149–51 (resolution by Radek on CPC tasks); Titarenko (ed.) 1986, pp. 37–8 (ECCI resolution). Radek's resolution can also be found in German in Kuo and Titarenko (eds.) 1996, pp. 192–4; and in English, with a slightly different text, in Saich (ed.) 1991, pp. 377–8. Titarenko *et al.* (eds.) 1994 states that the Radek resolution reflected a 'fairly insistent tendency against aiding Sun Yat-Sen and the Kuomintang, favouring a line of developing the workers' and trade-union movement not dependent on the Kuomintang, especially in Northern and Central China', which 'gained the ascendancy . . . at the Fourth Congress' (p. 160). Thanks to Victor Granovsky for alerting me to this comment.

82 *TUF*, pp. 800–7 (Billings), 807–10 (McKay), 947–50 (resolution on blacks).

Replying to Eastern delegates' complaints that their work did not meet with interest, Radek stated that 'interest in parties is tied to their deeds'.⁸³

The deeds of the major European parties attracted interest for quite a different reason: many delegates pointed out that they were failing to fulfil their duty of active support for colonial freedom. Orhan claimed that, in Italy, a significant colonial power engaged in the dismemberment of Turkey, the CP had no policy for the colonies. Webb insisted that anti-colonial work should be given greater priority. William Earsman posed the question of labour's complicity in the colour bar in Australia. Boudengha made a decisive intervention, exposing the actions of French CP members in Algeria, who were backing French colonial rule and resisting Algerians' strivings for independence. Safarov and Trotsky supported Boudengha's stand, stressing the urgency of a sharp break with such attitudes, and this was codified in the resolution on France. Less positively, the Congress resolution on South Africa did not take up the fact that the general strike in Transvaal in March 1922 had been waged, in part, in defence of the colour bar against black workers.⁸⁴

Programme: The Challenge of Transition

A much anticipated Congress discussion on programme was cut short unexpectedly after three reports that revealed a sharp disagreement, including among leading Russian delegates, on an issue related to united-front policy.

In the view of Communists, the collapse of the Second International at the outset of the First World War reflected, in part, a crisis of programme. Previously, socialists had taken their lead from the Erfurt programme, adopted by the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) in 1891. This programme, Luxemburg told the KPD's founding congress in December 1918, was marked by 'the separation of the immediate, so-called minimal demands formulated for the political and economic struggle from the socialist goal regarded as a maximal programme... For us there is no minimal and maximal program; socialism... is the minimum we have to realise today.'⁸⁵ During the revolutionary upsurge that followed the First World War, Communists believed that

83 *TUF*, pp. 235–6 (Ravesteyn), 686 (Roy), 723 (Orhan), 264 (Tan Malaka), 726 (Nikbin), 711 (Webb), 707 (collective protest), 720 (Safarov), 650 (Kolarov), 735 (Radek).

84 *TUF*, pp. 723 (Orhan), 709 (Webb), 716–17 (Earsman), 700–4 (Boudengha), 719–20 (Safarov), 1000–1 (Trotsky), 1131–2 (resolution on France), 736 (resolution on South Africa).

85 Luxemburg 2004, pp. 364–5. An English translation of the Erfurt programme is available at: <www.marxists.org>.

achievement of workers' power was posed as an immediate task. This was the central issue addressed by the two programmatic documents adopted by the Comintern's founding congress, the 'Platform of the Communist International' and Lenin's 'Theses on Bourgeois Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat'.⁸⁶

As the revolutionary wave ebbed, it became increasingly urgent, as Trotsky later remarked, to find ways 'to help the masses in the process of the daily struggle to find the bridge between present demands and the socialist programme of the revolution'. This challenge was addressed by Radek at the Third Comintern Congress. Referring to Luxemburg's 1918 remarks on the KPD's programme, he asked, 'And what did Rosa Luxemburg propose as a minimum? All power to the workers' councils, arm the proletariat, cancel state debts, seize the factories, and so forth.' But now, 'the first onslaught of the working class . . . has been beaten back'. Communists must offer 'more than the bare programme of the dictatorship of the proletariat'. The Theses on Tactics adopted by the Third Congress sketched out the resulting programmatic challenge:

In place of the minimum programme of the centrists and reformists, the Communist International offers a struggle for the specific demands of the proletariat, as part of a system of demands that, in their totality, undermine the power of the bourgeoisie, organise the proletariat, and mark out the different stages of the struggle for proletarian dictatorship. Each of these demands gives expression to the needs of the broad masses, even when they do not yet consciously take a stand for proletarian dictatorship.⁸⁷

This 'system of demands' encompassed many that were considered to be 'immediate' or 'partial'. Following on the usage of German Communists, the term 'transitional demands' came to be applied to the elements of this 'system' that could help the working masses, as they radicalised, to see the need to break from bourgeois influence and set out on the road to power. Prominent examples were the calls for a workers' government and for workers' control of production. The programme adopted by the KPD in October 1922 included demands for confiscatory taxation of capitalist property; abolition of bank, technical, and commercial secrecy; a state monopoly of the food supply;

86 Riddell (ed.) 1987, pp. 149–59, 241–8; Lenin 1960–71b, pp. 457–74.

87 Trotsky 1973, p. 75; Comintern 1921a, pp. 475–6; Comintern 1921b, p. 47. See also Adler (ed.) 1980, p. 286.

rationing under workers' control; and a state monopoly of external trade and banking under workers' control.⁸⁸

On 11 June 1922, an expanded ECCI conference noted that its largest member parties had not yet adopted programmes. It established a commission with 33 members from 15 countries to assist them in this task. Zinoviev projected that the commission might submit a draft programme to the Fourth Congress. In any case, consideration of a programme for the Comintern and its main member parties would be 'among the most important' Congress agenda items. When the commission met on 28 June, differences emerged regarding the appropriate scope of a Comintern programme. Bukharin opposed including in the programme transitional demands such as the workers' government and united front, which he viewed as tactical matters. In response, Šmeral argued that the programme needed to encompass the Communists' tactical course and line of action during a possibly lengthy transitional period preceding the revolution. Zetkin added that the programme had to be 'sufficiently broad to encompass everything necessary in the given situation'.⁸⁹

The pre-Congress issue of the Comintern journal *Kommunistische Internationale* included the draft programmes of the Italian and German parties, plus contributions to the discussion by Varga, Thalheimer, and Wera Kostrzewa of the Polish CP.⁹⁰

The Fourth Congress discussion on this point opened with presentations by Bukharin and Thalheimer, presenting the two counterposed viewpoints voiced in the ECCI. Bukharin reported a decision, presumably by the Congress Presidium, that the Congress would hold only a preliminary discussion on programme, because most parties had not yet taken a position on this question. Bukharin noted that his own draft had not been discussed by the Russian delegation. He argued against including transitional demands in the programme, including in a jocular exchange with Radek. Thalheimer stressed the dangers of a 'separation of tactical principles from goals,' a characteristic of the Second International 'that opened the door to their descent into opportunism'.

88 Broué 2005, pp. 648–50.

89 For the ECCI decision, see Comintern 1922a, pp. 134–5. The ECCI specified that the Fourth Congress would consider the programmes of parties in Germany, France, Italy, Czechoslovakia, the US and Japan, plus one party each in Scandinavia and the Balkans – presumably those in Norway and Bulgaria. The programme commission included all five Russian CP leaders assigned to Comintern work (Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Bukharin and Radek) plus Zetkin, Thalheimer and Meyer of the KPD. For a summary of the commission discussion, see Sokolov 1980.

90 *Kommunistische Internationale*, 23 (November 1922), pp. 114–55. For a fuller collection of relevant documents, see Comintern 1924.

He quoted extensively from an October 1917 article by Lenin arguing against Bukharin's proposal at that time that the Bolshevik Party abandon its 'minimum programme'. A third report, by Khristo Kabakchiev, summarising the Bulgarian CP's draft programme, argued that under prevailing conditions the minimum demands of the old programme had taken on transitional significance.⁹¹

When Kabakchiev's speech concluded, the Presidium proposed and obtained adjournment of debate in order to grant a request of the Russian delegation for time to consider its position. Three days later, Bukharin read a short statement of the Russian delegation drafted by Lenin the previous day, essentially endorsing the Thalheimer position. Delegates then adopted a Presidium resolution written in the same spirit, with the Italian delegation dissenting. The German majority leaders had obtained an open repudiation of a position advanced by a leading Bolshevik on a principled issue.⁹²

The far-ranging exchange between Bukharin and Thalheimer included lengthy comments reviewing the evolution of Marxist views in the pre-1914 Socialist International. Both offered assessments of the revisionism controversy in the prewar SPD that differed from Lenin's published views. Bukharin traced Karl Kautsky's 1914 capitulation to revisionism back to his conduct in the 1899 controversy with Eduard Bernstein, a failing that Bolsheviks, he said, had not noted at the time. Lenin, by contrast, had written in 1920 that Kautsky in that period 'was still a Marxist and not a renegade'. Thalheimer described the continuity of German Communism going back to the struggle after 1905 of the Marxist-left current headed by Luxemburg against the current led by Kautsky, an outlook distinct from that of Lenin at that time. Thalheimer also criticised Lenin's early views on the prospects for capitalism in Russia. These disagreements illustrate the diversity of viewpoints and traditions that then coexisted and contended within the Comintern.⁹³

91 *TUF*, pp. 479–80 (Bukharin), 497–98 (Bukharin/Radek), 510, 511–15 (Thalheimer), 522–3 (Kabakchiev). Bukharin's draft programme is not found among published congress materials.

92 *TUF*, pp. 527 (adjournment of debate), 631–3 (statements by Russian and Italian delegations and resolution).

93 *TUF*, pp. 481 (Bukharin on Kautsky), 503–4 (Thalheimer on Marxist Left), 509 (Thalheimer on Lenin); and Lenin 1960–71c, p. 22 (Lenin on Kautsky).

Balance Sheet of the Russian NEP

Midway through its extended opening discussion of the united front and related matters, the Congress paused for three days to hear reports by Lenin, Zetkin, Trotsky and Kun on the state of the Russian Revolution. The Soviet government's New Economic Policy (NEP) had been the topic of a controversial debate in the Third Congress (1921), but this time the speeches were not followed by discussion. There was no follow-up regarding concerns expressed by some delegates during the previous congress regarding bureaucratisation of the Soviet administration or imposition of Soviet foreign policy on the Comintern. Zetkin drafted a brief resolution that was adopted as the Congress closed.⁹⁴

Kun's presence among the reporters reflected a return to prominence after his much-criticised actions as ECCI envoy in spurring the German party into the March Action of 1921. His topic was the indispensable role of the revolutionary party in the 1917 workers' victory in Russia, which he contrasted to consequences of the absence of such a party in the Hungarian revolution that followed a year and a half later.

Detailed discussion of the NEP in the reports by Lenin, Zetkin and Trotsky falls for the most part outside the scope of this study. It is worth noting, however, the extent to which Zetkin's presentation went beyond conventional Bolshevik analysis of that period.

Zetkin termed the prevailing economic order 'state capitalism', a term also used by Lenin but criticised by Trotsky. 'Capitalism has come again [to Russia]', Zetkin said, 'although its power . . . seemed to have been banished from the sacred revolutionary soil of Soviet Russia once and for all'. It had come in the form not only of small peasant operations but 'those receiving leases and concessions', in the search for 'the largest profit possible'. This meant the return of 'the contradiction between capital and labour . . . in all its ruthlessness and severity'. Capitalist pressures were also expressed through state enterprises, Zetkin pointed out. They were now subjected to strict accounting and forced to live mainly from market revenue – and from Russia's renewed insertion into the world capitalist market. These pressures could bring the workers' state

94 See also Lenin 1960–71e, pp. 418–32; Trotsky 1972b, pp. 185–216. Trotsky also wrote summary theses based on his speech (Trotsky 1972b, pp. 264–74), which – although included in the Adler (ed.) 1980 collection of congress documents – were not adopted by the Congress. Zetkin sent an outline of her speech to Lenin, who responded with encouragement: see Stoljarowa and Schmalfuss (eds.) 1990, pp. 303–7.

into conflicts with the interests of some workers, she stated – conflicts that ‘must be resolved . . . in the interests of the proletariat as a class, in its entirety’.⁹⁵

Zetkin sought to defend the Bolsheviks’ record against criticisms raised in a just-published posthumous work by Luxemburg. Without mentioning Luxemburg’s work, Zetkin endorsed the Bolsheviks’ actions in a manner that was unqualified but also unsparing. Referring to the government’s severe actions against counter-revolution, she commented, ‘By taking bad measures, they serve to prevent what is even worse.’ But she echoed Luxemburg’s argument by declining to accept such ‘bad measures’ as the last word in proletarian rule. Soviet Russia ‘is the first form of proletarian state’, she told delegates, but ‘[c]ertainly it is not the only form . . . because the historically given conditions for establishment of a proletarian state are varied’.⁹⁶

In other Congress sessions, delegates considered the implications of the NEP experience for communists outside Russia. Bukharin explained that the NEP had ‘general applicability’ – that it is ‘not only a strategic retreat but is also the correct solution to a broad organisational and social problem’, namely the relationship between the portion of the economy organised directly by the state, on the one hand, and on the other the ‘peasants and millions of small producers’. Zinoviev had previously explained that this was the collective view of the Bolshevik leadership. The perspective of a NEP outside Russia provided assurance to small farmers and other exploited independent producers that they would be able, under workers’ rule, to continue operations and dispose freely of their products. Perhaps more importantly, this perspective underscored that a workers’ state could not make policy according to a blueprint: adjustments were needed to local conditions and class relations.⁹⁷

A comment by Bukharin in his report on programme has been held by some historians to prefigure the later subordination of the Comintern to Soviet foreign-policy interests, under the leadership of Joseph Stalin. Bukharin suggested that, in the event of a military alliance between a proletarian state such as Soviet Russia and a bourgeois state, workers in the bourgeois state should

95 *TUF*, pp. 329 (Zetkin), 355–6 (Trotsky), 330–1 (Zetkin).

96 *TUF*, pp. 316, 336 (Zetkin). Zetkin was responding here to criticisms of Bolshevik policy during the Russian Revolution raised by Rosa Luxemburg in an article written in prison in September 1918 and published after her death by Paul Levi in 1921 (Luxemburg 2004, pp. 281–310). Defending the Bolshevik-led dictatorship, Luxemburg had written, ‘The danger begins only when they make a virtue of necessity and want to freeze into a complete theoretical system all the tactics forced upon them by these fatal circumstances’ (Luxemburg 2004, p. 309). Zetkin’s viewpoint was developed more fully in book form in Zetkin 1922; the book’s thesis is summarised in Van der Linden 2007, pp. 31–4.

97 *TUF*, pp. 493 (Bukharin), 71–2, 123 (Zinoviev).

‘contribute to the victory of such an alliance’ – which could conceivably mean supporting their own capitalist government in a war. The Bolshevik leader probably had in mind the Rapallo Treaty and other agreements concluded by Russia and Germany that year, which included provisions for military collaboration. These accords were not mentioned in the Congress and did not lead the German Communists to lessen their efforts to overthrow the German state. In the Stalin era, by contrast, diplomatic shifts by the Soviet government led to immediate worldwide reversals in Comintern policy. Bukharin’s comment has been cited to support his claim that the Congress ‘issued a new programme [that] turned the Communist International into an organ of the Soviet state’. In fact, no programme was issued, while Bukharin’s report did not represent the viewpoint of either the ECCI or the Bolshevik delegation and was not adopted.⁹⁸

There was no suggestion during the Congress that defence of the national interests of Soviet Russia had priority for the Comintern. Soviet foreign policy and Comintern interests were regarded as identical, as Zinoviev pointed out in his opening report. He cited Lenin’s belief that the leading role of the Russian party in the Comintern would soon be ended by the establishment of Soviet republics in advanced countries. Zetkin affirmed Marx’s statement that ‘the socialist revolution cannot be consummated within national limits’, pointing to it as a central theme of Bolshevik policy. Trotsky defined Soviet policy as ‘sticking it out until the working class of Europe and the rest of the world has taken state power’. According to the Congress resolution on Soviet Russia, ‘Proletarian revolution can never fully triumph in a single country. Rather it must be victorious internationally, as a world-revolution’.⁹⁹

Centralism in the International

A Congress agenda point on ‘reorganising the Executive Committee’ took up only two half-sessions among the thirty-two in the congress, and the resolution proposed only limited changes. However, the discussion touched on issues that weighed heavily in the International’s later evolution.

The Comintern was founded with the goal of ‘coordinating proletarian actions’ through a world party that ‘puts the interests of the international revolution ahead of so-called national interests’. Its statutes declared it to be a ‘united Communist party of the whole world’, whose affiliates in each country are ‘only its individual sections’. Its Executive Committee, the statutes affirmed,

98 For Bukharin’s statement, see *TUF*, pp. 496. Brauntal 1967, pp. 255, 258.

99 *TUF*, pp. 95, 73–4 (Zinoviev), 320 (Zetkin), 361 (Trotsky), 1103–4 (resolution).

issued directives 'binding on all [affiliated] organisations'. The Twenty-One Conditions, however, linked application of this principle to 'conditions of most acute civil war' and recognised that the Comintern and ECCI 'must take into account the diverse conditions under which each party has to struggle and work, adopting universally binding decisions only on questions in which such decisions are possible'.¹⁰⁰

These concepts were applied to newly formed parties, uniting forces with very different backgrounds and levels of experience, by an Executive that bore the political authority of Bolshevik victory but which was sometimes inclined to leftist impatience. The Executive's envoys came in for criticism for heavy-handed and ill-advised interventions in the affairs of national parties, particularly with regard to the launching of the 1921 March Action in Germany. In June–July 1921, the Third World Congress corrected political errors that underlay this problem, but did not review the Executive's conduct toward the sections. Subsequently, such problems were less disruptive but did not end: only a month after the Third Congress, Lenin publicly reproved Radek for meddling in the German party. And, even while the Fourth Congress commission on the US party was meeting, an envoy sent to that party by the ECCI, József Pogány (John Pepper), was – unknown to commission members and probably the ECCI – organising a personal faction to take over the US party leadership.¹⁰¹

But Pogány's intrigue ran counter to the spirit of the Congress. Appeals were made for caution in applying the Bolshevik organisational model to the International and its member parties. Lenin's address included a warning regarding the organisational resolution that the Comintern had adopted the previous year. Although he was 'prepared to subscribe to every one of its fifty or more points', the resolution – which he had helped draft – was 'too Russian' and incomprehensible to non-Russian Communists. 'Everything in it is based on the Russian experience', Lenin said; non-Russians 'will not understand it' and 'cannot carry it out'. However, apart from a comment by Zetkin, Lenin's

100 Riddell (ed.) 1987, pp. 247–8 (Comintern Platform); Riddell (ed.) 1991b, pp. 696, 698 (Statutes), 770 (Conditions).

101 Lenin 1960–71d, pp. 515–16. On Pogány's role see Draper 1960, *passim*; Cannon 1973, pp. 74–84; Palmer 2007, pp. 175–95. Cannon, then a central leader of the US party, explains that Pogány's authority as an ECCI representative 'was never completely clear'; in Moscow, Cannon heard that it was limited to working with the US party's Hungarian federation.

warning against arbitrarily imposing Russian organisational norms was not taken up in Congress discussion.¹⁰²

A few delegates did describe Communist parties in a spirit more flexible than that of the 1921 resolution. Willi Münzenberg, in his report on workers' aid for Soviet Russia, explained that in the Comintern's mass parties, whose members numbered in the hundreds of thousands, members 'are not all simply political activists. The moment the Communist Party is organised as an open party, which anyone won by our agitation can join, it wins a large number of forces who may well not be politically active in the purely political daily work'. Many of these inactive members, he said, could be won to participate in the aid campaign for Russia. As for international discipline, Meyer described it as a situation where 'every sister party knows the others and, in its own activity, takes into account the reaction in the sister parties and the consequences for them'. Trotsky, sorting out the troubled affairs of the French party, took care to reaffirm its autonomy, presenting the Congress's role as providing 'guidelines' and 'advice'. In the many national disputes brought before the Congress (e.g. Denmark, Spain, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia), its commissions sought to avoid a partisan stance and to unify the Communist forces in each country.¹⁰³

In Norway and France, however, the ECCI believed that a non-partisan approach to faction conflicts was beyond reach. The Comintern's Norwegian affiliate was the Labour Party, a mass federated organisation dating back to the prewar Second International. Despite many promises, its leadership had failed to re-organise the party along the lines of the Twenty-One Conditions. Convinced that the majority leaders were prevaricating, the Congress passed a forceful resolution, insisting that the party carry out Comintern decisions and acknowledge Comintern authority over its national sections. The majority of the Norwegian party was soon to leave the Comintern, although only after another year of ECCI efforts to resolve the conflict.¹⁰⁴

As for the French party, the ECCI had been working for two years to promote a united leadership combining the dominant Centre faction, which reflected the party's roots in the Second International, with the Left, bent on transforming it along Communist lines. Among the disputed issues was the united-front

102 *TUF*, pp. 303–4 (Lenin), 337 (Zetkin). For the Third Congress resolution, see Riddell (ed.) 2015, pp. 978–1006. For Lenin's involvement in drafting it, see Lenin 1960–71g, pp. 316–19; Lenin 1960–71h, pp. 185–6.

103 *TUF*, pp. 644 (Münzenberg), 141 (Meyer), 991 (Trotsky), and resolutions in Congress Sessions 29, 30, and 31.

104 See 'Resolution on the Norwegian Labour Party', *TUF*, pp. 1091–2.

policy, which the Centre considered to be inapplicable in France. Two weeks before the Fourth Congress convened, an agreement between these two factions collapsed, and a French CP congress ended in deadlock. Both sides agreed to ask the World Congress to mediate. Formal debate of the French question was assigned to the commission set up for this purpose, but the contending views were expressed in several speeches in plenary session. Alfred Rosmer and Henri Lauridan, representing the Left, launched a political offensive on the disputed issues, backed by Zinoviev; Faure, of the Centre, was evasive; Jean Duret, speaking for a third current, gave reasoned and candid arguments against applying the united-front policy in France. The broad course of this dispute is known from published articles of Trotsky, the main Bolshevik leader assigned to this question; the Congress contains his vivid summary report on the French party.¹⁰⁵

In the commission, ECCI representatives argued, against stubborn resistance, for a united leadership, including all factions and implementing Comintern decisions. The situation was unblocked, in part, by an initiative by Trotsky to enforce in the French party a Second Congress decision to bar Communist membership in freemasonry, a fraternal order that Communists viewed as a component of the capitalist ruling class. 'There were freemasons . . . in all three factions', commission member Jules Humbert-Droz later commented. 'Each of them would be equally affected by this decision. . . . Above all, the battle lines would shift: the freemasons of all factions would unite against this decision of the International.' The ban on freemasons was incorporated into the commission's ultimate agreement, which proposed a leadership based on proportional representation of all factions, with members nominated by the faction caucuses present in Moscow. The proposed list was submitted to a subsequent French party congress for approval. Formalities of French party autonomy and non-interference in the faction struggle were preserved, but in the context of the party's internal breakdown, the Congress had in fact thrown its authority behind the solution desired by the party's left wing.¹⁰⁶

The debates on the internal affairs of member parties were conducted in the spirit of encouraging member parties' autonomy, internal democracy, and self-reliance. In the broader discussion of organisational principle, how-

105 For Trotsky's contributions, see *TUF*, pp. 963–1003, and the *First Five Years of the Communist International* collection (Trotsky 1972a, 1972b). See also *TUF*, pp. 101–5 (Zinoviev), 169–78 (Duret), 226–35 (Rosmer), 217–23 (Faure), 574–87 (Lauridan).

106 See Riddell (ed.) 1991a, p. 417; Humbert-Droz 1971, pp. 119–20; and Trotsky's comments, *TUF*, pp. 994–8.

ever, the record was mixed. Kolarov, for example, called for 'a common conception regarding all great questions', insisting that 'deviating viewpoints will necessarily lead to indiscipline' – a formula that suggested the need for a monolithic movement. Radek, surprisingly, cited a 'Third Congress resolution forbidding the formation of factions' – perhaps referring to the decision that dissolved the factions then existing in the German party. Trotsky, by contrast, called the formation of factions in France a 'normal and healthy response' under the circumstances, while Zinoviev, in his closing summary, noted that 'minorities exist on this or that question (that is always the case)'.¹⁰⁷

Autonomy of national parties was buttressed by the main theme of the Congress – united-front policy – which oriented parties toward creative engagement with national political reality, as opposed to reliance on Moscow directives. The record shows no pattern of ECCI tactical directives to member parties on issues related to the united front – indeed, parties were permitted to defy this policy.

With regard to the International's structure, the report by Hugo Eberlein stressed the need 'for the Comintern to become, more and more, a truly centralised world party' in which the parties 'view the central leadership of the International as truly a leading body'. Bukharin, reporting on Norway, said of the Comintern that 'we are on the way to a constantly increasing centralisation'. Josef Grün of Austria said the International was moving from a time of agitation to one of 'intensive organisational reconstruction'. Zinoviev echoed this call in his summary, calling for a time of 'rehabilitating the parties'.¹⁰⁸

In contrast to these far-reaching pronouncements, the measures contained in the resolution reorganising the ECCI were modest. National conventions were 'as a rule' to take place after the World Congress, not before. However, national parties were also advised to meet in conference before a world congress, in order to prepare proposals for it and enable the International to review its experience from 'below to above'. ECCI members were to be elected by the Congress, not, as previously, appointed by national parties. Eberlein's report had proposed empowering ECCI envoys to exercise 'close supervision' of national sections; the resolution limited this to 'special cases'. Eberlein

107 *TUF*, pp. 243–4 (Kolarov), 1062 (resolution), 989 (Trotsky), 1110 (Zinoviev). The Third Congress condemnation of 'power struggles or battles for the leadership within the party' did not bar formation of a politically constituted faction. See Comintern 1921b, p. 108; compare Adler (ed.) 1980, p. 235.

108 *TUF*, pp. 926 (Eberlein), 1083 (Bukharin), 941 (Grün), 1115 (Zinoviev).

specified that the newly constituted organisational bureau was to supervise the organisation of the sections; this did not appear in the resolution.¹⁰⁹

The adjustments made to Eberlein's proposals suggest that they received a searching review in backroom discussion. The underlying issue of misconduct by ECCI emissaries and secret factionalism by ECCI members had weighed heavily in the Comintern's crisis going into the Third Congress in 1921 but had not been aired in the congress itself. In the Fourth Congress as well, this vital question was not discussed. True, there had been no repetition of scandalous incidents such as Kun's mission to Germany in March 1921, but, even so, silence on this issue left the member parties vulnerable to future interference of this type.

Another significant area of silence concerned the operating subsidies that Comintern member parties received from the ECCI. Some national leaders had expressed concern that these payments were being manipulated to exert control over national policies. This issue played a role in the antagonism between the ECCI and forces in the German party led by Paul Levi prior to his expulsion in 1921, and again in the exit of forces led by Friesland (Ernst Reuter) from that party early in 1922.¹¹⁰ However, Comintern finances were not mentioned during the congress sessions.

The Broadening Scope of Comintern Activity

Many agenda items addressed areas of Comintern work: trade unions, cooperatives, political education, youth, farmers, women, and material aid to the Soviet Union; a decision was also made to launch a new campaign in defence of class-war prisoners. Taken together, these discussions demonstrated the growing scope of the Comintern's activity and its practical experience in diverse areas. Significantly, structures established in two of these arenas – International Workers' Aid and the Communist Women's Movement, were the only branches of the Comintern to be headquartered in Berlin rather than Moscow. The women's movement had shifted its headquarters from Moscow to Berlin after the Third Congress, even as the previously highly autonomous youth movement sought closer subordination to the ECCI through a headquarters move in the opposite direction. Another peripheral structure, International Red Aid (MOPR), was an extension of a movement to aid class-war prisoners launched in Germany in 1921.

109 *TUF*, pp. 1134–6 (resolution on ECCI), pp. 932, 930 (Eberlein).

110 See Geyer 1976, pp. 234–5; Brandt and Lowenthal 1957, pp. 191–2.

The Fourth Congress devoted three sessions to debate on the trade unions, just as revolutionary unionists assembled for the concurrent congress of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU or Profintern). The reporter, Bolshevik leader S.A. Lozovsky, reiterated Communist arguments against syndicalist insistence on maintaining the absolute independence of trade unions from politics. However, at the RILU congress, Comintern leaders agreed to a significant concession on that very point. On the insistence of the revolutionary-syndicalist union confederation of France (CGTU), and as the price of its affiliation, the RILU agreed to sever its formal link with the Comintern, while retaining close working relations.¹¹¹

The resolution on the agrarian question was memorable for having initially provoked strong objections from Lenin. In response to the 'Outline of Agrarian Action Programme' prepared for the Fourth Congress, Lenin wrote, 'I very much hesitate to support it'. The draft 'gives virtually nothing new' and 'is of very doubtful value'. Lenin held that the text merely repeated the points made in the resolution on the agrarian question he had drafted in 1920 for the Second Congress. The Fourth Congress made some editing adjustments in the direction of Lenin's views, but otherwise held firm regarding the need for a new resolution. Varga, the reporter on this point, explained that the new text responded 'to the need to link up with the daily needs... [of] all working layers in the countryside', as an application of the united-front tactic. Zinoviev termed this the need for workers 'to lead all oppressed layers in struggle against the bourgeoisie'.¹¹² For the first time, a workers' international was drawing conclusions about the peasant struggle from experience in the field in a wide range of countries.

The session devoted to the Communist Women's Movement reveals a studied ambiguity as to the nature of this structure. Formally speaking, it was merely an array of committees for work among women, with the purpose of winning them to communism. Yet in reality, it functioned as a movement of communist women themselves, coordinating women's structures in each party, holding occasional international conferences, publishing a journal, *Die Kommunistische Fraueninternationale*, and animating women's papers and supplements in the national sections.¹¹³

111 The standard work on the RILU is Tosstorff 2006.

112 Letter to Trotsky, Zinoviev, Bukharin and Radek, in Lenin 1960–71h, pp. 593–4; Riddell (ed.) 1991b, pp. 660–70 (Second Congress theses); *TUF*, pp. 953–4 (Varga), 112 (Zinoviev).

113 For studies of the CWM, see Waters 1989; Bayerlein 2006; Riddell 2013. For Comintern documents on the CWM, see Riddell (ed.) 1987, pp. 250–1; Riddell (ed.) 1991b, pp. 972–98; Adler (ed.) 1980, pp. 211–29.

All of these peripheral structures helped Communists strengthen their links with varied layers of working people. They were often more successful than the Communist parties to which they held allegiance. They had the potential of conveying impulses and pressures from the worker ranks into the Communist movement, and the Fourth Congress reports in this category showed this process at work.

Pressure from the Margins

Several positions introduced into the Fourth Congress by the ECCI and its reporters were changed as a result of floor debate and delegate pressure:

- The concept of a workers' government was modified to focus on the possibility of a coalition transitional regime preparing the ground for revolutionary workers' power.
- A long-standing disagreement on the role of transitional demands was resolved by a decision to include them in the International's future programme.
- On Fascism, where the ECCI had been providing cover for Bordiga's ultraleft course, a new policy, based on united-front concepts, was developed during Congress sessions and adopted shortly after its close.
- During the discussion of the anti-imperialist united front, delegates from colonial countries secured steps against expressions of racist chauvinism in the Algerian wing of the French CP as well as a modification of the Comintern's stance toward Islamic anti-imperialist formations.
- In debates on united-front policy as a whole, the views of the KPD majority gained ground, but key issues were left unresolved.

Previous congresses had also been marked by abrupt shifts. The very decision in 1919 to found the International was a mid-Congress improvisation. During the Third Congress, Lenin and Trotsky led an effort to overcome the initially dominant ultraleft mood in the International. Still, the Fourth Congress was the high-point of influence by non-Russian parties in reshaping Comintern decisions.

The Fourth Congress resounded with calls to further centralise the International, to combat 'federalism', and to gather more authority in the hands of the ECCI. These concepts were not yet transformed into reality. The autonomy of national parties was respected; the era of hand-picked national leaderships still lay in the future. However, the calls for centralism were not countered by any alternative conception of the International.

Many aspects of the Congress, it must be conceded, support the view that it was controlled and directed by Bolshevik leaders. They gave the main reports. Two of them – Zinoviev and Radek – made the most extensive contributions to the united-front debate. The dispute in the German party over participation in a state government was resolved not by the ECCI but in a meeting of German leaders with the ECCI's leading Bolshevik members. Trotsky's authority and direct involvement were essential to resolving the crisis in France. The overriding authority of the Bolshevik leaders and their central role in Comintern decisions is indisputable. United-front policy originated in Germany, but only when central Bolshevik leaders – above all Lenin – finally became convinced of its correctness was it adopted by the International. The workers' government demand also arose in Germany, but the ECCI encouraged its adoption by the KPD. The concept of an anti-imperialist united front emerged from struggles for colonial liberation, but it became world policy because Bolshevik leaders endorsed it and, indeed, applied it in their own struggle for Soviet power.

That said, the persistent divisions on policy among central Bolshevik leaders assigned to the Comintern – the leftist views of Bukharin and Zinoviev were often opposed by Radek, and in 1921 all three were aligned against Lenin and Trotsky – cannot be explained by the dynamics of the Russian party. Bukharin was part of its leftist wing in 1918, but so too was Radek, and Zinoviev was not – and these divisions had been superseded by 1922. Their alignments were inconsistent: Radek supported the ultraleft March Action, while Bukharin made the only concerted effort to counter the Italian party's ultraleftism on Fascism. Lenin was the most consistent supporter of united-front politics, but when his role in the Comintern diminished, in 1921 and even more in 1922, this did not shift the dynamics of this discussion. Rather than viewing the national party leaders as puppets dangling from Russian strings, it seems more fruitful to consider the divisions, hesitations, and ambiguities of Bolshevik leaders as evidence that they were facing challenges that appeared to them in new guise, demanding fresh analysis based on the experiences of national parties and working-class ranks in struggle.

Moreover, the Bolsheviks were not the only leadership force at the Congress. Bordiga headed a resolute majority in the Italian party, which then included Gramsci. Ruth Fischer spoke with confidence for a faction with strong roots in the German party ranks and a continuity reaching back to the ultraleft moods in the KPD and left-USPD in 1918–19. The German proponents of united-front politics at the Congress – Meyer, Thalheimer, Hoernle, Fritz Heckert – had been, like the absent Heinrich Brandler and the expelled Paul Levi, comrades of Rosa Luxemburg in the wartime Spartacus League. Their successes at the Congress suggest that, despite the departure of Levi and many of his close

collaborators, the concern of Luxemburg and the Spartacists to strengthen ties with the broad masses of workers remained a creative force within the Comintern.

The Congress revealed the limitations of what could be achieved by a general staff in Moscow, isolated by distance and slow communications from the seat of great class battles. In the face of the Fascist challenge, the ECCI failed to develop a policy. On united-front policy as a whole, debate arose from the experiences of front-line parties, above all the KPD. Pressure for consistent application of this policy came principally from the KPD majority, supported by leaders in Czechoslovakia and other neighbouring countries; resistance was led by the Italian party, the French majority, and the German minority, backed by the Hungarian émigrés. Zinoviev and Radek made the most extensive contributions to debate, but it is questionable how much they contributed to policy formation. Radek's strength lay in his close collaboration with the KPD leaders; Zinoviev's views reflected pressure from Fischer and Bordiga, and, beyond them, the impatience of a significant portion of the Comintern ranks. But what is most striking about ECCI policy on united-front issues, as Fayet has remarked with regard to the questions posed in Germany, is its persistent ambiguity.¹¹⁴

The experience of the early Comintern demonstrates that in an International genuinely seeking unity in the service of workers' struggles, the model of a single centralised world party led from Moscow was unrealisable. The Executive was remote from the struggle, learning of events after delays of days or weeks. As Zetkin pointed out in a 25 January 1921 letter to Lenin, the ECCI was 'far too cut off' to do more than 'recognise the broad lines of development and deduce basic conclusions'. The ECCI 'cannot possibly survey all the concrete circumstances that must be considered in carrying out the guidelines'. This limitation 'is understandable, but it leads to errors'.¹¹⁵

The decisive conflicts remained, as they are today, national in framework: a contest for power against national ruling classes. Only in these struggles could Communist leaderships win the confidence of the party ranks and the broader working class. Imperious interventions from afar, such as in Germany during the lead-up to the March 1921 battles, could not endow Communist parties with such authority – rather they tended to undermine and destroy party leaderships, inflicting wounds on the party that did not heal.

It was not until the later Stalinisation of the International, when it functioned as a transmission belt to impose the self-serving directives of Russian

114 Fayet 2004, p. 352.

115 Stoljarowa and Schmalfuss (eds.) 1990, p. 215.

party leaders, that a military-style command structure functioned with some measure of efficiency. That transformation began soon, only a year after the Congress. But so long as the International's purpose remained the promotion of revolutionary victories in the class struggles under way in individual countries, the main locus of leadership remained national. The goal of centralism consisted in uniting the movement around a common goal and general line of march. Thus understood, centralism in the early Comintern could only rest on an on-going conversation among all the movement's components, in every country and at every level. The record of the Fourth Congress shows that, to a significant degree, that goal was realised in the early Comintern.

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