

## The Estonian Communist Party and the Comintern, 1920-1940

The Estonian Communist Party (*Eestima Kommunistliku Partei*; EKP) was a section of the Communist International (CI) for twenty years (1920-1940) and its activities were largely based on the instructions of the leadership of the Comintern. Through the EKP the Comintern influenced the struggle for political power in Estonia. It must also be taken into account that the neighbouring country, the Soviet Union, at that time controlled the most powerful section of the Comintern. The leaders of its Communist party would, as a rule, determine the strategy and tactics of the Comintern, which were often used to serve the interests of the Soviet Union as a great power. Relations with the Soviet Union played an important role in the destiny of the Estonian Republic.

For a better understanding of the activities of the EKP we give some data about the Estonian Republic in those years.

Area: 47,450 km<sup>2</sup>, population: 1,126,413 (1934), nationalities: Estonians 88.2%, Russians 8.2%, Germans 1.5%, Swedes 0.7%, Jews 0.4%, others 1%. Two thirds of the Estonian inhabitants lived in the country. Agriculture, particularly cattle-breeding, dominated the economy. In the nineteen-twenties an extensive land reform was carried out. As a result of this reform the large farms (estates) belonging to the German land-owners were broken up. The land was distributed among the peasants. Agricultural products (e.g. butter) were exported to Great Britain and Germany. Being part of the Russian Empire, Estonia had quite well-developed metal and textile industries, which exported their products mainly to the Russian market. After the country gained its independence its links with Russia weakened. Estonian industrial products were not sufficiently competitive on the West European markets. This resulted in an severe industrial crisis in 1923-1924. In the second half of the twenties the situation stabilized. Industry was reorganized to accord with to the demands of the home market. The Estonian economy achieved its highest output during the second half of the thirties. In general the standard of living in Estonia lagged behind that of advanced countries such as Great Britain, the Netherlands or Switzerland, but exceeded that of Lithuania and the Soviet Union.

In 1920 the Estonian Republic enacted its first constitution. According to this the highest legislative power was vested in the State Assembly, a 100-member single-chamber parliament, elected for three years. The State Assembly provided the executive organ: the government. There was no provision for a head of state in the 1920 constitution. The government was led by the State Elder, who in addition to acting as a Prime Minister also performed some presidential duties. Election to the State Assembly was by proportional representation of the political parties. In the twenties about ten political parties existed in Estonia. Substantial changes in the Estonian political system took place in the mid-thirties.

### 1. Primary Sources and Historiography

The documents about the EKP as a section of the Comintern are mainly preserved in the archives of the Estonian Communist Party in Tallinn.<sup>1</sup> There are minutes of EKP congresses, conferences and Central Committee plenums, reports from the EKP's Central Committee to the Comintern, correspondence between party activists, etc. They provide quite abundant information about the EKP's activities, tactics and political standpoints. Unfortunately the information given in the documents is not always trustworthy. Particularly for the years from 1925 onwards distorted (i.e. upwardly adjusted) facts about EKP activities and membership are given in the EKP Central Committee's information to the Comintern. For the period 1938 to 1940, when connections between the EKP and the Comintern were disrupted, there is an almost complete lack of documents.

Some essential documents concerning the activities of the EKP are also preserved in the USSR Central Archives in Moscow. Facts about EKP organizations and the activities of labour associations connected with them are provided by materials held by the Estonian State Archives, in particular the archives of the political police, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Court of Appeal. There are also the archives of the Estonian Socialist Labour Party and its predecessor, the Estonian Social-Democratic Labour Party in the Estonian State Archives. Several collections of documents about the history of the Estonian Comintern section have been

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<sup>1</sup> The new official name since 1991: *Eesti Riigiarhiivi filiaal (Partei arhiiv)*.

published in Estonia.<sup>2</sup> They deal mainly with the period between 1920 and 1924. Quite a few documents have been published about later years. The political standpoints of the EKP are reflected in illegal Communist newspapers and pamphlets as well as in legal publications from labour organizations influenced by the EKP.<sup>3</sup> Quite a lot has been published in the memoirs of Communist activists.<sup>4</sup> They are to some extent useful as an aid to understanding the events, the circumstances and the state of people's minds at that time.

The scholars that have researched the history of the Estonian Comintern section may be divided into two groups. The first group consists of historians writing outside Estonia (and the USSR).<sup>5</sup> Their work was exempt from the ideological rigidity prevailing in the USSR. They were therefore able to estimate critically the activities of the EKP. The research of this group of historians was made more difficult by the fact that their access to archives in Estonia and Moscow was limited. The second group of historians consists of those living and publishing in Estonia during recent decades (including the authors of this article).<sup>6</sup> In their articles and books they worked on an ideological treatment of history, based on an absolute acceptance of the principle of class struggle and stressing the inevitability of the socialist revolution. It was rather easier for them, than for historians outside Estonia, to use the archives, particularly the documents preserved in the EKP's archives. Nevertheless historians living in Estonia did not manage to study several essential documents in the Comintern archives and they had very few chances to use source material from abroad. But this is not the main problem. Most importantly, following ideology and attempting to justify in every way the activities of the Comintern and the EKP have led them to distort historical processes. Only in the last few years have Estonian historians had the opportunity to publish objective opinions about the history of the EKP.

## 2. Before the Comintern

The first Social-Democratic organisations in Estonia were founded at the beginning of the twentieth century. These organisations existed as branches of the Social-Democratic Labour Party of Russia (*Rossijskaja Social-Demokratičeskaja Rabočaja Partija*; RSDRP) - Estonia itself being a part of the Russian Empire at that time. As the RSDRP as a whole was split between "Bolsheviks" and "Mensheviks", its division could not but affect the structure of the EKP, in which a similar division took place. In 1917 a new party was founded in Estonia

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<sup>2</sup> *Eestimaa Kommunistliku Partei I kongress. Dokumente ja materjale* (Tallinn, 1960); *Eestima Kommunistliku Partei II kongress. Dokumente ja materjale EKP tegevusest ajavahemikul 1921. aasta jaanuarist 1922. aasta aprillini* (Tallinn, 1962); *Eestima Kommunistliku Partei III kongress. Dokumente ja materjale EKP tegevusest ajavahemikul 1922. aasta maist 1924. aasta aprillini* (Tallinn, 1975); *Eesti proletariaadi relvastatud ülestõus 1. detsembril 1924. Dokumente ja materjale* (Tallinn, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> The EKP's most significant illegal newspaper was *Kommunist* (The Communist, 1918-1938). The legal newspapers published under the supervision of the EKP were: *Tööline* (The Worker, 1922-1923), *Tööliste Lipp* (The Worker's Flag, 1923-1924), *Kiir* (The Ray, 1927), *Edasi* (Forward, 1928-1929), *Uus Aeg* (The New Age, 1930), and *Võitluse Lipp* (The Flag of Struggle, 1933).

<sup>4</sup> Anton Vaarandi, *Kild killu kõrvale. Mälestute raamat* (Tallinn, 1975); A. Veimer, *Koos rahvaga. Mälestuskatkeid* (Tallinn, 1976); Henrich Ross, *Ei vadabust saa taeva väega. Mälestusi* (Tallinn, 1986); *Saabus päev. 1940. aasta revolutsioonilistest sündmustest osavõtjad jutustavad* (Tallinn, 1960).

<sup>5</sup> Seppo Myllyniemi, *Die Baltische Krise* (Stuttgart, 1979); Anatol Renning, *Eesti tööliikumisest 1934-1940. Metroo 77* (Stockholm, 1977); Tõnu Parming, *Kompartei ja eestlased. Metroo teine raamat* (Stockholm, 1977); Sirje Inilind, *Mõningatest rahvuspoliitika aspektidest. Visand nõukogude rahvuspoliitika kriitikaks Eestis 1940-1983* (Stockholm, 1983); Johannes Mihkelson, *Vastu tuult* (Stockholm, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> *Ülevaade Eestimaa Kommunistliku Partei ajaloost. II osa (aastad 1920-1940)* (Tallinn, 1963); A. Liebman, *Eestimaa Kommunistliku Partei loomise ajaloost (veebruar 1920 - aprill 1922)* (Tallinn, 1960); O. Kuuli, *Ühise võitluslipu alla (Eestimaa Kommunistliku Partei võitlus sidemete tugevdamise eest töörahva hulkadega aastail 1929-1934)* (Tallinn, 1961); A. Libman, *Vo imja pobedy: taktika kompartii Estonii v bor'be protiv buržuazii v 1920-1929 gg.* (Tallinn, 1979).

by the local Mensheviks - the Estonian Social-Democratic Workers' Party (*Eesti Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Tööliste Partei*; ESDTP). Later it was called the Estonian Socialist Workers' Party (*Eesti Sotsialistlik Tööliste Partei*; ESTP). Estonian Bolsheviks, on the other hand, remained in the Bolshevik Party of Russia and had the status of a regional organization.

After the October Revolution the Bolsheviks were in power in Estonia for a short while. In 1918, however, the independent Republic of Estonia was proclaimed, which defended its sovereignty in the War for Liberty. In this war the Estonian Bolsheviks, together with Soviet Russia, fought against the independent Republic of Estonia. They thought it more appropriate for Estonia to become a socialist country closely associated with Soviet Russia. The Social-Democrats of Estonia were, on the contrary, advocates of the independent Republic of Estonia.

In February 1920 a peace treaty (The Peace of Tartu) between the Republic of Estonia and Soviet Russia was signed, in which the latter recognized Estonia's sovereignty and independence. As a result the Estonian Communists had to separate from the Communist Party of Russia. The formation of the EKP as a section of the Comintern was completed by November 1920.

The succeeding activities of the EKP up to the year 1940 can be divided into four periods, taking into account the changes in the tactics of the Comintern, in the influence of the EKP and in Estonia's political situation.

### 3. The Years of Active Work (1920-1924)

At the first congress of the Estonian Communist Party (5 November 1920) a brief, general programme drawn up by the EKP (the so-called "programmatic principles") was adopted. Its first point was overthrowing the political system, establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat and associating Estonia with Soviet Russia.<sup>7</sup> After that a socialist society had to be built up in Estonia.

After adopting the programme of the Communist International at the Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928, the EKP Central Committee also started to work out a new and more detailed programme. The EKP conference discussed a draft version in January 1929. In this draft both the tactics of the EKP before the socialist revolution and the main direction of the party's activities in the circumstances of a proletarian dictatorship were fully dealt with. The EKP programme approved at this conference had to be confirmed by the Comintern. In 1929 the EKP programme was discussed in the Comintern Secretariat for Poland and the Baltic States. In every major question the EKP programme followed the Comintern programme. But small differences of opinion with the Comintern leadership were the cause of disagreement. The Comintern programme called social-democracy the third bourgeois party, while the EKP characterized the ESTP as a petty-bourgeois party. This kind of standpoint gave rise to sharp criticism. We have no data about the confirmation of the EKP programme. Probably it was not confirmed.<sup>8</sup> In any case there was nothing written about the programme in EKP publications in the thirties.

Since the EKP's goal was to overthrow the existing social and political system, the party was not given legal means for its activities in the Republic of Estonia. However, the membership and influence of the illegal EKP grew between 1920 and 1924. At the end of 1920 the EKP had a membership of 700, by the beginning of 1924 it had grown to about 2,000<sup>9</sup> (the total population of Estonia being 1.1 million at the time).

The EKP had close connections with the leading Comintern organizations. The leaders of the EKP took part in the work of the congresses of the CI, reports on the activities of the EKP were regularly sent to the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) and instructions on the development of tactics for the EKP were received from the ECCI. At the beginning of the twenties the Comintern was less domineering and less detailed in its orders to its sections than it became later.

A significant impact was made on the work of the EKP by the Third Comintern Congress in 1921. Encouraged by the October Revolution the supporters of the Communist movement had cherished the hope of

<sup>7</sup> *Eestimaa Kommunistliku Partei I kongress. Dokumente ja materjale* (Tallinn, 1960), p. 77.

<sup>8</sup> A. Liebman, *Kominterni Täitevkomitee Poola-Baltimaade Sekretariaat ja EKP taktika küsimused. Tõid EKP ajaloo alalt VII* (Tallinn, 1975), pp. 167-170.

<sup>9</sup> *Kommunistiškaja partija Estonii v cifrach 1920-1980. Sbornik statističeskich dannych* (Tallinn, 1983), p. 37.

a quick world-revolution. By 1921 this hope started, to some extent, to die away. In many countries the decline of the labour movement had begun. After a heated discussion at the Third Congress agreement was finally reached: instead of taking capitalism by storm, consistent propaganda and organization were needed. It was also considered important for the Communist parties to pay more heed to the fight for the workers' economic and political demands. This point of view served as a basis in the Comintern's attempts to create a united front in the years to come.

This was also the direction followed by the Estonian Communists in the course of the years 1922-1923. In their agitation work they no longer aimed at establishing soviets right away, but rather at achieving several political and social goals: fixing a minimum wage for workers, reducing working hours, abolishing the rent for land, etc. Tactics of this kind were obviously helpful in strengthening the impact of the EKP. It must also be borne in mind that the economic difficulties' beginning in the Republic of Estonia put pressure first of all on the "have-nots" of society, so that they were eager to support the EKP's policy.

In the period from 1922 to 1923 much of the work of the trade unions and other legal labour organizations was carried out in accordance with the directives of the EKP.<sup>10</sup> The influence of the Communists can be illustrated by the result of the elections for the parliament (State Council) and the local self-governing bodies in 1923. In these elections the Communists stood in the lists of the Workers' United Front. They received 9,5% of the votes, which gave them 10 seats in the State Council (the total number seats was 100). The number of EKP supporters was actually even bigger. Shortly before the elections, in Estonia's two important industrial cities, Tallinn and Narva, and in the region of Viru, the lists of the Workers' United Front were cancelled. Taking into account the results of the elections to the local self-governing bodies in these regions, it is estimated that the Communists would have gained five more seats on the State Council from these small regions.<sup>11</sup> Thus we can estimate the number of EKP supporters in 1923 at approximately 15% of the total population. They were mostly workers from the urban regions, but there was also considerable support among the rural population, mainly from the poor and the farmers. The year 1923 can be regarded as the highest point of Communist influence in the Republic of Estonia. However, an unexpected change took place in 1924. In January 1924 about 200 members and activists who had played a leading role in the legal workers' organizations were arrested. Several organizations working under the Communists' supervision were shut down.

In 1923 the illegal EKP had still had quite extensive opportunities to make use of different legal organizations; these opportunities now substantially diminished. In the spring of 1924 the Central Committee of the EKP changed its tactics. Preparations were made to seize power by means of armed rebellion. The Estonian Communists realized that the idea of carrying out an unsupported coup d'état was unrealistic. In 1924 preparations for an uprising in Estonia were considered in the Executive Committee of the Comintern and also in the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Russia. Without the approval and the support of these organizations the EKP certainly would not have made an attempt to seize power.<sup>12</sup>

At that time there were about 155,000 Estonians residing permanently in the Soviet Union, more than 4,000 of them members of the Communist Party. Many Estonians served in the Red Army and studied at various military schools. In the course of the preparations for the uprising a number of Estonian Communists from the Soviet Union (mainly Red Army officers) were illegally sent to Estonia to help the EKP with its preparations. According to its plans armed groups were to seize the most important objects in Tallinn and then appeal to the Soviet government for help. On the borders of Estonia thousands of Red Army soldiers (most of them Estonians) would be waiting to give that help.

In the early morning of 1 December 1924, several hundred people started an armed uprising in Tallinn, but their forces were beaten within a few hours and that was the end of the foolhardy attempt at a coup d'état.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Eestima Kommunistliku Partei kolmas kongress. Dokumente ja materjale EKP tegevusest ajavahemikul 1922. aasta maist 1924. aasta aprillini* (Tallinn, 1975), pp. 240-244, 261-264.

<sup>11</sup> *II Riigikogu valimised 5.-7. mail 1923* (Tallinn, 1923); E. Truuväli, *Valimisõigus ja valimised Eestis 1917-1980, I osa* (Tallinn, 1986), pp. 162, 182.

<sup>12</sup> Archives of the Estonian Communist Party (AECPP), Tallinn, fund 24, register 1, folio 272a, pp. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 92, 94, 99, 100, 133, 135; folio 298, pp. 126, 135, 136, 137.

<sup>13</sup> J. Saar, *Enamlaste riigipöörde katse Tallinnas 1. detsembril 1924* (Tallinn, 1925); A. Sunila, *1. detsember 1924. Arutlusi 50. aastapäeva puhul* (Tallinn, 1974).

#### 4. Years of Decline (1925-1935)

After the attempted uprising the situation of the EKP worsened considerably. Many of the Communists had either been arrested or had fled to the Soviet Union. Many of them quitted their political activity for good. In the second half of the twenties and the beginning of the thirties the number of underground Communists in Estonia fluctuated between 20 and 150. The organization of the EKP also changed. In the first half of the twenties the EKP under the leadership of Jaan Anvelt (as early as 1917 the best known Bolshevik activist) worked illegally in Estonia. Only two or three members of the Central Committee lived in Russia and kept in contact with the Comintern board. From 1925 onwards the majority of the Central Committee of the EKP lived in the Soviet Union,<sup>14</sup> from where they gave instructions to the underground activists of the Communist Party in Estonia.

From 1920-1924 three illegal EKP congresses took place, from 1925-1939 none was held at all. EKP conferences took place in 1926, 1929 and 1934. At both in congresses and conferences a new Central Committee was chosen. After 1924 and until 1938 the meetings of this Central Committee were held in the Soviet Union. When necessary new members were co-opted onto the Central Committee.

Basic changes also took place in the leading organizations of the Comintern. An intensive struggle for power was going on among the leaders of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party of Russia (from 1925 known as the All-Union Communist Party) which, to a great extent, left an imprint on the Comintern, since many of the Russian Communist leaders who had challenged the policy of Stalin had occupied leading posts in the Comintern (Leon Trotsky, Grigori Zinoviev, Nikolai Bukharin, etc.).

The stronger Stalin's power grew in the Soviet Union, the more intensive the "witch-hunt" for adversaries inside the Comintern and its sections became. The Comintern's attacks against the Socialist and Labour International and its parties increased accordingly.

In the second half of the twenties the board of the Comintern was enlarged and the Centre's control of the centre over the activities of the Communist parties strengthened. In 1926 eight regional Secretariats were established to complete the Executive Committee of the Comintern. Their purpose was to check the work of the Communist parties in their regions and report on them to the Political Secretariat of the ECCI.

One of these controlling organizations was called the Secretariat for Poland and the Baltic States. The head of this Secretariat was the Lithuanian Communist Vincas Kapsukas (Mickievičius), a member of the ECCI. During the ten years this secretariat was active there were 42 discussions on problems connected with the work of the EKP, whereas there were 91 discussions on problems concerning all three Baltic states.<sup>15</sup> However, the work of the EKP was repeatedly discussed at the Political Secretariat of the ECCI. As a result of these numerous discussions a whole avalanche of resolutions and instructions was issued by the Executive Committee to be fulfilled by the EKP, which in its turn forwarded these instructions to the Communists of Estonia.

Instructions issued by the Comintern at this time were often designed to expose any opponents of the Stalinist course in the various Communist parties (even if there were no such actual opponents). So, for example, the EKP was accused of right-wing tendencies concerning decisions dated 16 January 1930, issued by the Political Secretariat of the ECCI.<sup>16</sup> Specifically it was claimed that the EKP did not fight energetically enough against the Socialists, in particular against the left-wing Socialists. In fact, there was no kind of opposition in the EKP at that time against either the Comintern or the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This search for non-existent enemies decreased the EKP's already weak influence within the working-class movement.

The EKP depended entirely upon the Comintern, not only for its organization and its ideas but also for its finances. It was not possible for us to obtain access to financial documents in the USSR Central Archives, but some financial information is contained in the EKP Central Committee's report on its income and expenses for 1930, preserved in the Estonian Communist Party Archives. According to this document, the EKP received income from three sources: 1) subsidies from the ECCI - 19,376 roubles; 2) membership fees and party

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<sup>14</sup> O. Kuuli, V. Toom, *EKP Keskkomitee Välismaa Büroo (1919-1937). Töid EKP ajaloo alalt IV* (Tallinn, 1970), p. 113.

<sup>15</sup> A. Liebman, *Kominterni Täitevkomitee*, pp. 162-164.

<sup>16</sup> AECF, fund 6495, register 1, folio 231, pp. 168-171.

collections in Estonia - 450 roubles; 3) collections among Estonians living in the USSR - 5,756 roubles.<sup>17</sup> Thus, more than 75% of the EKP's income came directly from the Comintern.

In the second part of the twenties there was a considerable increase in the membership of the socialist ESTP. In the parliamentary elections of 1926 and 1929 the Socialists polled almost a quarter of all the votes and became the biggest party. In 1923, by comparison, the ESTP had polled only 14%.<sup>18</sup> The stabilization of the economic situation, which led to a softening of radical tempers in poverty-stricken social groups, was one of the reasons for the success of the ESTP. On the other hand the failed uprising in 1924 considerably decreased the influence of the EKP within the working-class movement. The ESTP achieved a predominant position in the majority of the trade unions.

In spite of the general decline of the EKP's influence, the Communists nevertheless continued to retain the loyalty of some of their supporters. At the elections in both 1926 and 1929 the legal Estonian Labour Party (*Eesti Töölise Partei*, ETP), operating under the influence of the EKP, won six seats.

In the first part of the thirties great changes took place in Estonian political life. They were closely related to processes taking place in the rest of the world at the same time. From 1929 to 1933 an extensive economic crisis hit several countries. In several European states the anti-parliamentary political current strengthened and aimed at establishing dictatorial regimes. (In the documents of the Comintern such movements were called "fascist" after Benito Mussolini's party, which came to power in Italy in 1922.) The German National Socialist Party developed into the most influential of them; its leader, Adolf Hitler, became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933.

In Estonia the economic crisis became extremely severe in 1931-1933. In this period internal political stresses also increased. There were calls for a change in the constitution. Several influential political groups, headed by Konstantin Päts and general Johan Laidoner, who were frequently the leaders of Estonia, wished to limit the authority of parliament and install a head of state with considerable power.

A new organization entered the political arena, the League of Veterans of the Estonian War of Independence (*Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liit*; EVL). It was founded by veterans who had taken part in the War of Independence and who were joined later by sympathisers. The members and supporters of the EVL were called "vapsid". The leaders of the EVL did not limit themselves to asking for a change in the constitution. In their ambition for power they violently attacked other politicians and parties and the whole parliamentary system. As an example from abroad the "vapsid" cited Mussolini's dictatorship in Italy. In 1933-1934 they achieved considerable popularity with several social classes. A great part of their success was owing to people's disappointment with the political parties and politicians who had divided the power among themselves.

In a referendum held in October 1933 a new constitution, presented by "vapsid", was approved. As a result elections for a head of state and the State Assembly were to take place in April 1934. Through fear of his "vapsid" adversaries, the head of government at that time, Konstantin Päts, declared a state of emergency in the whole Republic on 12 March 1934, dissolved the EVL and cancelled the planned elections. Political meetings and demonstrations of all kinds were forbidden. With this event basic changes began in the political system of the Estonian Republic.

At the beginning of the thirties the strength of the ESTP weakened noticeably. Some of its supporters (just like supporters of several other parties) went over to the "vapsid" side. In 1934 the party split. Some of its leaders supported Konstantin Päts' aspirations to power, the left wing of the party took a stand against installing an authoritarian regime.

The decline of the EKP continued. In 1930-1931 several underground workers were arrested by the police. In the following years only a few Communists were active in Estonia. They tried to keep in contact with the Central Committee of the EKP in the USSR. Some left-wing trade unions also remained under the influence of the EKP.

In 1933 an EKP centre was founded in Copenhagen, led by Johannes Meerits, a Communist of the younger generation. (In the USSR he used the name Leo Looring.)<sup>19</sup> One of the centre's task was maintaining communication with Communists in Estonia and sending Communist literature into the country. Keeping connec-

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<sup>17</sup> AECF, fund 6495, register 1, folio 275, pp. 6-7.

<sup>18</sup> *IV Riigikogu valimised 11.-13. maini 1929* (Tallinn, 1929), p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> Olaf Kuuli, "...ja teised. Mõningaid täiendusi 1930-ndate aastate EKP ajaloole", *Eesti Kommunist*, 1988, nr. 5, pp. 48-54.

tions going between Denmark and Estonia was easier and less dangerous than secretly crossing the border between the USSR and Estonia. The Copenhagen centre was active until 1936, when it moved to Sweden, where its activity was continued until 1938. The majority of the EKP Central Committee's old guard (Hans Pöggelmann, Jaan Anvelt, Otto Rästas and others) remained in the USSR. They kept in touch with the leaders of the Comintern and prepared a number of people for underground activities in Estonia.

##### 5. The United Front (1934-1940)

In 1934-1935 the tactics of the CI changed. Hitler's coming to power and the strengthening of fascist movements in several other countries made both Communist and Socialist circles feel seriously endangered. Several leaders of the Comintern, headed by Georgi Dimitrov, deemed it necessary to give up attacking the Socialists and to look for ways of co-operating. Their goal was to found a united Communist and Socialist front against fascism and in defence of democratic rights and freedoms. At the same time it was deemed necessary to develop common activities with other democratic forces too. These standpoints were approved at the Seventh Comintern Congress in 1935. Of course, this did not mean that the Comintern would give up its final aims: world-revolution, the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the setting up of Socialism in other countries in accordance with the example set by the USSR. In fact the about-turn in the Comintern's policy just meant working out more realistic tactics to achieve more immediate aims.

The changes in Comintern tactics brought about a basic shift in EKP activity as well.

During this period the formation of an authoritarian regime continued in Estonia. In March 1935 the activities of all parties and political unions were forbidden. Various regulations and laws were passed limiting the freedom of the press, free speech and the right to strike. From October 1934 till April 1938 the parliament of Estonia ceased to function. After parliament was closed, legislation was in the hands of the head of the government, Konstantin Päts. Nevertheless Päts' government did not establish a totalitarian regime in Estonia and did not use mass repression against his political adversaries. Although all political parties were dissolved, the workers of several parties and its active members continued their activities to some degree. For this purpose trade unions, cultural societies and several other organizations without an official political character were used as a cover.

At the end of 1934 the EKP's Central Committee proposed a united front to the left-wing Socialists. The latter agreed in principle. On 9 July 1935 a meeting took place between a representative of the EKP, Johannes Meerits, and a representative of one of the leaders of the left-wing Socialists, Nigol Andresen. At this meeting a united front was agreed upon, for organizing a co-ordinated fight for the economic demands of the working-class and the democratic freedom of nations. The agreement stressed the necessity uniting the trade unions (i.e. uniting the left-wing unions, up till then under the influence of the Communists, with the Socialist-led unions).<sup>20</sup>

The main organizations tasked with carrying out the provisions of the united front were, initially, the trade unions. Their membership grew in 1935-1936 and they were able to increase their activities. Although the government on several occasions tried to hinder the work of the trade unions - union leaders were removed from their jobs, some unions were dissolved - at the end of the thirties the majority of the trade unions was subject to the influence of Communists and especially of left-wing Socialists.<sup>21</sup>

At the end of 1935 (after the Seventh Congress of the Comintern) the EKP's Central Committee started to establish contacts with other political forces in opposition to the Päts government. Some members of parties that were dissolved by the government and that were prevented from leading the Republic, e.g. the National Central Party (*Rahvuslik Keskerakond*) and the Settlers' Union (*Asunike Koondis*), were dissatisfied with the authoritarian regime of Konstantin Päts. These parties had never had any sympathy for Communists or Socialists. To draw them into a common fight the EKP's Central Committee worked out an "activity platform for a National Front". One of this platform's demands was: "to cancel extraordinary decrees, to give democratic freedom of

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<sup>20</sup> AECF, fund 6495, register 1, folio 337a, pp. 1-2; fund 247, register 51, folio 19a; Myllyniemi, *Die Baltische Krise*, p. 82.

<sup>21</sup> ERA, fund 1, register 7, folio 162a, pp. 5-7; AECF, fund 6495, register 1, folio 354, pp. 13-15.

action to all political parties defending Estonian national independence against the danger of fascist Germany".<sup>22</sup> In 1936 discussions took place between representatives of the National Central Party and the Settlers' Union. A "National Front" was not created, but they managed to co-ordinate their activities in some political campaigns.<sup>23</sup> This became evident also in the parliamentary elections of February 1938.

In 1937 a new (the third) Estonian constitution was worked out and came into force on 1 January 1938. This constitution made provision for a two-chamber parliament. The first chamber (the Representative Assembly) was elected by the people, the second chamber (the State Council) was composed of representatives of several institutions and organizations and of persons appointed by Konstantin Päts.

In the elections for the Representative Assembly a block of government supporters put up their own candidates in every constituency. Although political parties were still forbidden to be active, the opposition was allowed to put up candidates and the police forbade the government-block candidates to agitate against them in the press. In the election campaign the united front co-operated to a certain extent with the National Central Party, the Settlers' Union and several other organizations). An effort to create a common block for the elections did not succeed. Many opposition candidates competed with each other. As a result the government's block achieved a majority in the Representative Assembly. The EKP and left-wing Socialist block won 4 of the 80 seats. In April 1938, at a meeting of the Representative Assembly and the State Council, Konstantin Päts was elected first President of the Estonian Republic.

In 1938 the EKP's situation changed abruptly. In 1937-1938 in the USSR, at a time of mass purges, thousands of leading party activists were killed. Many Comintern officials also became victims. All the leaders of the EKP's Central Committee living in the USSR were arrested and shot. The leader of the EKP centre in Sweden, Johannes Meerits, was invited to Moscow in the spring of 1938, but knowing what was going on there he refused the invitation and stayed in Sweden. As a result all connections between the EKP and the Comintern were severed.

In May 1938 the Estonian parliament passed a comprehensive amnesty law; 183 political prisoners were freed. 79 of them were "vapsid" who had attempted a coup d'état at the end of 1935, the other 104 were Communist political prisoners, among them both EKP members and people working secretly for the Party. The initiative for the amnesty law came from Päts. He wanted a reconciliation and future co-operation with the "vapsid". Since the destruction of the EKP leadership in Moscow, Päts no longer considered the Communists to be a danger.

The majority of the freed Communists tried to re-join the political struggle, carefully attending to the demands of conspiracy. In summer 1938 an illegal EKP Bureau was founded, with Henrik Allik as secretary.<sup>24</sup> All five members of the Bureau had been active Communists in the early twenties and were subsequently imprisoned for 14 or 15 years. They were deeply convinced of the rightness of their aim: the establishment of Socialism in Estonia. Although they had heard about the violence and purges in the USSR and the execution of the EKP leaders there, they considered these to be only isolated mistakes in the building of a new society and did not understand the inhumane nature of the Stalinist regime. This attitude was typical of most of the Estonian Communists, but also of several other left-wing activists.

The illegal EKP Bureau tried once or twice to re-establish contacts with the Comintern, but did not succeed.<sup>25</sup> Therefore for a couple of years (1938-1940) the Estonian Communists had to act without instructions from the Comintern and also without its financial support.

At that time the EKP was a very small party with about 150 members only. Most of them were active in the bigger towns such as Tallinn, Tartu and Narva. By developing co-operation with left-wing Socialists the Communists managed to broaden their influence in trade unions and in workers' cultural and sports organizations. Some Estonian intellectuals were also sympathetic to the activities of the Communists. Nevertheless the EKP and its supporters accounted for only a small part of the Estonian nation at that time. Without outside interference they would not have been able to carry out any kind of revolution in Estonia.

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<sup>22</sup> AECP, fund 27, register 7, folio 12, pp. 74-75.

<sup>23</sup> AECP, fund 6495, register 1, folio 354, pp. 10-12.

<sup>24</sup> Hendrik Allik, *Malēstusi 1940. aasta 21. juuni ettevalmistamisest. Saabus päev* (Tallinn, 1960), pp. 47-55.

<sup>25</sup> AECP, fund 247, register 51, folio 8, p. 7.

## 6. The End of the Estonian Section of the Comintern (1940)

The Communist International did not play a role in establishing Soviet power in Estonia and in uniting Estonia with the Soviet Union in 1940. This was carried out by the Stalinist leadership of the USSR. The basis of it was the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 23 August 1940. According to its secret clause Germany left Estonia and several other republics to the USSR's sphere of influence.

In September 1939 the Government of the USSR used threats of force to make Estonia sign a mutual assistance pact. In line with this pact Red Army bases with 25,000 soldiers were set up on the territory of the Estonian Republic. The army of the Estonian Republic had 16,000 soldiers at that time. On 16 June 1940 the Soviet Government presented Estonia and Latvia with an ultimatum. It accused the governments of the Republics of violating the mutual assistance pact and demanded the stationing of more Red Army forces in the territory of Estonia and Latvia and the formation of new Soviet-friendly governments. Lithuania had already received a similar note on 14 June 1940.

On 17 June 1940 Red Army shock-troops (about 80,000 to 90,000 men) crossed the border and occupied important centres. On 19 June Andrei Zhdanov, one of Stalin's closest assistants, arrived in Tallinn. A new government, led by Zhdanov, was installed by Konstantin Päts in the evening of 21 June. Estonia was declared a Soviet Socialist Republic a month later, on 21 July, and on 6 August it was united with the USSR.

What role did the EKP play in these events?

The EKP did not take part in forming a new government. Candidates for this government were assembled in the Estonian embassy in the USSR. At the same time Zhdanov consulted some left-wing Socialists who had already had contacts with the embassy, namely Maksim Unt, Nigol Adrese and Neeme Ruus. The post of prime minister went to the doctor and poet Johannes Vares-Barbarus, who was not a member of the EKP and who had repeatedly expressed his opposition to the government in power. Initially no-one in the new government was a member of the EKP, but during the next two months most of the ministers, led by Vares-Barbarus, joined the Party.

On the evening of 20 June (the day before the new government was installed), Zhdanov ordered one of the left-wing leaders, Maksim Unt, to organize a workers' demonstration the following day, demanding the formation of a new government. On 21 June these demonstrations and meetings, organized by left-wing Socialists and supported by Communists and trade-union activists, took place in several towns.

As events proceeded the EKP increased its public activity. More and more Communists, who had previously worked illegally, took leading positions in the state machine. When, after the adoption of the constitution of the Estonian SSR, a new government was formed at the end of August 1940, one of the leaders of the EKP, Johannes Lauristin, became chairman of the "People's Commissars Council". In July and August 1940 many right-wing Socialists and other workers joined the EKP. In the space of a couple of months the number of Party members increased tenfold. The EKP became the only party in a one-party state, because other parties were forbidden to be active.<sup>26</sup>

So far historians have not found any documentary evidence that the Comintern sent instructions to the EKP in the summer of 1940. Indeed several Communists alive then confirm in their memoirs that both the Vares-Barbarus government and the activities of the EKP were controlled by Andrei Zhdanov. He was in Estonia for the first time from 19 to 25 June and his second visit took place from 2 July until the end of that month. At Zhdanov's suggestion elections for the new Representative Assembly were announced at the beginning of July. For this purpose an electoral block was formed, the Estonian Working People's Union (*Eesti Töötava Rahva Liit*; ETRL), led by the EKP. In accordance with Zhdanov's instructions opposition candidates were removed from this Union. He also instructed the new Assembly, that was dominated by Communists, to proclaim soviet government for Estonia and to join the Soviet Union. On this occasion the EKP just had the role of a rubber-stamp.

On 8 October 1940 the EKP was amalgamated with the all-Union Communist Bolshevik Party. With this act the EKP ceased to exist as a separate section of the Communist International.

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<sup>26</sup> Olaf Kuuli, "Eesti sotsialistid ja kommunistid 1940. aasta suvel", *Poliitika*, 1991, No. 8, pp. 21-35.

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