

COMINTERN RESEARCH PROBLEMS:
A NOTE ON THE PERIOD 1919-1933

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For a long time, political considerations dominated historical writing on the Comintern. This has changed only recently. The literature on the "party of world revolution" can be divided globally into four categories.

The oldest genre is made up of publications of dissident communists, who were attempting to order their own experiences and to place them in a broader context. The works of Borkenau, James, Volk, Friedländer and Frank belong to this category.¹ Despite the claims made from the side of communists, not all this literature was inspired by sectarian tendencies or "witch-hunting" - although naturally this did take place.² In fact many of these studies - inspired by the question as to why the Comintern had not acted in accordance with its aims - have an underlying current of moral and political outrage. Although this does not always agree with the demands of science, useful insights and information can nevertheless be found in them.

A second category consists of the "normal" anti-communist literature, which became especially popular during the Cold War. These authors often saw the communist parties as "sinister, compulsive, potentially omnipresent bodies, half religion and half plot"³, which needed to be forcefully opposed.⁴

A third group includes the "official" communist literature, which may be counted part of the "Legitimationswissenschaft"⁵. Haupt has an apt characterisation of these publications as self-indulgent myth-formers, which "à l'aide de falsifications inouïes, foulant aux pieds et méprisant les réalités historiques les plus élémentaires" turn history into a caricature.⁶

The fourth type, which has come to the fore since the sixties, is made up of the new scientific literature, which analyses matters with more objectivity than the first three categories. The political position of the authors is relegated to the background while rational arguments and careful study of the sources come to the fore. Studies by communists (e.g. Spriano), as well as dissidents (e.g. Claudin) or anti-communists (e.g. Cornell) may be found in this group.

At the same time as the communist studies became more scientific, the perspective broadened. The older literature mainly concerned itself with the political history of inter-

1. Franz Borkenau, *World Communism* (Ann Arbor 1962); C.L.R. James, *World Revolution 1917-1936* (London 1937); Ypsilon [Karl Volk], *Stalintern* (Paris 1948); Ruth Fischer [Elfriede Friedländer], *Stalin and German Communism* (Cambridge, Mass. 1948); Pierre Frank, *Histoire de l'Internationale Communiste (1919-1943)*, 2 vols (Paris 1979).

2. E.J. Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries. Contemporary Essays* (London 1973), p. 11.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Philip Selznick, *The Organizational Weapon: A Study of Bolshevik Strategy and Tactics* (New York 1952), describes the aim of his study as the formulation of "an advanced training-manual for anti-communistic forces" (p. 16).

5. Oskar Negt, "Marxismus als Legitimationswissenschaft", in: Abram Deborin [Abram Ioffe]/Nikolai Bucharin, *Kontroversen über dialektischen und mechanistischen Materialismus* (Frankfurt/M. 1969), pp. 7-48.

6. Georges Haupt, *L'Histoire et le mouvement social* (Paris 1980), pp. 30-31.

national communism. The "orthodox", as well as the dissidents and anti-communists all placed the political course of the organisation they studied at the centre of their considerations. Because in general attention was paid solely to congresses, resolutions, the formation of factions, splits and suchlike, important elements of the communists' picture of themselves were reproduced uncritically. This in turn led to the international communist movement being described too easily as an entity which tended to be monolithic, which acted in complete agreement with the foreign policy interests of the Soviet Union. Through a broader approach which also encompasses economic and sociological aspects, such premisses have since been put into perspective.

For a proper understanding of the history of the Comintern it seems desirable to distinguish three relatively autonomous elements, which were interdependent but at the same time possessed a variable amount of room to manoeuvre: (i) the separate national communist parties, (ii) the Comintern, and (iii) the foreign policy of the Soviet Union. It seems that the development of the communist international can only be properly understood if it is considered together with both other factors. I shall here cover the 1919-33 period.

The development of every national communist party is determined by a large number of factors, which vary from the international situation to the geographic distribution of the national population. It would go too far to consider all these determinants more closely here.⁷ I shall limit myself to certain factors, which research has shown to be of crucial importance for the developments: the socio-political characteristics of the members, the party structure, and the relationship with other parts of the labour movement.

If one follows Stinchcombe one could say in general that "an examination of the history of almost any type of organisation shows that there are great spurts of foundation of organisations of the type, followed by periods of relatively fundamentally different kinds of organisation in the same field."⁸ The founding of communist parties in the first few years after the October Revolution can without doubt be regarded as such a spurt. Each communist party represented in a national context an "initial solution" for the problems faced by parts of the working class and those intellectuals who sympathised with them.⁹ Even when the conditions which gave rise to the party's foundation to an important extent ceased to exist, the organisation was able to continue in the same way as before. This was possible, provided that the internal structures were consolidated, a tradition was built up and a socialisation process in families and communities was continued

7. In fact there is still no convincing theoretical model in which the various factors can be fitted logically and so explain the overall development of the communist parties. For the moment attempts made in this direction by political scientists remain very abstract and therefore of no use for historians. See, for instance, Georges Lavau, "A la recherche d'un cadre théorique pour l'étude du Parti Communiste Français", *Revue française de science politique*, XVIII (1968), pp. 445-466 and Annick Percheron, "A propos de l'application du cadre théorique d'Easton à l'étude du Parti Communiste Français", *Revue française de science politique*, XX (1970), pp. 75-92.

8. Arthur Stinchcombe, "Social Structure and Organizations", in: James G. March (ed.), *Handbook of Organizations* (Chicago 1972[4]), pp. 142-193, 154.

9. The notion of the "initial solution" has been developed in James G. Scoville, "Some Determinants of the Structure of Labor Movements", in: Adolf Sturmthal/James G. Scoville (eds), *The International Labor Movement in Transition* (Urbana, IL 1973), pp. 58-78, 74. An attempt to apply this notion in communist historiography can be found in Marcel van der Linden/Joost Wormer, "The End of a Tradition: Structural Developments and Trends in Dutch Communism", *Journal of Communist Studies*, 4 (1988), pp. 78-87.

which kept on producing new generations of militants who adapted themselves to the inherited norms and values. In that sense the analysis of the initial situation is of essential importance for an understanding of the later developments.

Opinions differ on the sociological characteristics of the early communist parties. An old opinion held by the communists themselves states that the split between the social democrats and the communists was a split between the privileged labour aristocrats "bought" by the bourgeoisie on the one hand, and the uncorrupted and therefore revolutionary workers on the other.¹⁰ A later version of this thesis was formulated by *operaismo*, which sees a division between highly trained "professional" workers and uneducated "mass workers".¹¹

A second vision is expounded by Lucien Laurat (Otto Maschl), himself co-founder of the Kommunistische Partei Deutschösterreichs. Laurat distinguishes between the experienced social-democrat militants, who had already been politically active for some time and took up a considered position, and the communists, who belonged to the newcomers in the political labour movement and were somewhat inflammable and undisciplined:

"Those who experienced the years of disruption will at once agree that from September to December 1920, from the split in the Czech social democracy to the Congress of Tours - via the split in the German Independent Socialist Party at Halle - one and the same phenomenon was observable everywhere: the majority of the new and raw recruits to socialism voted for joining the Moscow International, whilst the majority of the older socialists voted against it. And in 1921, when the French C.G.T. was being dragged into a split, we again saw the collision of these "two masses".¹²

A third thesis states that communism only managed to gain any substantial support in those places where an already-existing labour organisation provided it with an audience. In this way Greene concludes, for example, on the basis of historical-comparative research, that "in competitive systems" Communism established itself "where it was the beneficiary of already strong socialist traditions *and* only where the Communists split from the dominant socialist party at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution and the organisation of the Third International."¹³

The research which would make it possible to test these three hypotheses is unfortunately scarce. This does not change the fact that the first hypothesis has in any case proven untenable for the most important communist party outside the Soviet Union before 1933: the KPD. This turns out to differ rather less in its social make-up from the SPD than the

10. The classical statement of this position may for example be found in M. Jablonski, "Ein Jahrzehnt Kommunistische Internationale", *Unter dem Banner des Marxismus*, III (1929), pp. 177-191.

11. The "operaistic" version may be found in Karl Heinz Roth, *Die "Andere" Arbeiterbewegung* (Munich 1974) and elsewhere. See also Sergio Bologna, "Per la storia dell' Internazionale Comunista", *Primo Maggio*, No. 5 (1975), pp. 89-94.

12. Lucien Laurat, *Marxism and Democracy* (London 1940), pp. 124-125.

13. Thomas H. Greene, "The Electorates of Nonruling Communist Parties", *Studies in Comparative Communism*, 4 (1971), pp. 68-103, 102.

idea of a labour aristocracy would lead one to suspect, although there are important differences between the two parties.¹⁴

On the other two hypotheses the empirical research is, for the moment, not so clear. One could perhaps consider Wheeler's observation, that in the USPD the proponents of joining Comintern were younger than the opponents¹⁵, as possible support for Laurat.

The third thesis can be found most often in the literature. From another perspective Lazich and Drachkovitch have come to the conclusion that the Communists were "condemned to remain a splinter group of no political importance" in those places where they did not succeed in reaching the masses through the social democratic party or the trade unions - as in England, Belgium, and Austria.¹⁶ In the Finnish case something like this also appears to be true at a regional level: Laulajainen has shown that the communists were strongest in those areas where the workers were highly organised and where they gained possession of an organisation which allowed communist ideology to be "radiated" to its immediate hinterland.¹⁷

Laurat's and Greene's theses do not necessarily contradict each other. They could be combined by assuming that Communist Parties had the best chances in those cases where communist positions could be disseminated through the big trade unions and social democratic parties and in which freshly recruited members were more attracted to these positions than more elderly members. Further research will have to show whether this is a plausible thought. It clashes with the fact that many "unruly" elements of the labour movement who were attracted to communism were in no way inexperienced, and had already participated for a considerable time in older (anarchist or revolutionary-syndicalist) movements.¹⁸ More in general one can doubt whether relatively simple causal relations such as those suggested here have sufficient explanatory power. For the moment it would seem that "a multivariate approach which draws together a number of different dimensions"¹⁹ yields the best results.

From the available data on the social composition of the members and voters - the number of studies covering this questions is gradually increasing²⁰ - it would appear that

14. Ossip K. Flechtheim, *Die KPD in der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt/M. 1969), pp. 311-321; Hartmann Wunderer, "Materialien zur Soziologie der Mitgliedschaft und Wählerschaft der KPD zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik", *Gesellschaft. Beiträge zur Marxschen Theorie*, No. 5 (1975), pp. 257-281. For a theoretical critique of *operaismo*, see: Heiner Minssen/Werner Sauerborn, "Der Massenarbeiter und das Kapital", *Gesellschaft. Beiträge zur Marxschen Theorie*, No. 10 (1977), pp. 141-186; a historical critique was formulated by Erhard Lucas in *Zwei Formen von Radikalismus in der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Frankfurt/M. 1976).

15. Robert F. Wheeler, "German Labor and the Comintern: A Problem of Generations?", *Journal of Social History* 7 (1973-74), pp. 304-321.

16. Branko Lazitch/Milorad M. Drachkovitch, *Lenin and the Comintern*, vol. I (Stanford, Cal. 1972), p. 217.

17. Pertti Laulajainen, "Some Aspects of the Division of the Finnish Working Class after the Civil War: A Research Note", *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 2 (1979), No. 1, pp. 53-64.

18. Hardly any research has been done into this interesting continuity. However, see Larry Peterson, "Revolutionary Socialism and Industrial Unrest in the Era of the Winnipeg Strike: The Origins of Communist Labour Unionism in Europe and North America", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, No. 13 (1984), pp. 115-131.

19. Alexander Dallin, "The Bases of Communist Support: Pre-Theoretical Approaches", in: Hannelore Horn/Alexander Schwan/Thomas Weingartner (eds), *Sozialismus in Theorie und Praxis. Festschrift für Richard Löwenthal* (Berlin/New York 1978), pp. 414-440, 431.

20. Beside Flechtheim's and Wunderer's publications see Kenneth Newton, *The Sociology of British Communism* (London 1969) which, although concentrating on developments after 1945, does contain information on the period before the Second World War, and Jacques Girault, *Sur l'implantation du Parti Communiste Français dans l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris 1977).

the CP's especially attracted those workers with a short time-horizon, who therefore wanted quick results. Whether it was the relative youth of the members, the over-representation of occupational group known for their strike proneness (like construction workers, dockers and metal workers), the considerable number of unemployed amongst the supporters, or the rapid turn-over of the membership, everything in the twenties points at this single common characteristic: great social impatience.²¹

The CP's, so it would seem, represented some of the varied opinions held by different parts of the working class. Endogeneous and exogeneous causes resulted in a situation in which bridges to the more "patient", but not necessarily less anti-capitalist, social democratic workers were built only occasionally. Partially as the consequence of the chosen tactics communism was isolated and the split of the labour movement into two parts was consolidated. The self-imposed isolation was only partially ended when the fatal consequences of the split became visible for all after Hitler's *Machtübername*.

During the first ten years of the Comintern every separate CP seemed to follow its own zigzag course, in which the various "left" and "right" turns of the different parties were in no way synchronised and diverging national "styles" could be discerned. A broad social perspective is needed here, if one wants to avoid exclusively voluntarist explanations based on internal party controversies. A long time ago Rist attempted to relate the zigzag line of the KPD to the business cycle. He supposed that German communism in the period of the Weimar Republic displayed permanent ultra-left tendencies - a thought which ties into the thesis of the "unruly membership" - but periodically was turned away from this course. Time and again when the business cycle moves downwards the activist desire for immediate revolution increases, according to Rist. The party leadership interprets the radicalisation in its own ranks as a shift to the left of the entire labour movement and as proof of its own position. The result is a sectarian party position which emphasises all the points distinguishing the party from the social democrats, aiming for a "united front from below". As soon as this course runs into difficulties and results in defeats - something regarded by Rist as inevitable - and when the business cycle takes a temporary turn for the better, a turn to the "right" follows: the emphasis shifts to those factors uniting all workers' organisations and the striving for a "united front from above" increases.²²

Although the simplicity of this theory makes it an attractive one, and it undoubtedly contains a grain of truth, it also has two important shortcomings. In the first place the implied causal relationship between politics and economics ignores other influences. Especially the ties to Comintern (which were not only political-ideological but also material: the KPD was partially dependent on it financially!) were more important than Rist suggests.²³ In the second place no attention is paid to the question of what might be called the "sub-political" relations; this is a failing which Rist has in common with most interpretations of early communism. Wickham was probably the first to point out the importance of these "sub-political" relationships. Through a case study of the metal workers' movement in Frankfurt/Main 1923-30 this author has thrown a new light on the conditions under which the social fascism theory was created. Wickham has made a good

21. Here too, irresponsible generalisations should be avoided. Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten showed in her remarkable book *Aufstand der Avantgarde. Die Märzaktion der KPD* (Frankfurt/M. 1986), that the revolutionary impatience of KPD members differed from region to region.

22. Walter Rist, "Die innere Krise der KPD", *Neue Blätter für den Sozialismus*, 3 (1932), pp. 134-149.

23. Flechtheim, *Die KPD in der Weimarer Republik*; on the KPD's financial dependency Hermann Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus*, vol. I (Frankfurt/M. 1969), pp. 308f.

case for not just studying the labour movement at the level of institutions (meaning the level of formal organisations with codified organisational structures, clearly defined membership criteria and suchlike) but also at the level of the "quasi-institutions", from shop steward meetings to friendship networks. His thesis is that until 1923 the Frankfurter metal workers were not only connected with each other at the apparatus-level (parties, trade unions, cultural organisations) but also at a quasi-institutional level through non-formalised meetings at the place of work, etc. After 1923 this sub-political underground fell apart, which meant that the cohesion of the local labour movement became far more dependent on official institutions and therefore the political parties, the SPD and KPD, and their respective political courses. When from 1928 the national SPD leadership started moving to the right in connection with its entering the national government, this aided the triumphant flight of the social-fascism train of thought, because those sub-political contacts which would have opposed sectarianism, were relatively absent. Although one can question whether this thesis does not also oversimplify the complexity of the relationships and it is an open question whether the Frankfurter situation corresponds to those in other towns, Wickham's approach focuses on an aspect which definitely needs further research.²⁴

Although the non-political backgrounds of the communist policies in various countries have been insufficiently researched it can already be stated that the clarification of these backgrounds proves that there were powerful internal elements co-determining the development course of the national parties. With this I naturally do not want to claim that the international aspects are unimportant for understanding the CP's. On the contrary. I do want to claim however that in terms of analysis the national relations deserve as much attention as the international ones.

Naturally the development of Soviet society and the attitude taken by the Soviet elite towards foreign countries (especially in Asia, the United States and Western Europe) were also of crucial importance. Since there have been an enormous number of publications on this subject I shall only list some short theses. Three stages in the development of Soviet foreign policy may be distinguished, globally speaking. During the first stage, to 1921, world revolution formed a central part of Bolshevik considerations. The October Revolution was regarded as a mere "prologue" (Lenin) for a far greater international revolution; it was even stated that the temporary suppression of the Russian revolutionary state would be accepted, if this would make revolution in Western Europe possible. During a second stage, until the mid-twenties when the revolutionary tide started to recede, the emphasis gradually started to shift to the national interests of the Soviet Union, although these did not yet dominate. There was something like a precarious balance between on the one hand the desire to further develop one's own national society and to consolidate the gains, and on the other the striving for a revolution elsewhere (specifically in Germany). The third stage was finally introduced by the theory of "socialism in one country", formulated in 1924 by Stalin. The building of the USSR now became paramount and the Soviet elite increasingly judged developments elsewhere in the light of their own *raison d'état*.

24. James Wickham, "Sozialfaschismus und Spaltung der Arbeiterbewegung: Arbeiter und politische Parteien im Raum Frankfurt 1920/30", *Archiv für die Geschichte der Arbeit und des Widerstandes*, No. 5 (1982), pp. 27-56, 33-39.

These three stages were reflected in a somewhat distorted fashion in the development of the Comintern. While at the first conferences the different CP's met on equal terms, in time this changed and the aims of the CPSU became more important. This transition from a more or less pluralist system to a mono-centric one did not take place without tensions and contradictions. Even under Lenin a political difference of opinion came to the fore between the Soviet leadership and the Comintern, when the Russian communists initiated a co-operation between the Red Army and the Reichswehr which clashed with the revolutionary pretensions of the International.

Such contradictions can only be understood if it is recognised that, as suggested above, the various CP's and the Comintern itself had a certain autonomy. Often there was a situation in which the Narkomindel wanted a particular policy, the Comintern a slightly different one and some non-Russian CP's yet another. A good example of this is the attitude taken towards social democracy at the end of the twenties. The Comintern and the KPD fought German social democracy, because they judged it in an extremely negative way. The Soviet authorities did not agree; they saw the SPD as a political group which behaved in a relatively peace-loving fashion and which tended towards recognition of the Soviet Union. Unlike the German communists, the French communists had a policy of co-operation with the social democrats until about 1927, which meant that during elections SFIO candidates were supported. The Comintern, however, through its ECCI-Praesidium successfully pressured the PCF leadership into a more antagonistic course (class against class).²⁵

The situation in the twenties was complicated further by the fact that the separate communist parties with which the Comintern had to deal were not so monolithic internally. It was not only possible to form tendencies for a very long time, but there was also a lot of practical-political manoeuvring room. Samuel's description of the British CP is typical:

"The unity of the Party was naturally never as monolithic in practice as it was in theory. Individual districts developed their own distinctive traditions - e.g. joint work with Labour people in Sheffield, bitter hostility to them in East London. Rank-and-File movements at all times enjoyed a certain latitude, and at crucial points it was their independent initiatives which cumulatively served to change or even reverse the Party line. Comrades engaged in 'mass work' - outstandingly, Wal Hannington in the Unemployed Workers Movement and Arthur Horner among the South Wales miners - enjoyed a large measure of autonomy and under pressure could prove a law unto themselves, as Horber did when he was attacked by the party in 1930. The division between the Party and the Plebs League, imperiously demanded by the Dutt-Pollitt Report in 1922, was not consummated until the 1930's."²⁶

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25. Manfred von Boetticher, *Industrialisierungspolitik und Verteidigungskonzeption der UdSSR 1926-1930* (Düsseldorf 1979), pp. 183-197.

26. Raphael Samuel, "Staying Power: The Lost World of British Communism" (II), *New Left Review*, No. 156 (1986), pp. 63-112, 79.