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The Finnish Communist Movement and the Comintern

1. Introduction

Transferred from Swedish to Russian rule in 1809, and given wide-ranging autonomy within the Russian empire, Finland became an independent state in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. The new country was almost immediately plunged into a bitter civil war in which White government forces operating from the north defeated the Red Guards of the Council of People's Commissars (*Kansanvaltuuskunta*), which had been set up in Helsinki at the end of January 1918. The civil war was essentially a struggle for power, though unresolved social and economic problems also played a part in igniting the conflict.¹ This tragic experience undoubtedly had a decisive influence upon the nature and course of Finnish politics for the next four decades. However, it is worth noting that the parliamentary arena - the two-hundred seat single-chamber *Eduskunta* elected by universal male and female franchise on the d'Hondt system of proportional representation, introduced in 1906-7 - remained the same, and although the constitution of 1919 vested strong executive powers in the president (elected indirectly for a term of six years), government had to enjoy the confidence of the *Eduskunta*.

In the *Eduskunta* elections of 1916, the Finnish Social Democratic Party (*Suomen Sosialidemokraattinen Puolue*; SSDP) had actually won an absolute majority of 103 seats, and had striven during the revolution of 1917 to establish a parliamentary sovereignty which would have subordinated executive authority to that of legislature. Since no one party has ever enjoyed an absolute majority of seats since independence, coalition governments have been the norm in the republic of Finland. The leading non-socialist party of the interwar years was the Agrarian Union (*Maalaisliitto*), which in 1918 had come out firmly for a republic as opposed to the monarchy favoured by the conservatives of the Finnish nationalist movement and the Swedish People's Party. This and other divisions in the ranks of the "White" parties, the collapse of Imperial Germany (on whom the hopes of the monarchists rested) and the insistence of the victorious Allies that democratic elections for a new *Eduskunta* be held allowed the labour movement not only to revive as a political force, but also to play an active role.

The numerical strength and popularity of the political labour movement goes some way to explain why Finland did not become a repressive, authoritarian state like Hungary, though other factors such as respect for constitutional legality and national-democratic principles have also to be taken into account. Finland was a land of relatively modest peasant-farmers (their numbers augmented by land reforms in the early twenties). It had no unassimilated national or ethnic minorities, and no serious territorial grievances upon which a rampant nationalism could feed. Above all, its economy was relatively buoyant, although rather heavily dependent on the timber-processing industries. The demand for timber had a profound impact upon the rural population, providing work opportunities for small farmers and the landless and opportunities for the owners of forested land to enrich themselves. The impoverished small farmers in the north, often forced to sell their forests at knock-down prices to the timber companies during the war years, were less fortunate; not a few were to turn to communism in the 1920s, thereby perpetuating the "rural/backwoods" traditions of the Finnish labour movement.²

2. The Origins of Finnish Communism

The Finnish Communist Party (*Suomen Kommunistinen Puolue*; SKP) was founded at a meeting of exiled Finnish

¹ The most recent study in English of the origins of the civil war is by R. Alapuro, *State and Revolution in Finland* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988). The most detailed study is by A.F. Upton, *The Finnish Revolution* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1980).

² For a brief comparative discussion of the phenomenon of "backwoods" communism, see David Kirby, "The Labour Movement", in Max Egman and David Kirkby (eds.), *Finland. People - Nation - State* (London: Hurst & Co., 1989), pp. 208-10.

socialists in Moscow on 29 August, 1918, four months after the end of the civil war.³ Although voices had been raised within the SSDP leadership against the decision to seize power at the end of January 1918, the party remained united throughout the civil war. However, the Council of People's Commissars was on several occasions chided by radical groups of workers and Red Guards for failing to prosecute a truly revolutionary course, and its failures were to be posthumously exposed by some of its members, most notably, Otto Ville Kuusinen.⁴

The Communist Party was thus founded in the aftermath of defeat, in exile; and it bore all the hallmarks of a sudden departure from the path of parliamentary politics hitherto espoused by the Finnish labour movement on to a full-blooded revolutionary course. The first of the five theses adopted at the founding meeting bluntly declared that "The workers are to prepare energetically for an armed revolution and in no way to fall back into the old parliamentary, trade union and cooperative struggle which was the basis of the Finnish workers' movement before the revolution."⁵

In defeat, the former social democrats, who had long acknowledged Kautsky as their ideological mentor, ate ample helpings of humble pie at the table of their seemingly victorious Bolshevik hosts. Before 1918, the Finnish socialist leadership had carefully avoided too close an association with Russian social democracy; it had, indeed, shared many of the basic assumptions of Finnish nationalism and its principal objective for much of 1917 had been to secure Finnish independence rather than to prosecute the revolutionary cause.⁶ The harsh manner in which future communists such as Kuusinen, Kullervo Manner and Yrjö Sirola dismissed their own recent past, and the fawning tones with which they professed their willingness to learn from the Russian example is particularly striking, especially in view of the great reluctance of many would-be adherents of the Third International to follow a similar course of stiff self-criticism and grateful obedience to the precepts of comrade Lenin.

The SKP was not permitted to operate legally on Finnish soil until 1944. It had therefore to conduct its operations through a variety of organisations and political fronts, facing constant harassment from the authorities. However, the prospects were by no means unfavourable for the party. The Social Democratic Party, which was revived by moderates who had stayed on the sidelines in the civil war, secured over one-third of the votes cast and 80 of the 200 seats in the *Eduskunta* in parliamentary elections held in March 1919. Left-wing opposition, which had been muted at the extraordinary SSDP conference in December 1918, mounted a serious challenge to the reformist party leadership a year later. Although the left had managed to gain control of a number of unions and local party organisations, they failed to capture the party. In May 1920, eighty-six delegates, mostly from northern and eastern Finland and the southern cities of Helsinki and Turku, convened in Helsinki to form the Socialist Workers' Party (*Suomen sosialistinen työväenpuolue*; SSTP). Within three years, the SSTP could claim 23,666 members, only four thousand fewer than the SSDP, and polled 14.8% of the vote in the parliamentary elections of 1922 as against 25% for the SSDP. In August 1923, the authorities struck. The entire parliamentary group, members of the executive and leading officials of the SSTP were arrested, and the party's assets sequestered. The left continued to operate under the cover of an alliance of workers and peasants,

³ A.F. Upton, *Communism in Scandinavia and Finland. Politics of Opportunity* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), pp. 111-8; John H. Hodgson, *Communism in Finland. A History and Interpretation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 81-6; Ilkka Hakalehto, *SKP ja sen vaikutus poliittiseen ja ammatilliseen työväenliikkeeseen 1918-1928* (Porvoo-Helsinki: WSOY, 1966), pp. 12-17.

⁴ Although attempts have been made to draw parallels between the Finnish and the Russian Councils of People's Commissars, any perusal of the minutes of the Finnish Red government will soon reveal the differences. See Juhani Piilonen, "Venäläiset esikuvat punaisen Suomen hallinnossa 1918", *Historiallinen Arkisto*, 65 (1971), pp. 206-91. Kuusinen, who had had responsibility for education in the Red government and who drafted the constitution for a future republic of Finland, wrote his "self-critique" in the immediate aftermath of the civil war.

⁵ Upton, *Communism in Scandinavia and Finland*, p. 115.

⁶ David Kirby, "The Finnish Social Democratic Party and the Bolsheviks", *Journal of Contemporary History*, 11 (1976), pp. 99-113; Eino Ketola, *Kansalliseen kansanvaltaan. Suomea itsen itsenäisyys, sosialidemokraatit ja Venäjän vallankumous 1917* (Helsinki: Tammi, 1987) is a detailed study of the social democrats' efforts to secure Finnish independence.

and was still able to secure a strong grip of the trade union movement, but at the cost of dividing and weakening the labour movement as a whole. When the axe finally fell in 1930, wielded by a government under pressure from the redneck Lapua movement to root out communist activities, the real weakness of the communists' position was revealed.

3. Sources for Research into the Early History of Finnish Communism

I have elsewhere argued that the SSTP should be seen more as a continuation of a tradition of intransigent radicalism within the Finnish labour movement than as an instrument of Moscow-based Finnish communism.⁷ My study was based upon primary sources deposited in Finnish archives: minutes, membership and account books, hand-written newspapers and reports of local trade-union and party organisations, deposited in the Finnish Labour Archives (*Työväenarkisto*) and the People's Archives (*Kansanarkisto*), and confiscated documents and police reports in the national archives (*Suomen Valtionarkisto*). Finland is in fact exceptionally well-endowed in archival material concerning the labour movement, not least in the amount of records of local workers' organisations which have been preserved. Although a number of studies of the post-1918 organised labour movement have begun to appear, it is the pre-1918 social democratic movement which has attracted the most attention up till now.⁸ The history of communism in Finland had not proved as attractive, partly for internal political reasons, partly because of the more patchy nature of the sources. This is particularly the case with the interwar period, when the party was a banned organisation in Finland, and its leadership was based in Moscow. Any serious student of the relationship of the SKP with the Communist International would therefore have to have access to archives in the former Soviet Union. According to Finnish sources, there is plentiful material in Moscow, and there are hopes that this may be catalogued and/or microfilmed by an archivist seconded by the *Kansanarkisto*.⁹ As the front organisations operating in Finland had to be careful not to reveal any connections with the illegal SKP, one cannot expect to find much in their papers about international communist activities - and in any event, the main concerns of these organisations were generally local and specific. On the other hand, the policy lines laid down by Comintern were taken on board and debated in meetings and in the press, so that it is possible for example to form some kind of overall picture of the reactions of the SSTP by reading the minutes or party council meetings, or the party press.¹⁰ After 1923, this becomes more difficult, as clandestine, SKP-organised activities and organisations replaced the relatively open organisation which the SSTP had copied from the old SSDP, and one is more heavily reliant on police reports and court records. There are however collections of memoirs, flysheets and brochures from the "underground years" of the SKP in the People's

⁷ David Kirby, "New Wine in Old Vessels? The Finnish Socialist Workers' Party, 1919-1923", *Slavonic and East European Studies Review*, 66 (1988), pp. 426-45. The most detailed account of left-wing/communist activities in Finland in the 1920s is by Hakalehto, *SKP ja sen vaikutus poliittiseen ja ammatilliseen työväenliikkeeseen 1918-1928*, though see also Gary London, *Opposition of Principle: the Finnish Socialist Workers' Party in Parliament 1922-1930* (Ph.D. thesis, Seattle, University of Washington, 1973).

⁸ There is a brief discussion of some of the recent research work on the pre-independence labour movement in David Kirby, "Finland", in Marcel van der Linden and Jürgen Rojahn (eds.), *The formation of labour movement 1870-1914. An international perspective*, 2 Vols. (Leiden, etc.: E.J. Brill, 1990), 2, pp. 523-40.

⁹ Communication from Professor Hannu Soikkanen, October 1990.

¹⁰ The papers confiscated by the police in 1923, and kept in the national archives in the collection of the secret police (*Etsivän Keskuspoliisin arkisto*, files II x 1-4), include minutes of the founding meeting, of the party council, reports of the executive and numerous district committee reports. The Communist Party has itself published a number of collections of articles and documents over the years, of which the most important are: *SKP:n taistelun tieltä* (Leningrad, 1934), a collection of materials and memoirs illustrating the history of the party to 1933; *SKP:n taistelujen tiellä*, eleven yearbooks, published between 1945-1955 in Helsinki; *Suomen kommunistinen puolue. Puoluekokousten, konferenssien ja keskuskomitean plenumien päätöksiä. Ensimmäinen kokoelma* (Leningrad, 1935), decisions of SKP congresses, conferences and plenary sessions of the central committee.

Archives, and trade union papers preserved at the Labour Archives which are relevant for the study of this period.¹¹

A prolific, though not always reliable writer of memoirs is Arvo Tuominen.¹² Tuominen first made his mark as the secretary of the SSTP and was one of the participants in the training courses organised in Sweden by the SKP in 1920. Moving to the Soviet Union in 1933, Tuominen was elected a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) and a candidate member of the Presidium at the Seventh Comintern Congress. In 1938, he moved to Stockholm to investigate irregularities in the use of party funds; a year later, he refused to accept the position assigned to him as head of a puppet government to be installed by a "liberating" Red Army in Finland, and broke with the party. Not surprisingly, Tuominen is thoroughly vilified as a renegade in subsequent party literature and histories.¹³ The personal archives at present stored in the People's Archives do not offer a great deal for further study of the Comintern. The Otto Ville Kuusinen collection contains nothing concerning his work for the Comintern, though there is an eye-witness account of Kuusinen's visit to Stockholm in 1920 which might shed new light on a crucial period in the history of the SKP. There are also letters from former colleagues in the pre-1918 SSDP in the extensive Karl Wiik collection (Finnish National Archives), in addition to correspondence from a wide range of friends on the left such as Aleksandra Kollontay, which offer a number of interesting insight (and private reservations) on developments in the communist camp and in Soviet Russia.

4. The Communist Party and "Front" Organisations in Finland

The lack of research on the history of a Communist Party whose leadership was based in Moscow (with a substantial number however based in Karelia until the mid-thirties: the history of the Karelian ASSR has

¹¹ The recent study of the SKP's attitude and policies towards the peasantry by Matti Lackman, *Taistelu talonpojasta. Suomen Kommunistisen Puolueen suhde talonpoikaiskysymykseen ja talonpoikaisliikkeisiin 1918-1938* (Oulu: Kustannus OY Pohjoinen, 1985), makes good use of these materials, and has a lot to say on Comintern policy on the peasant question. The following collections in the People's Archives may offer material for further study: Suomen Sosialistinen Työväenpuolue (1C1): two files, containing minutes, programmes, reports, electoral material and papers of the regional organisation of the Socialist Workers' Party; Sosialistisen työväen ja pienviljelijäin vaalikomiteat (1C2): thirteen files, containing lists, minutes, reports, correspondence and papers of regional organisations of the electoral committees of the Socialist Workers and Small Farmers, also includes material from the secret police files; Suomen kommunistinen nuorisoliitto 1925-1936 (1C): microfilmed papers of the illegal Communist Youth League, which contains much interesting material on the Communist Youth International, as well as directives, reports and newspapers; Suomen punainen ammattiyhdistys 1930-1935 (1C): microfilmed papers of the Red trade union organisation set up illegally after the communist-dominated trade union organisation SAI was broken up; Suomen punainen apu 1930-1944 (1C): microfilmed papers of the Red Aid; Suomen kommunistinen puolue 1918-1944: microfilmed papers of the Communist Party, mostly of printed materials such as party conferences, though includes an extensive range of newspapers, pamphlets and flysheets. These archives are freely available for consultation by foreign scholars; the same cannot be said of the archives of the secret police (*Etsivä Keskuspoliisi*) in the Finnish National Archives. Although access seems to be given to Finnish scholars, officialdom does not seem disposed to concede the same right to foreigners. There appears to be no catalogue, and I was reduced in 1986 to requesting files for which were references in Hakalehto's 1966 (!) study, after being told, somewhat reluctantly, that access was in principle permitted to materials over sixty years old.

¹² His writings include: *Sirpin ja vasaran tie* (Helsinki: Tammi, 1957); *Maan alla ja päällä* (Helsinki: Tammi, 1958); *Kremlin kellot* (Helsinki: Tammi, 1958), translated and published as *The Bells of the Kremlin. An Experience in Communism*, ed. by Piltti Heiskanen, translated by Lily Leino (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983).

¹³ Most notably in the writings of the party's official historian, Antti Hyvönen, whose book covering the interwar period has remarkably little to say about the SKP and Comintern: *SKP:n maanalaisuuden vuodet. Suomen työväenliikkeen historia 1920-1930-luvuilla* (Helsinki: Kansankulttuuri OY, 1971). Non-communist historians have however relied heavily on Tuominen's written and oral memoirs.

recently begun to attract the attention of local scholars there) and whose activities were conducted by a variety of illegal and legal organisations makes it difficult to reach any firm conclusions about Finnish communism's attitudes and responses to Comintern. Before turning to this question, however, something needs to be said about the relationship of the illegal Communist Party and its various "front" organisations in Finland.

There are some grounds for thinking that the émigré communists never fully established a firm grip over the various left-wing organisations and groups in Finland. Internal disputes and wrangles within the communist party leadership in the early twenties must have projected a rather confused picture across the frontier. The rigidly revolutionary line adopted by the party in 1918 failed to find much support in Finland. The left-wing socialists there publicly voiced their disagreement with the SKP call for a boycott of the 1919 parliamentary elections, and by the autumn of 1919, Kuusinen (operating underground in Finland) had begun to come round to their point of view. By the summer of 1920, the rift between the central committee and the dissidents was complete. Two separate reports on activity were submitted to the Second Comintern Congress, one from the central committee of the party, the other from "communists active in Finland", whose leading figure was Kuusinen.¹⁴ The conflict spilled over into Finland, with both sides sending their own agents over to influence the SSTP. The SSTP, prompted by Kuusinen, had resolved at its founding congress in May to join the Communist International with its own programme. As A.F. Upton points out: "This has two interesting implications: first, that Kuusinen publicly revealed his disagreement with some points in the current Comintern theses; second, since Finland could only be represented by one party in the Comintern, he was proposing that SKP be wound up and [S]STP taken into its place as the sole recognised party of the Finnish workers".¹⁵ The intervention of the police, who broke up the meeting and arrested eleven of the leading participants as soon as the proposal to join the Communist International was made, spared the nascent communist movement the embarrassment of a split. The SSTP on future occasions refrained from taking any decision to join the Third International for fear of further harassment from the authorities.

Kuusinen's year-long mission to Finland was something of a success, for not only was a sizeable left-wing party created, with its own press, but the trade union central organisation (*Suomen Ammattijärjestö*; SAJ) was captured by the left. The SKP leadership in Russia, on the other hand, seemed to be on the verge of tearing itself apart. The internecine feuding within the party culminated in August 1920, when a group of malcontents who had been expelled from the party broke into a lecture and shot eight of the leading SKP functionaries. In February 1921, Lenin invited Kuusinen to Moscow to help draft the new programme of the Comintern. This in itself was an explicit recognition of Kuusinen's participatory line, though Kuusinen himself did not escape entirely from the general criticism in the Fourth Congress of the SKP, arranged under Comintern auspices to bring the schism to an end. A majority of the delegates at this congress were from Finland, though not all were loyal Kuusinen supporters. The programme of action adopted by the congress was based on the Comintern theses. The party structure was also given a more definite form, and it was decided to establish a Finnish bureau in Helsinki to coordinate the work of the cells and to receive instructions from the central committee. Arvo Tuominen, a loyal Kuusinen supporter, was selected to head this bureau.

Jaakko Kivi, a metalworker in the Helsinki shipyards at the time, reveals in his unpublished memoirs something of the role of the SKP in directing the activities of the SSTP, but admits that there were many "wobblers" amongst the party's members of parliament. Several leading functionaries of the SSTP were also "unreconstructed" socialists, especially after a number of SKP activists were arrested in 1922.¹⁶ Popular figures from the past, newly released from jail, were taken into the party leadership, and they were not slow to criticise aspects of communist activity which they disliked. Yrjö Mäkelin, a veteran of the labour movement who had pursued his own course in the prewar days, was one of those released from jail who joined the SSTP. In 1922, he attacked an SKP central committee circular who had, amongst other things, urged workers to steal tools and materials from their employers in order to aid famine relief in Russia. Mäkelin's attack drew the fire of the SKP members on the council of the SSTP in 31 March 1922, but was also stoutly defended by other popular figures

¹⁴ Ilkka Hakalehto, "Die Beziehungen zwischen der Kommunistischen Partei Finnlands und der Kommunistischen Internationale in den Jahren 1919-1930", *Jahrbücher für die Geschichte Osteuropas*, 15 (1967), p. 601.

¹⁵ Upton, *Communism in Scandinavia and Finland*, pp. 130-1.

¹⁶ "Kappale SKP:n Suomen Byroon käytännöllistä 1917-1926" (Manuscript memoir in the Jaakko Kivi collection, People's Archives), f. 16.

in the party, such as the former chairman of the Christian Workers' Association, the farmer Antti Kaarne, who argued that the party should distance itself completely from all underground activity. Mäkelin was accused of centrism by SKP activists, though one at least admitted that the whole of Ostrobothnia (where the party had built up support, and where Mäkelin edited the local newspaper) might well follow him if he left the party.¹⁷ The secretary of the parliamentary group after the 1922 elections, Nestori Aronen, was another old-time socialist, who was later to defect once more to the social democrats. As Kivi summed up the situation in his memoirs: "It was no easy task for a SKP functionary to keep the group in the right lines".

Left-wing activities in Finland during the 1920s were in fact shaped more by internal circumstances than external pressures. The vigilance of the police and the authorities seriously hampered efforts to direct work from Russia. In the run-up to the 1929 parliamentary elections, for example, the police managed to break up a smugglers' route, and thereby delay distribution of the SKP pamphlet *Millä pohjalla* (On what basis), which contained the party's combat programme and which also sought to expose the threat of opportunism within the party. "What is significant", the police report commented, "is that the leftist line already put forward by the party orthodox at the trade union congress is described as "the clearly expressed will of the masses", even though the masses themselves know nothing about it until it is offered to them."¹⁸ Two of the three party "renegades" specifically mentioned in the pamphlet were in fact actively involved in the procedure of selecting candidates for the workers' and small farmers' election committee in Helsinki.

The endorsement of the SSTP by the fourth Communist Party congress had meant in practice that the creation of a separate system of cells was effectively abandoned. Thus, when the SSTP was broken up by the authorities in the summer of 1923, its assets seized and almost two hundred of its leading figures arrested, the Communist Party's own organisation was virtually wiped out as well. The second party conference in the autumn of 1923 and the subsequent fifth party congress acknowledged the error, and sought to create a system of underground cells which would control fractions in various front organisations. In fact, it would seem that the workplace or village cells remained faithful to their preferred leaders and tactics, inherited from the days of the undivided labour movement. One of the bastions of rural communism, studied in detail by Jaakko Nousiainen in the 1950s, was the western half of Kuopio province. In 1929, the workers' and small farmers' election committees secured 32% of the vote here, 5% less than the SSTP had secured in the peak year of 1922, but far outstripping their social democratic rivals. In effect, the SSTP and its successors was the labour movement in this region, a continuation of the pre-1918 tradition, which had not been badly afflicted by executions, flights and arrests of Red leaders in 1918, as had the old "Red heartland" of Häme. A report on the state of electoral activity drawn up in 1926 for the Helsinki workers' election council pointed out that in Kuopio West there were a large number of workers' and small farmers' associations set up after the sequestration order of 1923, and that it was difficult to persuade their members of the necessity of separate election committees. Three years later, a travelling speaker sent out by the Helsinki committee commented on the rather different political traditions in Kuopio West, which followed the old social democratic practice of operating openly and publicly, rejecting closed sessions and meetings for fear that the secret police would accuse them of secret activities.¹⁹

The party was even less able to establish complete control over the trade unions, in spite of an auspicious beginning in the early twenties. That the trade union movement as a whole did not fall completely into the hands of the communists says something for the resourcefulness and determination of the social democrat minority to split the movement in two. Although opposing membership of the Amsterdam International, the left majority of the SAJ opted to stay independent of any international federation in November 1920, attracting criticism from the SKP central committee. Fear of reprisals from the government, and a desire to keep the movement united, influenced this decision, though by the autumn of 1921, the communist leadership of SAJ were prepared to risk losing socialist-led unions by joining Profintern. Although two-thirds of the workers voting

¹⁷ Pöytäkirja SSTP:n puolueneuvoston kokouksesta 31.3.-1.4.1922, Etsivän Keskuspoliisin Arkisto 1 II x 4 (81), Finnish National Archives.

¹⁸ Etsivän keskuspoliisin raportit ja yhteenvedot: tilannekatsaus 5.8.1929 (Viipuri), Sosialistisen työväen ja pienviljelijäin vaalikomiteat (1C2, file 13), People's Archives.

¹⁹ Toimintaselostus Helsingin työväen vaalineuvoston Vaalikomitean toiminnasta sekä vaalitoiminnan kehityksestä eri vaalipiireissä (1926): Matkakertomus jaselostus poliittisesta tilanteesta eri vaalipiireissä (H Allila, 1929), Sosialistisen työväen ja pienviljelijäin vaalikomiteat (1C2, file 2), People's Archives; Jaakko Nousiainen, *Kommunismi Kupion läänissä* (Joensuu: Pohjois-Karjalan kirjapaino OY, 1956).

supported affiliation to Profintern, the SAJ executive shied away from taking the final formal decision, preferring to avoid reprisals and to keep a united union movement.²⁰ When the SKP central committee in 1925 declared that public activities were to be based on the revolutionary line of the SKP and Comintern, directed through the cells, the trade union leadership voiced their disapproval. There had already begun to appear a vociferous opposition to the SKP amongst a number of former leaders of the SSTP, incarcerated in the Tammissaari penitentiary. In the spring of 1925, they called for an end to the influence of the émigrés in the legal activities of the left in Finland, and for a new party which would seek to work with the left-wing of the SSDP. The SKP managed to stifle this incipient opposition, but it continued to rumble on in the trade unions and surfaced once more in 1929.²¹

The Tammissaari opposition also made its voice heard on the question of SKP policy towards the farmers. Niilo Wälläri rejected the notion of a workers' and farmers' alliance, pointedly asking: "Wasn't it the farmer who, together with the true bourgeoisie, fought against the workers and rural proletariat [in 1918?]"²² It is also possible that the poor response of the workers in the 1925 presidential elections towards the SKP-inspired programme, which called for a workers' and farmers' government, may indicate that Wälläri's sentiments were shared by others.

By the late summer of 1929, as John Hodgson remarks, the situation within the ranks of the left-wing of the Finnish labour movement was "explosive".²³ In December 1929, the "left group of Finnish workers" (*Suomen työväen vasemmistoryhmä*) was formed in Helsinki, and a six-man central committee elected. In particular, the group took exception to the line adopted at the Sixth Comintern Congress, which alleged that there was an especially tense and revolutionary situation in Finland, and that the workers were ready for revolution. By the beginning of 1930, a newspaper edited by Wälläri (*Suomen Työmies*) had begun to appear, and the group began making preparations for a new party, in which the emigrants were to play no part. However, the call for a common front against the fascist danger, issued in June 1930 by the group, was rejected out of hand by the communists, and treated with suspicion by the social democrats.²⁴

By the end of the year, all legal activity by communist front organisations in Finland had been effectively proscribed by the government. Their publications were banned, their members of parliament arrested, and the trade union central organisation SAJ dissolved. The ECCI issued a scathing attack on the unpreparedness and inability of the SKP to recognise and resist the rising fascist menace, an attack reinforced in November, when the party was accused of having been caught off guard by a fascist assault on the very frontiers of the Soviet state.²⁵ The party continued to be plagued by what it deemed the "revolutionary passivity" of leftist deviants, former Red Guards who rejected all forms of parliamentary and trade union activity, preferring, as their slogan put it, death in battle to life in capitalist society. But the party as a whole was suffering from its impotence and inability to rouse the workers. A circular put out in 1932 to members of the Youth League went on at length about the tendency of members to retreat within their shells, cutting themselves off from working-

²⁰ Pirjo Ala-Kapee and Marjaana Valkonen, *Yhdessä elämä turvallisiksi. SAK: laisen ammattiyhdistysliikkeen kehity vuoteen 1930* (Helsinki: Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö SAK r.y., 1982), pp. 541-55. The same reluctance to split was also evident in the workers' sports movement: see the study of the Workers' Sports Union (TUL) by Seppo Hentilä, *Suomen työläisurheilun historia*, Vol. 1 (Hämeenlinna, 1982).

²¹ Ala-Kapee and Valkonen, *Yhdessä elämä turvallisiksi*, pp. 734-42; Hakalehto, *SKP ja sen vaikutus poliittiseen ja ammatilliseen työväenliikkeeseen 1918-1928*, pp. 278-302.

²² Cited in Lackmann, *Taistelu talonpojasta*, p. 84.

²³ Hodgson, *Communism in Finland*, p. 129.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 130-9.

²⁵ Upton, *Communism in Scandinavia and Finland*, pp. 194-7. There is a lengthy and interesting typewritten account of decisions taken at the first delegate conference of the Finnish Communist Youth League (SKNL), held in Stockholm on 10-15 August 1929, which paints a rather gloomy picture of the state of the party and its organisations before the Lapua movement struck, in the People's Archives, Suomen Kommunistinen Nuorisoliitto 1925-1935 (1C, microfilm reel 16).

class youth, and hinted darkly at the continued presence in the league of those who thought it was merely a secret society, and who were pathologically afraid of all forms of public activity.²⁶ The hard-hit small farmers of northern Finland, where the left had polled well in the 1920s, seemed to offer the most promising recruits to the movement during the Depression, and Lackman's studies have revealed that the communists, especially when they could operate without too much control from Moscow in regions they knew personally, did manage to infiltrate and control several of the farmers' protest movements. Nevertheless, these movements remained small and uncoordinated, and tended to peter out once the worst effects of the depression were over.²⁷

5. Finnish Communism and the Comintern

As one of the few organised communist parties in existence at the beginning of 1919, one whose leaders were moreover to hand in Russia, the SKP played an important role in the founding congress of Comintern. Its central committee was one of the eight signatories of the official invitation, and one of its number, Jukka Rahja, fiercely attacked the hesitant attitude of the German communists' delegate Hugo Eberlein (Albert) in the debate on the founding of a Communist International.²⁸ In his report on the situation in Finland, Yrjö Sirola confidently predicted the imminent demise of the reactionary regime there and the renewal of the revolutionary struggle, reflecting the "ultra-leftism" into which the SKP had plunged.²⁹ Although the party finally endorsed Kuusinen's policy of operating through the unions and political front organisations, there still remained insurrectionist tendencies, as for example, the attempts in 1930-1931 to revive the Red Guard tradition.

As we have seen, the Comintern played a major role in bringing together the feuding wings of the SKP in 1920-21. The ECCI appointed Béla Kun and Karl Radek to the central committee of the SKP and set up a special organisation committee to oversee the staging of the fourth party congress. The ECCI also intervened in the affairs of the SKP on future occasions, having one of its favoured candidates, Toivo Antikainen, appointed to the central committee in 1923, and refusing to accept the decision of the fifth party congress to remove from the central committee Lenin's old comrade-in-arms, Eino Rahja. The ECCI not only took the party to task in 1930 for failing to spot the fascist menace; it also effectively took over control of its direction. This was less an indication of the overweening influence and power of the Comintern than a reflection of the impotence and indeed incompetence of the Finnish communist leadership (though it would be fair to mention that some of the most able were deeply involved in running the Karelian ASSR, and that Kuusinen himself had become a senior figure in the Comintern hierarchy).

The first signs of a move towards a popular front tactic can be detected at the turn of the year 1933. The emergence of a radical left-wing group of young social democrats opposed to the policies of the moderate leadership - the Academic Socialist Society, with its journal *Soihtu* - helped provide a point of contact with the communists, and the enlarged party central committee meeting in 1934 took the first cautious steps towards the new line, urging workers to join the reformist SAK trade unions and proposing measures for the defence of bourgeois institutions against the fascist menace. The convictions of Toivo Antikainen on charges of treason and murder by the Finnish courts in 1934 offered the communists a suitable opportunity to launch their popular front line. The movement to save Antikainen from execution, which developed in 1935 into a human rights league, and which drew in a number of bourgeois intellectuals, was one of the more successful activities undertaken by the Finnish communists in the 1930s. Although the intelligentsia as a whole remained firmly entrenched in the camp of the nationalist right, there were a number of younger academics, writers and artists who rejected their somewhat introspective and narrow cultural milieu, and not a few were attracted to left-wing activities. John Hodgson has indeed gone so far as to claim that the roots of the post-1944 successes of the legalised Communist

²⁶ Suomen kommunistinen nuorisoliiton jäsenille (1C, microfilm reel 16), People's Archives.

²⁷ Lackman 1985, pp. 449-457, for a fairly extensive summary in English of the activities and achievements of the communists in the countryside during the 1930s.

²⁸ J. Riddell (ed.), *Founding the Communist International. Proceedings and Documents of the First Congress: March 1919* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1987), pp. 174-7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-72.

Party are to be sought in the emergence of left-wing radical groups in the 1930s.³⁰

The revival of the fortunes of Finnish communism, in the form of popular front activities, was not to last, for the police and the social democratic leadership soon moved into action to nip in the bud any such activities. As for the relationship of the party leadership and Comintern, it would appear that funds were cut off in 1937 (though other parties also suffered from a diminution of financial support from Moscow at the same time). If we are to believe Tuominen, the party leadership was accused of leading immoral private lives, and - in the case of the Stockholm-based members - of misuse of party funds. These accusations were handed over to Tuominen, then party secretary, by Georgi Dimitrov, with orders to investigate the charges, made by a young Finnish communist activist called Ahti Liedes. Whatever may be the truth of this episode, it would seem to reveal the levels to which the party had sunk in the estimation of the Comintern.³¹

In November 1939, talks between Finland and the Soviet Union on frontier adjustments broke down. The outcome was the Winter War, which began on the 30th of that month. One day later, a Finnish People's Government was proclaimed in the town of Terijoki, just across the Finnish border, according to Tass, at a meeting of citizens of the town. This government had seemingly been concocted in the last two weeks of November, after the breakdown of talks. The party secretary Arvo Tuominen declined the invitation to head this government, preferring to leave the party whilst in the safety of Stockholm. The government was therefore headed by Kuusinen. Its other members were nonentities, unknown in Finland, and whatever they may have hoped, the Finnish people neither welcomed them or their ally, the Soviet Union (with whom they concluded a mutual assistance pact). Although this government appears to have been something of a last-minute expedient, certain aspects of its stated aims and programme are not without their interest in the light of what was to happen in the Baltic states and eastern Europe.³² As it was, however, the Kuusinen government was quietly abandoned by Stalin at the end of January, when it became apparent that other options were available to bring to an end a war which had proved to be, from the Soviet point of view, a costly mistake.

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Communist International was an all-devouring force which crippled and distorted all who came within its ambit (though it is equally difficult to separate the activities of the Comintern after the mid-thirties from those of Stalin's henchmen). Nevertheless, communist movements managed to survive and to reach new heights of popularity in the immediate postwar years. Why this should be so is still something of a mystery, which cannot simply be explained away by reference to the role of communists in wartime resistance movements against Nazi occupation. In the case of Finland, such an explanation would hold even less water, since the country was never occupied by Nazi Germany and was twice at war with the Soviet Union - on the first occasion moreover the determination to repulse the enemy (even when it claimed to be liberating the working classes from the yoke of White tyranny and repression) was universal. Although there was opposition to the Continuation War against the Soviet Union (1941-1944), and some organisation of sabotage by underground communist groups, this was certainly not on a scale which might conceivably have launched the communists into the postwar world on a wave of patriotic popularity. Finland, in other words, had a rather different wartime experience to that of fascist Italy or occupied/Vichy France. As this essay has attempted to show, the roots of Finnish communism are to be found at home, and not in Moscow, where the party was founded. To have been a "Red", or from a red family in 1918 was enough to place workers beyond the pale in "White" Finland. This did not of itself drive the workers into the communist camp. Indeed, the majority stayed firmly loyal to social democracy; but a good deal of Finnish communism's attractive force flowed from its perceived continuation of a radical, uncompromising tradition of opposition to the established order of the "herrat", now reinforced by the experience of defeat in 1918. Seen from this perspective the Finnish Communist Party became almost a kind of mythical hope, capable of assuming any dimension for those mistrusted by employers and officials, and frequently at the sharp end of police repression. It is a moot point which of three interfering and destructive elements - The Communist International, the Finnish secret police, or the party's own leadership - did most to hamper the cause of radical, uncompromising left-wing socialism in a country where the ground for such a movement was so fertile.

³⁰ Hodgson, *Communism in Finland*, p. 174-5. See also Upton, *Communism in Scandinavia and Finland*, pp. 206-10 for details of popular front activity in Finland.

³¹ Tuominen, *The Bells of the Kremlin*, pp. 147-52, for the details of this episode.

³² The history of the Terijoki government, and its relevance in terms of Soviet tactics and strategy, is the subject of Osmo Jussila's *Terijoen hallitus 1939-1940* (Porvoo-Helsinki, 1985). See also Upton, *Communism in Scandinavia and Finland*, pp. 217-21.