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The Communist Party of Belgium

Since the Belgian labour movement was dominated from the end of the 19th century onward by the dual hegemony of the Social-Democrats and the Catholics, the Communist phenomenon remained marginal throughout the life of the Communist International (CI). The Communist Party of Belgium (*Parti Communiste de Belgique*; PCB) became a factor in social life thanks to the crisis of the 1930s, but did not manage to consummate this impact through the formation of a "mass party" and brief participation in government until after the Second World War.

The Party's relation to the CI thus presents itself in twofold form. As with all the small parties, the CI's role was overdetermining in the actual history of the PCB from this party's very foundation. Furthermore, the moments when the CI concerned itself with this small party in a small country point to the importance ascribed to the events in question.

1. Available sources

The bulk of the available sources for the history of the PCB, though not all of them, have been deposited in the Archives of the Communist Party, and the leadership has agreed in principle that these papers can be freely consulted down to the ones for the year 1960.¹

The institutional records of the PCB for the period 1921-1940 have vanished from Belgium. The former Institute of Marxism-Leninism in Moscow has recently reconstituted, in three series of microfilms, the documents which were regularly sent by the PCB to "headquarters". Among these, therefore are: verbatim reports of meetings of the Political Bureau, of the Secretariat and (very partially) of the Central Committee; resolutions and reports; numerous documents emanating from the Party's district organisations; political and trade-union periodicals; the documents of the Young Communist League (*Fédération des Jeunesses Communistes*; JC); correspondence with the Profintern, the International Red Aid (IRA) and the Workers' International Relief (WIR) organisation. However, these documents do not constitute complete series and there are many indications that the Archives of the CI must have held or must still hold, other documents besides these, emanating from the PCB.

The decisions taken by the CI's organs regarding Belgium, the reports presented and the discussions held are also represented in the microfilms, though with substantial gaps. The period 1939-1943 is particularly poorly represented. Paradoxically, original materials from the period of clandestinity have been preserved.² Some of the founders of the PCB (Joseph Thonet, Ferdinand Minnaert, Charles Massart) have deposited their personal papers, but this collection still has many gaps in it. On the other hand, the collection of periodicals and printed publications of the PCB is very rich.³

The Group studying the sociology and history of Communism in Brussels University has taken deposit of the Bordiga-Perrone correspondence, of Ersilio Ambrogi's correspondence,⁴ and of the papers of Adhémar Hénault, Van den Boom and Vandembossche, founder-members of the Party.

If, contrary to what they say, the various police and judicial organs have preserved files on Communists

¹ At the moment of writing, as a result of the Party's disintegration, the fate of the Archives of the PCB (18-20, Avenue de Stalingrad, B-100 Brussels) is subject to absolute uncertainty. A copy of the microfilms has been deposited with the Group for study of the history and sociology of Communism (*Groupe d'histoire et de sociologie du communisme*) in the Free University of Brussels (Director, Prof. J. Gotovitch, Institut de Sociologie, U.L.B., 44, Avenue Jeanne, B-1050 Brussels).

² Used by the author in writing his thesis: José Gotovitch, "Le Parti communiste de Belgique 1939-1944. Stratégie nationale et pratique locale: la Fédération bruxelloise" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Free University of Brussels, 1988, typescript, 3 vols.).

³ See Milou Rikir, *Répertoire des Périodiques*, 1: *Les Communistes* (Brussels: Archives du PCB, 1986).

⁴ Published in part by Anne Morelli, "Lettres et documents d'Ersilio Ambrogi 1922-1936", *Annali della Fondazione Feltrinelli*, 1977, 119 pp.

for the period, these are in any case not accessible. The files of the police organ dealing with foreigners, who played an essential role in the PCB in the 1920s, do exist but are equally inaccessible.

The only series of published documents relates to the foundation of the PCB.⁵ An almost exhaustive bibliography, appeared in 1980.⁶ Activists' memoirs began to appear in the 1970s. With two exceptions these are not by the leaders of the period and consequently they do not deal with relations with the Comintern.⁷ The only founder-member who published his memories earlier than that, in pamphlet form, does not mention the CI at all - not even his residence of more than a year in Moscow!⁸ A first attempt at a biographical index of about 200 activists of the period will be found in my thesis. The Communist activists are, of course, covered in the *Dictionnaire du mouvement ouvrier belge* which has been in preparation for several years.

Since the 1970s, M.A. theses have been written in a number of universities, and have remained unpublished. Their authors conducted many interviews. Some of these theses are available and can be consulted.⁹

2. An Attempt at Periodisation

The following periodisation combines elements from the country's history with the internal history of the international Communist movement. For the period during which the CI existed I distinguish three phases, which overlap with each other:

(1) 1921-1928: the Bolshevik sect, though its membership varied only between 500 and 900, nevertheless won 1.64% of the votes in the elections of 1925 (34,149 votes) and elected two deputies (out of 187).

(2) 1928-1932: the Trotskyist crisis (congress of 1928); loss of two-thirds of the membership; the Party taken in hand by the CI; entry into social life during the violent miners' strikes of July 1932; election success - 2.81% of the votes, three deputies; recruitment carried on under the slogan "class against class".

(3) 1933-1936: the "class against class" line gradually replaced by the line of the CI's Seventh Congress; the leading team changed at the Charleroi conference in 1935; 2,000 members, then 3,200; failure of an attempt to form a People's Front.

(4) 1936-1939: anti-Fascism; election successes (6.06% of the votes cast); organic unity of the Socialist and Communist youth and student organisations. Emphasis on specific national features (a Flemish Communist Party within the PCB and holding of a Walloon conference). Electoral score maintained in 1939, with only slight fall. Adhesions to the Party level out at 9,500.

(5) 1939-1941: the Pact, the phoney war; absolute loyalty to the CI; though isolated politically, the Party does not lose members.

(6) May 1941-July 1943: formation and success of the Independence Front (*Front de l'Indépendance*). Setting up of the Armed Partisans (*Partisans Armés*) and of underground trade unions. Absolute priority given to national resistance. The illegal PCB has 10,000 members and the liberation brings it 100,000. Elections of 1946: 12.68% of the votes, 23 deputies.

⁵ Claude Renard (ed.), *Documents sur la fondation du Parti communiste de Belgique* (Brussels, 1971) [*Cahiers Marxistés*, special number].

⁶ B. Dandois, "Bibliographie du Parti communiste de Belgique 1920-1979", in *Le Parti communiste de Belgique (1921-1944). Actes de la journée d'étude de Bruxelles* (Brussels: CHEMA, Fondation Jacquemotte, 1980).

⁷ Bert Van Hoorick, *In tegenstroom. Herinneringen 1919-1956* (Ghent, 1982); Jean Blume, *Drôle d'agenda*, Vol. 1: 1936-1948. *Le temps d'une guerre mondiale et d'une adhésion* (Brussels, 1985).

⁸ Joseph Thonet, *Mémoires et souvenirs* (Brussels, s.d., 24 pamphlets). Cf. on this point J. Gotovitch, "Des élèves belges à l'école du communisme (1926-1940)", in Ed. Stols, et al., (eds.), *Montagnes Russes: La Russie vécue par des Belges* (Brussels, 1989), pp. 195-209.

⁹ In particular at the Centre for research and historical studies on the Second World War (4, Place de Louvain, B-1000 Brussels).

3. A Direct and Permanent Relation with the International

From its creation down to 1946 [sic] intervention by the CI not only in matters of strategy but also in the day-to-day work of the PCB was a specific feature of this party's experience.

The Belgian Communist Party was born in September 1921 from the merger, decreed by the Executive Committee of the CI (ECCI) (motion of 13 July 1921) and carried out in the presence of Wilhelm Koenen, of two groups which were very different in nature and origin. It was "a marriage of convenience rather than a marriage of love", as this was put at the Party's first congress, in April 1922, by one of the two leaders, Joseph Jacquemotte, secretary of the Socialist office-workers' trade union and moving spirit over many years of a left-wing minority within the Social-Democratic Party (*Parti Ouvrier Belge*; POB). Coming from the camp of revolutionary syndicalism, and impressed by the October Revolution, he had hesitated for a long time before making the break, because he enjoyed great influence in several of the POB's district organisations, whereas on his departure he took with him only a tiny minority, 730 members. Above all, though, he was very much opposed to the other founding group, which had been enthusiastic in support of the Third International since 1920 and whose leader, War Van Overstraeten had been present at the CI's Second Congress, which had recognised his party - of 200 members! This little sect, which emerged from the Young Socialists and the pacifists of the 1914-1918 war, was remote from the social movement and fiercely opposed to parliamentarism. Koenen got it to accept parliamentarism in principle, without, however, any obligation on its members to become parliamentary candidates. Nevertheless, Van Overstraeten was appointed secretary of the Party, which bears witness to the CI's distrust of former Socialists, who were always suspected of reformist leanings.

Neither the left-wing minority in the POB nor the trade-union activists, nor the militant leaders of the workers followed Jacquemotte into the PCB. Within the "Battalion of 517", as the founder-members of the PCB were called, the opposition between advocates of an "elite party" and those of a "mass party" remained purely a matter of rhetoric, as did the "turn" to the "united front", so far as the 467 regular members recorded in December 1921 were concerned.

In this period of pure Bolshevik agitation, the PCB grew to no very marked degree (from 500 in 1922 to 1,000 in 1928), yet it achieved the election successes mentioned above, which may surprise the reader. A key to the explanation is to be found in the amazing success of the IRA. Also, in 1926, the Profintern paid special attention to a trade-union experience which led some anarcho-syndicalists to argue for world trade-union unity and co-operation with the Soviets.¹⁰ Leadership of the Party remained in the hands of the leaders of its "Left" wing until the moment when "the Russian question" came up.

The fact was that the "opposition" possessed in Belgium - the only such case in Western Europe - a body of active supporters among the rank-and-file of the Party which was also well represented in its leading organs, headed by Van Overstraeten. The PCB therefore became a matter of concern for the CI, which despatched representatives to remain with it. Between 1926 and 1928 these ensured that the Party's Executive Committee kept to Stalin's line, whereas the Central Committee still had an oppositionist majority! The CI then sought support in the *Main d'Oeuvre Etrangère* ("Foreign Workers") (Poles, Yugoslavs, Jews, some of the Italians) and gave this group the right to speak and vote, so as to overturn the majority in the Central Committee. In March 1928 the National Conference, which had thus been "prepared" by the CI's direct intervention, in the person of Jules Humbert-Droz, expelled the Trotskyists - who left taking with them two-thirds of the Party's Belgian members!¹¹

In order to fill the gaps in the leadership while holding to the political line of "class against class", the CI drew upon the cadres of the Young Communist League. There thus came on the scene the first activists who had been trained in Moscow. The "veteran" Joseph Thonet (born in 1882), recalled from the CI to lead the fight against the Trotskyists, was briefly National Secretary in 1929. The youngster Henri De Boeck (born in 1903), who had worked in the CI's Secretariat for the Latin countries since 1926 and was married to a Soviet citizen, was also brought in to struggle against his comrade Van Overstraeten, now a heretic. And the Party's National Secretaryship was entrusted to Marc Willems, aged 22, who had been Secretary of the Young Communists.

¹⁰ See below.

¹¹ Humbert-Droz, who was in charge of the CI's West-European Bureau in Berlin, took part in the decisive meetings of the Central Committee in October 1927 in Brussels. See Siegfried Bahne, *et al.*, (eds.), *Les partis communistes des pays latins et l'Internationale communiste dans les années 1928-1932* (*Archives de Jules Humbert-Droz*, II) (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983).

Whereas it was the two former "class-struggle Socialists" Thonet and Jacquemotte who had led the decisive battle for the CI against the opposition, the CI entrusted the PCB to the two young men above-mentioned. The Party, though practically destroyed, nevertheless made gains in the elections of 1929 (from 34,000 votes to 43,000, or from 1.64% to 1.94%), which shows clearly the purely symbolic character of the Communist vote in the 1920s. Jacquemotte thus kept his seat in Parliament and thereby his position in the Party's leadership, even though the CI regarded him with suspicion and criticised violently the "opportunism" which it saw incarnate in him.¹²

The Party's practical activity pursued its sectarian course for some years yet, mainly directed against the Socialists, and even seemed to bring it to a head. In July 1932 violent strikes broke out in the mines of Wallonia, from which the "reformist leaders" emerged considerably weakened while the Communist activists made gains. The crisis had caused frightful deprivation and the deflationary policy of the Right met with no effective response from the POB, which acted as a break on action. Repression was brutal and bloody. Everything seemed to confirm the correctness of the dichotomic schema of "class against class" and "reformist betrayal." Within a few months the PCB trebled its membership (3,125) and its representation in Parliament through the elections in November (2.81% of the vote). It expanded its cells in the trade unions, the Revolutionary Trade-Union Opposition (*Opposition Syndicale Révolutionnaire*), especially the Revolutionary Miners' Centre (*Centre Révolutionnaire des Mineurs*). From the heart of a Socialist fortress based on the proletariat of the iron and steel industry, a trade-union leader who was already in disagreement with the POB now joined the PCB and won 19% of the votes in his city: Julien Lahaut, a future President of the PCB,¹³ gained a seat in Parliament. The Communist Party thus reaped a plentiful harvest of workers who were disappointed with the activity of the Social-Democrats, together with victims of the crisis and unemployed. Evolution both internal and external was to show, however, that the Party was recruiting from the margins of the organised proletariat, and that both voting for the Party and joining it remained merely expressions of a sort of despair. This was proved by the decline which took place in the following year.

A period was thus beginning in which the CI became aware of the isolation resulting from the sectarian practices of the leadership which it had itself installed but which it now criticised. Jacquemotte re-emerged. Paradoxically, it was an "opportunist" error (to use the jargon of the epoch) that enabled him to get rid of the "sectarians". A crime, indeed, rather than merely an error, since it was an heretical application of the united-front line: the signing of a pact for united action concluded in August 1934 between the JC, the Socialist Young Guards (*Jeunes Gardes Socialistes*; JGS) and, on the insistence of the latter ... the young Trotskyists!

In accordance with its usual tactic, it was through Jacques Duclos, in *l'Humanité*, that the CI denounced this scandal. De Boeck and Willems were directly involved and aimed at. Between September 1934 and February 1935 the CI's Secretariat devoted six sessions to "the Belgian question". De Boeck reported in person and was obliged himself to propose that he be removed from the leadership, along with Willems, for "sectarian politics and rotten liberalism in relation to Trotskyism".¹⁴ Actually, the CI was enforcing a general "turn". It became concrete at the national conference held at Charleroi in April 1935, which fitted in with the position to be taken up by the CI's Seventh Congress. This conference broke with sectarianism and restored to office the man who, in Belgium, symbolised the new policy, Jacquemotte. For the first and last time a public statement was made by the man the CI had charged with the task of carrying out the operation on the spot. A veteran of Béla Kun's Commune, in the CI's apparatus since 1922, and a member of its Secretariat for the Latin countries, Andor Berei (1900-1979) came to Belgium to "rectify" the error committed in 1934. He left after Charleroi but returned in 1937 as the CI's permanent delegate. In a unique and exceptional case, which defines and sums up to perfection the special relationship that existed between the Belgian Party and the Comintern, Berei ("Denis", "Clavel") eventually left Belgium and returned to socialist Hungary in 1946!

Provided with his own apparatus and connections, and with at his disposal a small, select team of Belgian activists, Berei took part in all meetings of the Political Bureau, where he acted as the unchallenged

¹² Maxime Steinberg, "Joseph Jacquemotte. Un certain combat: 1883-1936", *Cahiers Marxistes*, nos. 4, 5, 6, April, May and June 1974.

¹³ Julien Lahaut, arrested in 1941 and deported, was assassinated in 1950, and his killers have never been arrested. See: Maxime Steinberg, "Julien Lahaut," *Cahiers Marxistes*, no. 17, September 1975; R. Van Doorslaer and E. Verhoeven, *De moord op Lahaut* (Louvain, 1975).

¹⁴ Gotovitch, "Des élèves belges à l'école du communisme".

arbiter and permanent source of inspiration. Promoting resolutely the policy of the Seventh Congress, he was behind, or even actually wrote, the "Testament of Jacquemotte",¹⁵ which advocated collective adhesion by the PCB to the POB, which then consisted of a federation of Workers' Leagues (*Ligues Ouvrières*), representing the political branch, trade-unions, co-operatives and friendly societies. The PCB blossomed in this developing prospect of opening-up and fighting against fascism. It also benefitted from the fascination which intellectuals felt in those days for the Soviet Union, and successfully created various classical "Committees" amongst them.¹⁶ The elections of May 1936 testified to this progress. The Party's vote rose to 6% in the country as a whole - 9.4% in Wallonia and 11.7% in the capital. It won 9 seats in the Chamber (out of 202). The Spanish war also enabled the Party to mark itself off from the Social-Democrats, who were then in the Government, and, despite a very slight decline, in a setting where conflict was once more unleashed between Socialists and Communists, the Party succeeded in maintaining its positions in the election of February 1939.

Although Koenen, Henryk Walecki, Humbert-Droz, Ernő Gerő and Ercoli (i.e. Palmiro Togliatti) had, one after another, carried out important though brief missions in Belgium, Berei settled there lastingly, with jurisdiction also over the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg and the Netherlands. In 1939 he was to welcome his "colleague" Fried on his withdrawal from Paris, while maintaining distinct his own channels of communication.¹⁷

Brussels then became the West-European base of the CI, where *Monde* (World), successor to *International Press Correspondence*, was published, and from which activities in France and Germany were carried on: also an important centre for Soviet spying activity (*Rote Kapelle*). Although firmly compartmented, this work made a great appeal, in the nature of things, to Belgian activists at many levels, and that went to strengthen the Party's well-marked "international consciousness". Damage from the German-Soviet Pact was thus very limited.

As for Berei, arrested by chance by the Belgian authorities on 9 May 1940, he was deported to Saint-Cyprien, in the South-West of France, without his identity having been discovered. He escaped and returned to his post in July. He acted as immediate supervisor of the underground Party. Tragic proof of this role was given when, as the sole surviving member of the Party's Secretariat, he rebuilt the leadership with the only member of the Political Bureau who had escaped the round-up of July 1943 which beheaded the Party and the Partisans. Though officially "unemployed", since the CI had been dissolved, he was in fact the most senior cadre of the Belgian Party at large! However strange the fact may seem from the institutional standpoint, but the most natural thing in the world in the eyes of the activists and the leadership, "Clavel" was officially appointed to the Political Bureau by the Central Committee on 22 September 1944, as "having been a member of the Secretariat until now".¹⁸

Indicating thereby what was to come, "Clavel" performed until he left, not so much a directly political role as the essential function of discreet but all-powerful supervisor of the Party's cadres. All the cadres who escaped from the camps had to report to him. It was he who decided against expelling the leadership foursome, which included the General Secretary and two former members of the CI's apparatus, despite the hardly honourable compromise they had agreed to make with the Gestapo when they were arrested in July 1943. And he it was who reconstituted the Party's leadership for the post-war period.

Thus, practically from 1934 until 1946, the Belgian Party was under direct guidance by a delegate of the CI, who himself became totally assimilated by the Belgian milieu, to the point of dissolving into it, while retaining his links with Moscow. Down to 1940, however, this permanent presence did not in the least occlude the role of the CI's Secretariat, before which the Belgian leaders continued to present themselves in order to

¹⁵ This was actually an editorial by Joseph Jacquemotte in *Le Drapeau Rouge* of 18 July 1936. It was called his "Testament" owing to his unexpected death in the following October.

¹⁶ The "Vigilance Committee of Anti-fascist Intellectuals", the "Women's Committee against War and Fascism", the "Juridical Section of the International Red Aid", and the "Friends of the Soviet Union". See below.

¹⁷ On Fried's death in Brussels, see C. Coussement and J. Gotovitch, "Qui a tué Fried?", *Cahiers Marxistes*, no. 110, 1983, pp. 38-40.

¹⁸ Proceedings of the Central Committee of 21-22 September 1944, Archives du Parti Communiste de Belgique (hereafter APCB), papers of Jean Terfve.

discuss programmatic documents and which adopted various resolutions about Belgium.¹⁹ Belgium had always had a limited representation in these international organs of authority. The Third Congress of the CI had elected Van Overstraeten, leader of the Party at its beginning, to the ECCI, but he disappeared at the next congress (December 1922). Jacquemotte joined the ECCI in July 1924 (the Fifth Congress) and remained there till his death, but he was "demoted" to "candidate" status at the Seventh Congress, and not replaced.

On the eve of the War, in the last months of its legality, the PCB had 9,000 members, 122 municipal councillors in 71 communes, 9 deputies and 3 senators. The Party was organised in 33 districts and 341 basic units. It is important to note that when the International was dissolved, despite clandestinity and repression, the Party had recovered a membership of 8,035. The last known figure for the War period, in March 1944, shows 11,308 members.²⁰

4. The Press

The evolution of the Party's press was directly linked with the evolution of its membership. At the start the Party had a weekly paper, *L'Ouvrier Communiste* (The Communist Worker), which had begun publication in March 1920 and printed between 2,000 and 3,000 copies. The Jacquemotte tendency had grouped itself, while still within the POB, around a weekly, *L'Exploité* (The Exploited), revolutionary syndicalist in colour, which started to appear in 1911. Re-launched in November 1918 as the "revolutionary socialist" organ of the minority now regrouped as "Friends of *L'Exploité*" (*Amis de l'Exploité*), it obtained as many as 5,500 subscribers, for a print of about 10,000. After the merger both papers were replaced by *Le Drapeau Rouge* (The Red Flag), which was published by a co-operative society called "The Communist Press" (*La Presse communiste*). Jacquemotte was its editor-in-chief almost from start to finish. A weekly from 1921 to 1923, it became a daily from 1924 to 1929. It was very largely financed by the CI, whose distributor of funds, Hugo Eberlein, handed over the money personally every month, in Berlin, to the paper's administrator.²¹ After the Party's collapse in 1929, however, the CI stopped subsidising it, and *Le Drapeau Rouge* became a weekly once more, until September 1936. The readership was small and the paper was put together by two full-time functionaries. In Flanders an official Party weekly, *De Roode Vaan* (The Red Flag), was published between 1921 and 1937. A multitude of papers produced by local or factory cells proliferated, all ephemeral and very small-scale, but there were no regional organs.

In October 1936, in the wake of the Communists' successes, a decision to re-establish a daily paper resulted in the launching of *La Voix du Peuple* (The People's Voice; the change of title was quite in accordance with the line of the Seventh Congress). This was a big popular paper which an editorial staff of 7 or 8 succeeded in making very lively and which came out in 12,000 copies, with up to 4,000 subscribers. Very serious mistakes were made in the paper's management (Jacquemotte died in the train which he took every day from the printing works in Liège to his home and the Party's headquarters in Brussels) and a proper financial situation was never achieved. On the eve of its being banned, in November 1939, the paper was close to disappearing as a daily once again. At this moment the CI must certainly have intervened. Between November 1939 and May 1941, through ban after ban, the Communist Party brought out every week a newspaper which changed its name each time, and also took over publication of the CI's papers and pamphlets in French and printed the Rote Fahne (The Red Flag).

After a variety of attempts made from July 1940 onward, the central organs of the underground Party appeared fortnightly from January 1941 under the title *Le Drapeau Rouge* - in Flemish *De Roode Vaan*.²² After

¹⁹ Resolutions on the Communist Party of Belgium, Secretariat of the Executive Committee, 16 March 1937, 7 September 1938, and session of 21 July 1939, APCB, Institute of Marxism-Leninism, Moscow, (hereafter: IML) Microfilm, Secretariat of the CI.

²⁰ Gotovitch, "Le Parti communiste de Belgique 1939-1944", pp. 467-468.

²¹ Testimony of Jean Taillard, Jacquemotte's brother-in-law, administrator of "The Communist Press".

²² In May 1940 six issues of *La Voix du Peuple* appeared, duplicated and not submitted for censorship, but not clandestine. Similarly, the Communist Party published from 10 November 1939 a "camouflaged" newspaper, *Liberté* (Freedom), which it tried to continue bringing out till June. Negotiations for its reappearance subject to censorship broke down in early June. Only a "popular Flemish" sheet called *Ulenpiegel*,

February 1937 the Flemish language weekly had, in fact, itself been transformed into *Het Vlaamsche Volk* (The Flemish People), for reasons which I shall examine later. Clandestinity gave rise to publication of regional organs (on a district basis), several of which were to survive for some time after the War.

On its part, the Young Communist League published intermittently, from 1923, *Le Jeune Exploité* (The Exploited Youngster). In 1936, affected by the wind of change, it ventured to bring out a weekly, *Jeunesse Nouvelle* (New Youth), which merged, like the youth organisations themselves, into *JGS-Jeunesse Nouvelle*, from November 1936 to 1940.²³

In public political debate only *La Voix du Peuple*, of all the Party's papers, had really counted for anything, especially in the fight against Belgian fascism (Rexism) and for support to Republican Spain. The papers published previously, with their small circulation, had remained papers with merely an internal Party function.

5. The National Question

Economically and socially, and therefore in terms of politics and religion, Flanders and Wallonia are very different. The industrial revolution cut deeply in Wallonia as a result of the mining of coal there and large-scale industry developed in this region. It was in Wallonia that the Belgian proletariat grew - miners, metal-workers, glass-workers and textile workers, mainly - and there that the Social-Democratic and secularist fortress was established. Apart from some industrial development confined to the towns (the port of Antwerp and Ghent, mainly) Flanders is still largely agricultural and profoundly Catholic. Focusing its attention entirely on the conquest of universal suffrage, which it saw as the key to all problems, Social-Democracy turned only very belatedly towards taking up Flemish demands. These found their justification in the backward and unequal conditions in which the Belgian state, dominated by an exclusively French-speaking bourgeoisie kept the Flemish people. The war of 1914-1918 put a stop to a slow evolution which had begun towards recognition of some Flemish rights. There was thus a glaring imbalance in the distribution of political forces on the two sides of the linguistic frontier.

In its founding manifesto of 1921 the PCB had given honourable place to the "language question", seen as being really a Flemish question. Solution of the problem was put off till a proletarian state had been created. Meanwhile, the Party advocated "class unity with the Walloon working people".

Subsequently the PCB paid attention to the existence of two peoples in Belgium only in terms of repression or even of colonial-type oppression. Thus, through the IRA, the Communists called for an amnesty to be granted to the "activists", i.e. the Flemish nationalists who had collaborated with the German occupiers of 1914-1918 in the creation of autonomous Flemish institutions. One of these men, Jef Van Extergem, was to join the Party when he came out of prison in 1928, and, after a spell at the Lenin School, to play an increasingly important role in its Flemish wing. A motion that was passed at the "World Congress of Students against War and Fascism" held in Brussels in December 1934 was characteristic of the position defended at that time. It included, among the representatives of the "national minorities" who were rebelling "with indignation against the methods of national oppression utilised by the bourgeoisie in power", the Flemish "minority", along with the Catalan, Irish, Palestinian, Jewish and Negro minorities.²⁴

But a turn was made, in this matter as in many others, at the Seventh Congress of the CI. In the context of the People's Front strategy and work for alliances to defend the USSR, the Congress carried out a deep-going revision of the Communist approach to the problem of nationalities. Proletarian internationalism had to put down roots in the national soil. The entire policy of the PCB in this sphere was to take on this character of defensive

edited by the Flemish Communist leaders, was published in Antwerp down to February 1941. See Gotovitch, "Le Parti communiste de Belgique 1939-1944". The two central underground papers have been reprinted: *Le Drapeau Rouge clandestin* (Brussels: Fondation Jacquemotte, 1971) and *De klandestiene "Roode Vaan"* (Brussels: Frans Masereelsfonds, 1971).

²³ *JGS-Jeunesse Nouvelle* remained the official organ of the National Federation of the JGS until 1937. After unity ceased the Young Communists kept the title *Jeunes Gardes Socialistes Unifiés* and the paper.

²⁴ *Compte rendu du Congrès mondial des étudiants contre la guerre et le fascisme, Bruxelles 29-30-31 décembre 1934* (Paris, 1934).

alliance against fascism. Stalinist analysis of the national question would come into play only as ideological justification *a posteriori* for a political option once assumed.

Application of the new line took place at the sixth congress of the PCB in November 1936. The aim proclaimed was now equality and autonomy of the Walloon and Flemish peoples. A Flemish Communist Party (*Vlaamse Kommunistische Partij*; VKP) was formed within the Belgian Party with its own leadership. It came into being on 24 January 1937, with the slogan of autonomy for Flanders within the state of Belgium. It proclaimed its willingness to form an alliance with the democratic nationalists and the Christian Democrats, and symbolically claimed for its heritage the Battle of the Golden Spurs (the victory of the Flanders communes over the King of France) when it called for a great gathering on 11 July 1937. In a resolution devoted to Belgium the Secretariat of the CI assigned to the VKP the task of combating "clerical fascism" in Flanders, in a setting of unity between the Flemish and Walloon peoples.

On the Walloon side awareness of a specific identity took longer to mature and at first affected only literary and bourgeois circles. It was the beginning of industrial decline, fear of being reduced to minority status in the Belgian state and the ambiguities of the policy of independence pursued by Belgium after 1936 that evoked Walloon echoes within the labour and socialist movement. In May 1937 the Party's Secretariat decided to call a national conference of the Walloon Communists, and this met on 8 January 1938. In the preceding days *La Voix du Peuple* carried out an investigation of the Walloon movement. The Communist view favoured a broad union of Walloon democrats to fight for autonomy of the two peoples. The General Secretary of the PCB, Xavier Relecom, a Brussels man, marked out clearly the field of battle: the principal enemy of a "Wallonia free, happy and prosperous" was Hitler's Germany. Neutrality meant war, i.e. another invasion. With the primacy of international considerations thus affirmed, what followed was the statement that Belgian financial capital was destroying the Walloon economy. Salvation would come from a federal and independent Belgium.²⁵

The report presented by the Charleroi deputy Henri Glineux was entitled: "We are proud to be Walloons". If Walloon freedom was in danger, he said, this was due to the policy of neutrality, which was also hostile to the France of the People's Front. Wallonia would enjoy peace only through collective security. He drew at some length a picture of Wallonia's economic decline as victim of Belgian capitalism. The solution was federalism. However, though supporters of the right of peoples to self-determination, the Communists were opposed, in the existing circumstances, to any dismemberment of Belgium that would only be to the advantage of Hitler's Germany. The Party's adoption of the Walloon federalist line was also in accord with its policy of *rapprochement* with the Socialists, who, not accidentally, held a Walloon congress on the same day. Thereafter the PCB's documents, whether completed in Brussels or in Moscow, were regularly addressed "to the peoples of Flanders and Wallonia". *Rapprochement* was sought with the various Walloon movements. In December a delegation attended the congress of the *Concentration Wallonne* and argued for collective affiliations to it by the Communist organisations. As with the "Flemish democrats", however, these attempts at co-operation remained platonic.

It should be emphasised that the Communist presence in Flanders, very small from the outset (76 out of 702 on 15 December 1921) was always to remain in the proportion of one to ten in relation to Brussels and Wallonia. The PCB's electoral successes in the Flemish cantons reached their maximum at 2.27% in 1936 (26,887 votes).

Intensification of the danger of Hitlerite aggression caused a noticeable shift in the line of argument. It was now a question of ensuring the safety of Belgium, as a land of liberty coveted by Germany. A draft thesis on the national question prepared in Moscow for the congress to be held in August 1939 denounced the utilisation of Flemish nationalism by fascists and Hitlerites, but condemned equally the separatists and the Walloon *rattachistes*,²⁶ in the same context of the threat from Hitler. Once again a call went out to oppose any move to break up Belgium.²⁷ This meant a return to giving primacy to the international setting.

Under the occupation the beginnings of clandestine activity once more showed specific features in the two regions. The Flemish party stressed mainly denunciation of a Flemish nationalism perverted by collaboration. The appearance of a newspaper submitted to the censorship which was inspired by Antwerp Communists was

²⁵ *La Voix du Peuple*, 9 January 1938.

²⁶ This was the name given to those who wanted Wallonia to become part of France.

²⁷ Draft thesis on the national question in Belgium, 21 July 1934, APCB, IML Microfilm, Secretariat of the CI.

largely due to a desire not to leave this field to the fascists. When the Party put into practice the policy of the National Front, it was in Liège, around a "Walloon front for Belgian independence" (*Front Wallon pour l'Indépendance*) that it succeeded in assembling the first non-Communist groups. Gradually, however, the theme of national unity came to the top. The Party tolerated no deviation from its demonstrative rallying to the national tricolour. Every trace of regionalism was excluded. The repression strengthened this alignment. For lack of a specific editorial team the underground *Roode Vaan* was now merely a translation into Flemish of *Le Drapeau Rouge*. In the patriotic exaltation of the liberation federalism was officially buried for some time to come.

The Communist resistance during the war nevertheless enabled the Party to put down roots in parts of the country it had never reached before, and its trade-union and peasant organisations made contact with new strata, in Flanders as well as elsewhere. In particular, some intellectuals were recruited. The Party still remained, however, seriously under-represented in Flanders, with the proportion one to ten being maintained after the war as before.

6. The Trade-Union Question

Despite hostile legislation and an aggressive judiciary, trade-union organisation of the labour movement took place in Belgium early and on a large scale. In 1898 a Trade-Union Commission brought together a great number of craft and local unions and effected co-ordination with the POB, of which it soon became a component part. In 1914 it had 120,000 members. In order to confront this Socialist penetration of the working class the Catholic Church set up its own organisations, which were clearly labelled "anti-Socialist" - a class-collaborationist form of trade-unionism which was carefully controlled by the clergy. In 1914 it had only 65,000 members and had failed to get a footing among the industrial proletariat of Wallonia. After the First World War, with the passing of advanced social legislation initiated by Socialist ministers who were in government for the first time, trade-union membership made a gigantic leap forward. The Trade-Union Commission registered nearly 700,000 members. The structure of the organisation also evolved along the line of one trade union for each industry. Iron-and-steel workers, miners and building workers thus formed so many veritable fortresses of trade-unionism (more than 100,000 members) which possessed substantial resources but were careful to manage these with the most reformist prudence and pragmatism. Socialist politicians and top trade-union leaders were two groups that largely overlapped. Within the POB, all through the inter-war period, the trade-union leadership formed the right wing, the one most keen on participating in government. Confronting them, shut behind the doctrine of *Rerum novarum* (but also that of *Quadregismo anno*), the Christian trade unions had a membership no larger than 340,000 in 1939. Here it should be noted that, taking all the organisations together, there was in Belgium a high level of trade-unionisation: from 6.88% in 1910 it increased to 35.05% in 1930.²⁸

Jacquemotte, secretary of the Brussels office-workers' union, belonged before 1914 to the revolutionary syndicalist tradition. A "man of the masses", he brought into the new Communist Party his conception of an open party widely rooted in the trade unions, in contrast to the advocacy by the other branch of the PCB's founders of a closed, elitist Party of cadres. The structure of the POB allowed one to carry on trade-union activity even if one had left the political section of the party. Being still secretary of the office-workers union, Jacquemotte busied himself with developing Communist cells in the various trade-union headquarters. In August 1924 the Trade-Union Commission passed the "Mertens motion"²⁹ which made tenure of any leading position in a trade union incompatible with Communist Party membership. Many expulsions ensued. So as to avoid a split in his own trade union, where he was very popular, Jacquemotte voluntarily resigned from the secretaryship and devoted himself wholly to the "central trade-union commission" of the PCB's central committee.

In June 1925 there began to appear *L'Unité* (Unity), "a trade-union organ of class struggle", the task of which was to fight against expulsions and against reformism in the unions and to provide a platform for struggle for unity, national and international, to be used by the Communist activists in the unions. Actually, *L'Unité* made it possible for the Communists to work with some of the anarcho-syndicalist leaders, chiefly in the clothing and transport industries, and it especially carried on active propaganda for the Soviet unions to be

²⁸ A characteristic feature of the Belgian labour movement, this degree of trade-unionisation exceeded 50% in 1950 and continued to grow after that.

²⁹ From the name of Corneille Mertens (1880-1951), secretary of the Trade-Union Commission, a Socialist senator who was fiercely anti-Communist.

admitted into the International Federation of Trade Unions.³⁰ The Profintern followed this activity closely, and supported it both politically and financially. This support was needed within the Party itself, where Jacquemotte favoured developing what had become the Revolutionary Trade-Union Opposition (*Opposition Syndicale Révolutionnaire*) into a genuine movement of action in the localities. He wished to win over whole sections for defence of concrete demands. He came up against resistance from the majority in the Central Committee on this issue, and had to appeal to the Profintern in order to win his way.³¹ The trade-union question overlapped with the Russian question in the Trotskyist crisis which tore the Party apart in 1927-1928, the opposing camps being made up of the same people in each case. In his fight against trade-union sectarianism Jacquemotte had found support from Julien Lahaut, a metal-workers' leader at Seraing (Liège) who had been expelled from the Socialist union following a prolonged unofficial strike in 1921. Lahaut had brought together revolutionary elements opposed to reformist practices in an independent union called "the Knights of Labour".³² This organisation, to which belonged more than 6,000 iron-and-steel workers and miners, mainly in the Liège industrial region, joined the Profintern and its leader became a member of the PCB's political bureau.³³

The Trotskyist split affected the independent unions, just as the CI's turn to sectarianism led to the withdrawal of Lahaut from the political bureau. Criticising the "trade-union legalism" of Jacquemotte and Lahaut and, along with the CI, turning its back on its previous practice, the PCB set about creating its own trade-union organisation. The Party's weakness prevented it from doing more than establishing a Revolutionary Miners' Union, which included the ex-members of the "Knights of Labour". This union had up to 6,000 members, mainly in Charleroi, Liège and the central region, of whom 200 were metal-workers, and Lahaut eventually agreed to be its President.³⁴ These figures, the highest attained by the Revolutionary Miners' Union, relate, to be sure, to the aftermath of the 1932 strike, which brought a relative rejection of reformism and the beginning of the Communist upsurge. However, the Revolutionary Miners' Union was unable to do more than carry on agitation and its stability declined. What was left of it was sacrificed, very symbolically, to the requirements of the Seventh CI Congress. It was dissolved at the beginning of 1937.

It should also be mentioned that Antwerp competed with Bordeaux for the installation of a branch of the Revolutionary Sailors' Union, with a full-time official from the Transport International.³⁵ From 1938 onward particularly important propaganda activity was carried on from the Sailors' Club in Antwerp, directed towards Africa - mainly what was then the Belgian Congo (today's Zaire) - and then, after 1933, towards Germany, through Hamburg. Subsequently Antwerp served as base for the sabotage actions of the Wollweber organisation.³⁶

³⁰ An immediate consequence of this *rapprochement* was that the leader of the important trade union of transport workers in Brabant received a loan of 800,000 Belgian francs from the Soviet unions for building the "Tramwaymen's House", on condition that this should provide accommodation for various workers' organisations. The IRA and various committees of the "Main d'Oeuvre Etrangère" and Aid for Spain did in fact establish offices in this building, though not without some conflicts...

³¹ Maxime Steinberg, "Joseph Jacquemotte", APCB, IML Microfilm, Profintern.

³² They adopted the name, though not the Freemason-type practices of the Knights of Labour, an organisation of American inspiration which had had some success among the Walloon glassworkers and miners.

³³ Steinberg, "Julien Lahaut".

³⁴ Revolutionary Miners' Union of Belgium, National Secretariat, Jumet, "Note sur le développement de l'effectif de la CRM", 28.8.33, APCB, IML Microfilm, Profintern.

³⁵ Frans Moureau to the Transport CIP (sometimes called the Sailors' CIP), Solianka, Moscow, October-November 1928, APCB, IML Microfilm, Profintern.

³⁶ Cf. Jan Valtin, *Sans Patrie ni frontières* [English edition entitled: *Out of the Night*] (New York, 1941); H. Dankaert and R. Van Doorslaer, "De activiteiten van een kommunistische sabotagegroep in Antwerpen en Rotterdam. De organisatie Wollweber (1933-1939)", in *Opstellen over de belgische arbeidersbeweging*, 1 (Ghent: Frans Masereelfonds, 1979), pp. 129-160.

Thus, the PCB did not substantially succeed in developing its own field of trade-union activity within the tight network in which the Social-Democrats had managed to enclose the working class. The Second World War would enable it to make real progress in that direction. By forming at the outset, from its cells of manual and office workers, underground Committees for Trade-Union Struggle (*Comités clandestins de Lutte Syndicale*; CLS), the PCB succeeded then, in numerous factories and administrations, in eclipsing the old Social-Democratic structures. Through combining the fight for immediate demands with the national struggle, the CLS came to form in 1944 the basis for a broad trade-union movement which was inspired and led by the Communists. They were sacrificed on the altar of working-class unity in 1945.³⁷

7. The Youth

The Young Communist League came into existence soon after the Party itself. Its secretary, Henri De Boeck, figured prominently in the trial, for conspiracy against the security of the state, of 18 leaders of the youthful PCB which was held in 1923. This ended with acquittal of all the accused by the Assize Court, after they had been in custody for five months. The JC organisation, which reproduced the Party's slogans with even greater rigour and engaged mainly in struggles for immediate demands and in anti-militarist activity, was a very lively sect and its development was followed attentively by the Communist Youth International (CYI). I have already mentioned how its leaders were drawn upon to fill the gaps in the Party's leadership after 1928. In 1932 the JC numbered 700: this figure fell to 575 in the following year.³⁸ Their journal came out in some 3,000 copies. The agreement made in August 1934, mentioned earlier, with the Young Socialists and Trotskyists, caused the JC organisation to be subjected, like the Party, to CI tutelage. An instructor from the CYI, Erwin Nowak, came to Brussels, and a Frenchman, Georges Dudach, settled in with the special task of looking after the organisation's journal. A Party functionary who had spent two years at the Lenin School was summoned from Liège to take over the leadership of the JC.

The turn made at the Sixth Congress of the CYI, parallel with that made at the Seventh Congress of the CI, opened the way to collaboration with the JGS which had by now got rid of its Trotskyist members. An organisation with a distinguished record, the JGB was famous for its anti-militarist struggle, its political activism and its position resolutely on the left-wing of the POB, of which it formed part. The crisis of 1930 led to a fourfold increase in its membership. It carried out an extensive mobilisation in support of Henri de Man's *Plan du Travail* and held annual "concentrations" which assembled several tens of thousands of young people. It was more especially in actions against the Belgian fascist groups that the JGS came together with the Communists, in numerous joint demonstrations. A long process begun in 1935 among the students led, after much discussion, to the *organic fusion* of the two organisations as the United Socialist Young Guard (*Jeune Garde Socialiste Unifiée*; JGSU). Solidarity with Republican Spain, including the departure of some members to fight in the International Brigades, was to cement this unity. Since membership of the JGB gave access to POB meetings, the Socialist leadership, who had from the start sought to prevent this unexpected merger, now called the organisation to order. The Communist leaders of the JGSU agreed, with the approval of the Political Bureau, to sacrifice their membership of the PCB on the altar of unity. However, the brief respite this gave postponed only for a few months the break-up of the union of the Socialist and Communist youth organisations, which was without parallel except in Republican Spain, and had never been accepted by some of the Socialist district bodies. Furthermore, overall membership had declined sharply and few traces were left of the lustre of the old JGS. In Brussels and Liège the Young Communists retained the title of JGSU and went into very active underground work under that name. The memory of this brief unity takes in the history of the activists concerned a much bigger place than its historical reality justifies, and accounts for many of the Socialist accessions to the

³⁷ In May 1945 what had become in November 1944 the "Belgian Centre of the United Trade Unions" (*Centrale Belge des Syndicats Uniques*, CBSU) merged with the former Socialist CGTB and a revolutionary syndicalist movement which had also come into existence under the occupation, so as to create (excluding the Christians), a single trade-union grouping, the FGTB, the leadership of which soon fell into the hands of the old Socialist leaders. The unity congress gave the following figures: CGTB (Socialist) 248,259 members; CBSU (Communist) 165,968 members; MSU (revolutionary syndicalist) 59,535; Public services (single union) 51,789 members.

³⁸ APCB, IML Microfilm, Communist Youth International.

PCB which took place under the occupation.

8. "Mass Movements"

It was to bring help "to the famine-stricken in Russia" that there was formed in 1921 a Workers' Relief Committee (*Comité de Secours ouvrier*) which collected food and clothing and sent off ten ten-ton truck loads of wheat. The POB and the Trade-Union Commission participated in this work. An orphans' home in Kazakhstan bears the name of two of the founders of Belgian Socialism.³⁹ Belgian Committees of the Workers' International Relief organisation thus existed before the Party was founded. They distinguished themselves during large-scale strikes by the material support, mainly in food, that they provided for the strikers and, very soon, by temporarily adopting strikers' children. This happened in 1924 in the Borinage and in Liège in 1926. During the great strikes of 1932 over 500 children were found temporary homes. The WIR set up a Children's Commission and organised a holiday camp. It helped to organise hunger marches in 1933 and to form Committees of the Unemployed. In 1934, when numerous strikers were before the courts, it formed, in co-operation with the Revolutionary Trade-Union Opposition, a juridical commission to ensure defence for the accused. Several of its activists were prosecuted after the defeat of the Verviers textile workers who carried on, between February and July 1934, a strike which was supported by the Communists but was eventually abandoned by the Socialist union. At the time of the organisation's congress in 1933, the only one of which record survives, groups scattered all over the country had a total membership of 2,315.⁴⁰ As well as lawyers, doctors who were touched by the miserable living conditions of the families of workers and unemployed were mobilised by the WIR. It was a report by Dr. Paul Hennebert, published in July 1933 by the Social Policy Commission of the WIR - *Comment on crève de faim au Levant de Mons* - that inspired and provided the original script of the well-known film by Henri Storck and Joris Ivens entitled *Borinage*.⁴¹

After 1935 international solidarity and defence of activists before the courts was wholly the responsibility of the IRA, "the living Red Cross of the fighting proletariat", the Belgian section of which was founded in 1926.

This section came very quickly to play an important role both nationally and internationally. Under its President the advocate Charles Plisnier, whose name became well-known when he was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1937,⁴² it soon had a membership which was five times that of the PCB (in eighteen months it made 4,500 recruits), and included trade-union branches, anarchists, socialist activists and Flemish nationalists. It made Jef Van Extergem, who was in prison at that time, its honorary President, and fought for an amnesty for the Flemish collaborators. The right of asylum was another of its themes. It was through this organisation that the first "language groups" were formed, out of which came the sections of *Main d'Oeuvre Etrangère* which proved to be so important in the history of the PCB. It must have penetrated the labour movement effectively since in February 1927 the POB denounced the activity of both the WIR and the IRA and forbade its members

³⁹ This refers to the "César de Paeppe-Defuisseaux" settlement. See Claude Renard, *Octobre 1917 et le mouvement ouvrier belge* (Brussels, 1967).

⁴⁰ APCB, IML Microfilm, Archives of the Belgian section of the WIR.

⁴¹ Le Levant de Mons is the site of a colliery. Author's interview with Dr. Hennebert. See Bert Hogenkamp and Henri Storck, *Le Borinage, la grève des mineurs de 1932 et le film de Joris Ivens et Henri Storck* (Brussels, 1983). - This Belgian commission of the WIR had published in 1931 a pamphlet on abortion.

⁴² Charles Plisnier (1896-1952) became a Communist in 1919, at university. He was a doctor of law, a poet and a journalist. From 1925 he worked for the IRA. As President of the Belgian section he voted with the opposition, but left it in 1929. He devoted himself to literary work and joined the POB. In 1935 he pleaded at the International Writers' Congress in Paris for the release of Victor Serge, and welcomed him to Belgium in 1936. Serge provided Plisnier with the subject matter for *Faux Passeports*, the first literary denunciation of the Stalinist trials, for which, along with the novel *Mariages*, he was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1937. See J. Gotovich and A. Morelli, "Faux Passeports pour la Révolution", in Paul Aron (ed.), *Charles Plisnier. Entre l'évangile et la révolution. Etudes et documents* (Brussels, 1988), pp. 1939.

to belong to either.

That year, 1927, was when the Belgian section of the IRA organised in Brussels the inaugural congress of the League Against Imperialism and Colonial Oppression, which was joined by Barbusse, Nehru, Senghor, Katayama and, among Belgians, by the left-wing socialists Albert Marteaux and Paul Henri Spaak.⁴³ The IRA also succeeded in mobilising large numbers of people for the cause of Sacco and Vanzetti. In April 1927 Charles Plisnier was elected to the Executive Committee of the IRA and also to the International Juridical Bureau.

The IRA was a "homogeneous world organisation", not an "aggregate of national organisations", as Plisnier made clear⁴⁴ when justifying directives regarding the composition of the Belgian section's leadership. This was seen in 1928 when Plisnier, who had gone over to Trotskyism (though he did not follow it in its different successive organisations), protested against his removal from the international executive committee. Since "contamination" had obviously gone too far, the Presidium decreed the Belgian section dissolved.

Its reconstitution, like that of the PCB, took some time. Nevertheless, the section succeeded in bringing together, for the defence of foreigners and worker activists under arrest, a considerable group of lawyers who were not all Party members. Helped by the international organisations, it established a permanent apparatus. But its policy kept strictly to the line of the CI, and between 1923 and 1935 the Belgian section of the IRA vigorously attacked the corresponding Social-Democratic organisation, the Matteotti Foundation. In 1936, despite the change of line, instead of the membership figure of 10,000 its plan of work had aimed at, the Belgian section had only 3,800.⁴⁵ From that time, in fact, the IRA faded before the wave of popular support for Republican Spain. The PCB succeeded in setting up very broad Aid-for-Spain Committees, covering the whole country and constituting one of the factors in its success in elections and in political activity from 1936 onward. As a result both of the turn in policy and of a new division of labour, the IRA was transformed in 1939 into a *Secours Populaire* which made little impact. A *Red Aid*, with its proletarian sound, no longer fitted in with the strategy of the *People's Front*.

The latter was directly embodied in the Vigilance Committee of Anti-Fascist Intellectuals (*Comité de Vigilance des Intellectuels Antifascistes*; CVIA) formed in 1935 on the model of a similar committee in France. It had 1,100 members, including several professors at the universities of Brussels and Liège. Socialists, Liberals, Communists, and non-party persons made up a pressure group, which was markedly "lay" - whole sections of the Grand Orient of Belgium joined - in favour of a Belgian *People's Front*, in the cause of anti-fascism. Although this aim soon turned out to be unrealisable, owing to the objections from both the Liberal and the Socialist organisations, the CVIA devoted itself to supporting the cause of Republican Spain. Bonds created in this campaign survived the split caused by the Soviet-German Pact and fertilised the soil from which would spring the wartime underground *Independence Front*.⁴⁶

Where this small party is concerned, with its base principally in the Walloon industrial region, it is important to emphasise the relative importance of the success it achieved among intellectuals in the 1930s. In the fields of poetry, the theatre and the cinema the Communists played a role in the diffusion of advanced work through the veritably pioneering cultural institutions (*Revolutionary Cultural Association (Association Révolutionnaire Culturelle)*, *Proletarian Theatre (Théâtre Proletarien)*, *Screen Club (Club d'Ecran)*) which they created,

⁴³ An advocate and the leader, along with Albert Marteaux (cf. note 50), of a left-wing faction in the POB which twice published an oppositional weekly (1936-1928 and 1933-1935), Spaak opted definitively for office in 1935. Marteaux, a Socialist deputy and for a time a doctor in Republican Spain, joined the PCB in February 1939 in order to protest against the recognition of Franco by Belgium's Minister of Foreign Affairs... Paul-Henri Spaak!

⁴⁴ Charles Plisnier, Report on the second international conference, Central Committee of the International Red Aid, 7 August 1927, Plisnier Archives.

⁴⁵ International Red Aid, Report on the realisation of our plan of work, October 1935 to the end of March 1936, APCB, IML Microfilm, Belgian section of the IRA.

⁴⁶ Gotovich, "Le Parti communiste 1939-1944".

inspired or supported.⁴⁷

If we add to the above the Friends of the Soviet Union (*Amis de l'Union Soviétique*), formed in 1928, which supported all the rest of these "movements" through the faith in and admiration for the USSR which it kept up, we shall have covered the whole field of the structures which, though not of the "mass" character ascribed to them in the vocabulary of the period, did enable the PCB to try, often with success, to put down some roots in Belgian society.

9. Oppositions and Neighbours: Trotskyism and Social-Democracy

These aspects, which are inherent in the history of the PCB, have been mentioned at many points in this article: let us now consider them systematically.

Born from a split with the POB, the dominant party of the Belgian working class, the PCB followed, down to 1935, a line of consistent confrontation with that party. Being looked upon by the Socialist as "splitters" and "foreign agents", the Communists found, before that date, no echo in the Socialist left, though the latter produced many oppositional groups and organs. The most striking example of this is the Socialist Anti-fascist Union (*Union Socialiste Antifasciste*), a very militant youth organisation, formed as a militia from 1933 onward, which, though hostile to the leadership of the POB, physically resisted Communist "troublemakers" at Socialist meetings.

The POB, which was fiercely anti-Communist, showed itself more welcoming to the Trotskyists. The latter emerged directly from the original Communist Party of War Van Overstraeten who - uniquely in Western Europe - formed a fringe of the labour movement which enjoyed the sympathy of several intellectuals both inside and outside the Party.

Discussion of the question of the Opposition in Russia began in 1925, when the PCB published, one after the other, the arguments of both sides. After 1927 the position of the CI was openly criticised in the Party press. The Party's leaders asked for further information and wished to study the dispute before expressing their view. They asked the CI to suspend the expulsion of oppositionists. At the beginning of 1928 a discussion was officially opened in the PCB on the basis of two opposed reports. By bringing into play the six votes of the foreign section, an equality of votes for both sides was secured in the Central Committee. Jules Humbert-Droz, Otto Kuusinen and Dmitrij Manuilsky then got to work on the members of the Central Committee and in the district organisations, for the election of delegates to the national conference held in Antwerp on 11-12 March 1928. At this gathering 74 delegates supported the CI's line and 34 formed the minority. The latter left the hall to constitute themselves a few days later the *Parti Communiste (Opposition)*. At first the PCB suffered a heavy blow from this development, with many of its cadres defecting. The new group published a weekly in both languages (for the opposition was just as strong in Flanders) - *Le Communiste (The Communist)* and *De Kommunist* - with an initial print of 3,000.⁴⁸

The new group met with many difficulties in getting organised. Many oppositionists left it while it was becoming organised. Nevertheless, it resolved to compete in the elections of 1929. In the country as a whole its lists received 7,500 votes, as against 43,000 cast for the PCB. In 1930, however, a first split occurred in the new group and decline began. Some members joined the International Communist League while others went to Bordiga's group. In 1934 the policy of "entry" divided them, but a certain amount of influence was won among the JGS, which resulted in the "drama" of 1934 in the PCB. In 1936 the Revolutionary Socialist Party (*Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire*) was formed, at last, with nearly 800 members. It had some electoral support in the Borinage, around an activist named Walter Dauge, and a slender basis in Charleroi (metal-workers and miners), together with a fiery opponent of Trotsky, the taxi-driver Vereeken, in Brussels.⁴⁹

But we have now arrived at the period of the CI's Seventh Congress. The Communist Party had found

⁴⁷ On this very important aspect of Belgian Communist activity there exist at present only a few unpublished writings. See, however, the review *Documents* and Paul Aron (ed.), *Albert Auguersparse. La mémoire et l'histoire* (Brussels, 1986).

⁴⁸ Nadia De Beule, *Het belgisch trotskisme. De geschiedenis van een groep oppositionele kommunisten 1925-1940* (Ghent, 1980).

⁴⁹ G. Vereeken, *La guépéou dans le mouvement trotskiste* (Paris: La Pensée universelle, 1975).

a road on which it no longer feared competition from what it could look on as a sect that was similar in conduct and composition to what it had itself been before 1932. Its attention was wholly directed towards the POB, with which it sought alliance. In opposition to the rise of the Belgian fascist parties (21 + 17 deputies in 1936), and under pressure from the CVIA, the Brussels and Liège districts of the POB inclined towards an electoral alliance with the Communists. The national leadership forbade this. The Spanish war was to serve as the decisive test. At the start, solidarity with the Republic brought the two parties closer: joint committees operated and the youth organisations united. From 1937, however, the POB pulled back, protested that the Communists were forming cells in its ranks, denounced the Moscow trials and the Barcelona massacres. Trotskyist sympathies undoubtedly contributed to hostility toward the Stalinists, while fear of being outflanked, the reality of Communist cell-building and attachment to participation in government did what else was needed. Thereafter, dialogue between the two parties consisted of mutual denunciation. The election campaign of February 1939 was a climax when - and this was the only such case in its entire history - the very popular deputy for Brussels, Albert Marteaux, went over to the PCB in protest against the recognition of Franco, and was elected as one of its representatives.⁵⁰ But he was the only defector from the POB. The idea of forming a Left Socialist Party, though toyed with by the CI, came to nothing.

In the history of the Belgian labour movement the PCB is the only Left-wing "faction" which has survived to the Left of the POB. And, a point of great significance, nothing has survived to the Left of the Communist Party. In this fact we can unquestionably see the power and action of the CI.

Translated by Brian Pearce

⁵⁰ Albert Marteaux (1886-1949), physician, municipal councillor in Brussels from 1921, deputy from 1926 to 1929, then from 1936 till his death in 1949. From 1939 to 1949 a Communist deputy, co-founder of the Independence Front. Went to London 1942. Communist minister of public health 1944-1947, member of the Political Bureau 1946-1949.