Against Putschism: Paul Levi's Politics, the Comintern, and the Problems of a European Revolution 1918-1923

Manuel Berduc

Submitted under the supervision of Mary Jo Maynes to the University Honors Program at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, *Summa Cum Laude* in History.

May 11, 2016

Abstract

In this paper I analyze the politics of Paul Levi, who became the leader of the German Communist Party after the deaths of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. Levi has for the most part been neglected in the historiography of the period, but Pierre Broué's and David Fernbach's recent publications in 2006 and 2009 respectively have brought his ideas back into the spotlight in English. I seek to see how his understanding of politics between 1918-1923 make him unique in what I argue is his model which laid the groundwork for a "mass party" of Communism for Europe early on. This model followed Luxemburg's dream for a Communist party able to relate to millions of workers, a careful understanding of the role of insurrection in revolutions, and which would work through a more democratic framework than the one set up by the Bolsheviks under their specific circumstances. In particular, the early role played by the Comintern and its relationship to early European Parties was decisive in their failure to lead and grow early on. By understanding the context of European Socialism at the time and by looking closely at the period during 1919-1921, I will argue that Paul Levi set the foundation for a mass-Party in Germany, and that his political theory helps us understand why a revolution did not take place in Europe after World War I.

Table of Contents

"Now, insurrection is an art quite as much as war or any other, and subject to certain rules of proceeding, which, when neglected, will produce the ruin of the party neglecting them. Those rules, logical deductions from the nature of the parties and the circumstances one has to deal with in such a case, are so plain and simple that the short experience of 1848 had made the Germans pretty well acquainted with them. Firstly, never play with insurrection unless you are fully prepared to face the consequences of your play. Insurrection is a calculus with very indefinite magnitudes, the value of which may change every day; the forces opposed to you have all the advantage of organization, discipline, and habitual authority: unless you bring strong odds against them you are defeated and ruined. Secondly, the insurrectionary career once entered upon, act with the greatest determination, and on the offensive. The defensive is the death of every armed rising; it is lost before it measures itself with its enemies."
-Friedrich Engels

The German Revolution and the Importance of Levi

In the late months of 1923, multitudes of citizens in the newly formed Soviet republic of Russia began to parade, to raise money, and looked with hope toward the future. After years of civil war and economic isolation, many Russians looked west to Germany, convinced that a long-awaited European revolution would soon unfold. At the time, the newly formed Soviet Republic had money reserves for the specific purpose of aiding the revolution, and many of its intellectuals thought of nothing else but of the hopes for a "German October."[1] Pierre Broué described the scene in 1923:

> When the delegates from Germany arrived…they were to find the atmosphere in the Soviet capital transformed…posters [appealed] to young Russians to learn German in order to serve the coming revolution. Passionate meetings were being held every day in factories, schools and universities…Resolutions passed by mass meetings in factories declared that Russian workers were ready

[1] A reference to the Russian "October" Revolution of 1917.

> to give up increases in pay…to help the German Revolution. Units of the Red Army declared themselves ready [to fight]…two special funds were opened, a gold reserve, and a grain reserve.[2]

Grigory Zinoviev, the first leader of the Communist International (also known as the "Comintern") in charge of overseeing the German revolution's success, said of the events unfolding before him in 1923: "…the battle which will quickly decide the fate of Germany is upon us. The proletarian revolution is knocking at the door in Germany: one must be blind not to see this. The coming events will have a *world-historical* significance."[3] Zinoviev, like the majority of Communists at the time looking at Germany, had absolutely no doubt that the time for the revolution had finally come, after numerous abortive revolutionary attempts in Europe since the end of the First World War.

Many in Russia hoped that a European revolution would drag them out of their economic isolation, and would thus allow them to move past the New Economic Policy (NEP), a strategic economic plan to help Russia's isolation, albeit through the reintroduction of capitalism in sectors of the economy. Russians placed the greatest part of their hopes in Germany, a country whose industrial capacities would theoretically have ensured a victory for Communism in the long run by providing the Communist camp with great productive forces, a powerful military, and the world's most "educated"[4] working class. The uprising prepared for 1923 would fail however, being the last of its scope and size for the German left during the course of the Weimar Republic, leaving its participants dumbfounded and confused, having to change the focus of their attention overnight to very different circumstances. It was in part this major shock that would fundamentally change the nature of the Communist movement, would give way to serious

---

[2] Broué, Pierre. *The German Revolution, 1917-1923*. Edited by Ian H. Birchall. Haymarket Books, Chicago, IL 2006. 759
[3] Ibid. 780
[4] Engels, Friedrich. *The Peasant War in Germany*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956. p. 32

restructurings on the left, and would isolate Russia, giving Josef Stalin's theory of "Socialism in one Country" a popularity it would not have enjoyed under different circumstances.

Because of the importance of Germany and Europe in the course of the Soviet Union's policies, understanding this period's history is crucial to understand what later happened in the Communist camp for years to come. However, while there are a variety of important thinkers and activists in this period both in Russia and throughout Europe, this paper will rather mostly focus on Paul Levi, whose political understanding laid an important foundation for German Communists. A figure who lived and worked with the Zimmerwald left in opposing the First World War, who worked closely with the famous Rosa Luxemburg, who became a key member of the Spartacist League, and whose work as the first leader of the German Communist party has been neglected, I argue Levi is crucial in understanding why neither Germany nor places like Italy had a successful revolution after World War I.

During the period after the first revolutionary wave of 1918-1919 and before the last hopes of 1923, Paul Levi's work in the party gave it a direction it would later lose during the rest of the Weimar period. According to Ben Fowkes[5], the Communist party reached its membership peak in January of 1921, right before the disastrous March action prompted Levi to leave the party for good. The KPD[6] would never reach these high levels of membership again throughout the Weimar period, and would progressively lose touch with the workers they sought to represent.[7] Paul Levi's politics followed Luxemburg's insofar as they focused on staying in touch with the

[5] Fowkes, Ben. *Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic.* New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984. p. 205

[6] *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*, or Communist Party of Germany.

[7] Weitz, Eric D. *Popular Communism: Political Strategies and Social Histories in the Formation of the German, French, and Italian Communist Parties*, 1919-1948. Ithaca, New York: Institute for European Studies, Cornell University, 1992. p. 12 Throughout the Weimar period the party lost touch with workers they sought to lead, and became largely a party that represented the unemployed. By 1932 only 11% of the party's members were employed.

masses and making the party into a "mass" party, a term frequently used by Luxemburg to describe what she saw as the most appropriate model for a country with a vast, educated working class. He applied a political program that aimed to listen to the needs of the masses and respond to them, rather than seeing the party as an elite group that would guide the masses by forcefully pushing them forward solely through violence, what he would call "putschism." He set the Party toward a path that understood insurrection as something to be prepared for politically, before militarily. During his brief leadership of the party its numbers grew substantially, and after he left the party's numbers dramatically declined due to the sectarian and forceful policies it pursued. In essence, Levi's importance is due to the model of a party he envisioned, one that would learn from the masses, and in turn guide them toward a revolution by understanding mass consciousness every step of the way.

This paper will be split up into two parts. I will first look closely at the context that gave rise to Levi before and after World War I during the 'November Revolution.' This section will first introduce German Social Democracy through the SPD[8], the party that inspired not only the German but also European working class. This is the period where Levi learned from the tradition of Social Democracy in Germany that created the largest Socialist movement in the world, a period where the Bolsheviks developed their own course toward revolution, where Levi would eventually meet Lenin and join others around the Zimmerwald left in opposing the war, and would help found the Spartacus League along the way. This section will also take into consideration the particular and crucial context in which the Communist party of Germany

[8] *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, or Social Democratic Party of Germany, the first mass Socialist party in Europe, founded and led by a circle close to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

(KPD)[9] was founded, as its birth in the midst of a mass uprising called the "November Revolution"[10] in Germany played an important role in its difficulties in reaching the masses it spoke on behalf of. This, and in many ways the legacy of the SPD past, its relationship to civil society, and its difficulties were factors that the Communists later faced as well. Developing a new left party to counter the strong influence of one of the world's strongest Socialist parties was no easy task, something Levi in particular had in mind.

The importance of Levi, I argue, is to be seen in the early years of the German Communist party until his expulsion in 1921. According to Fernbach, Levi made "no original claims as a theorist," but still remained "a skillful tactician." [11] More importantly for my argument, Levi represents a much larger European tradition of Socialism that disagreed with the Bolsheviks'[12] understanding of European conditions at the time, one whose strategy offered a different path to revolution, one more careful in its understanding of Social Democracy and insurrection.[13] While figures like Antonio Gramsci are well known for their work on Communism in Western Europe, I argue Levi's role is essential in understanding not only the specificities of radical politics in Germany, but also, as we will see with his discussion on the Italian question and the issues of the Comintern, on other parts of Western Europe in this time period, and to understanding *why* revolution did not take place outside of Russia at the time. Levi's contribution in theory may not have been original, but in practice he created a precedent from which Communists could

[9] It is important to note that throughout this period the Communist party was first named KPDs (the S standing for Spartacus League), later VKPD (United Communist Party of Germany), and lastly the KPD. In general I will refer to the party as KPD unless specificity is necessary.
[10] The quotation marks are used to point to the contested meaning of the term "revolution," as many people in this time period (in our case the Communists especially) and after saw the events that took place in Germany during this time as a failure. While many political and cultural changes took place during the Weimar period, for Communists and many former Social Democrats the changes did not go far enough. This will be discussed below.
[11] Fernbach, David. *In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Writings of Paul Levi*. Leiden: Brill, 2011. p. 3
[12] More specifically the Comintern.
[13] Lindemann, Albert S. *The Red Years: European Socialism Versus Bolshevism, 1919-1921*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974. This book offers an in-depth analysis of the various conflicts in the Italian, French, and German left before and after World War I.

understand how to work within a country with a highly educated working class, and a massive one at that. More importantly, he was consistent in rejecting any simplified understanding of insurrection, and therefore revolution. Through his application of political principles, Levi created an outline for Communist political practice that emphasized careful understanding of politics toward a "mass party," leading to an effective albeit short-lived effort to build a successful popular communist party in Europe.

A Note on Sources

A brief clarification on the sources used for this paper. First, it is important to mention that most of the information on Paul Levi comes either from Broué[14] or Paul Levi's own words in Fernbach's[15] book. Other sources include Angress[16] and Carr[17], though their focus on Levi is secondary. Charlotte Beradt's[18] work on Levi is considered, but seeing as the most important works for this paper are translated into English in Fernbach's book, only the different interpretations of the authors in their introductions are important. For the history of Social Democracy before World War I, Carl Schorske's[19] book is the main source, with references to Tuchman[20] used for a broader European context. As for historical sources, the ones that focus on the period 1917-1923[21] are given preference over the ones that swallow up this period within the framework either of the Weimar Republic or the November Revolution of 1918, due to the fact

[14] Broué op. cit.
[15] Fernbach, op. cit. 2011.
[16] Angress, Werner T. *Stillborn Revolution; The Communist Bid for Power in Germany, 1921-1923.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963.
[17] Carr, Edward Hallett. The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923. Vol. 1. London: Macmillan, 1953. and Carr, Edward Hallett. The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923. Vol. 3. London: Macmillan, 1953.
[18] Beradt, Charlotte. Paul Levi: Ein Demokratischer Sozialist in Der Weimarer Republik. Frankfurt Am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969.
[19] Schorske, Carl E. *German Social Democracy 1905-1917, The Development of the Great Schism*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA. 1985.
[20] Tuchman, Barbara W. „The Death of Jaures" in *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890-1914*. Random House: New York, New York. 2014.
[21] Broué and also Harman, Chris. *The Lost Revolution: Germany 1918 to 1923*. London: Bookmarks, 1982.

that details are lost in accounts dealing with longer periods, such as Fowkes'.[22] For the *Freikorps* movement, Waite's[23] book is the main source used. Lastly, for the Comintern, a variety of sources are used to make the overall picture of the International, especially Caballero,[24] Hallas,[25] and Riddell[26] accompanied by with details from Fernbach, Broué, and Carr.

SPD before WWI

After World War I, a wave of economic crises and social unrest shook the whole of Europe. In Russia, this process would culminate in the first-ever socialist revolution, while in Germany an equally radical solution would ultimately fail in setting up a Communist government. By that point, German socialist activists had developed the largest party of its kind in the world, but when 1918 came the old SPD was no longer interested in revolution, seeing events taking place in Russia as a dictatorship against democracy. In 1918, activists in Germany left the SPD to form the KPD, a Communist Party to bring revolution to their own country. Communist revolutionaries however soon realized that Western Europe's conditions were very different, and that building a Party for revolution in competition with Social Democracy's strong influence over the working class would need a whole new perspective.

In 19th century Germany, the SPD's influence grew in what was a rapidly developing country. Decades after the 1848 mass demonstrations in Europe, two groups[27] would form of the

---

[22] Fowkes, Ben. *Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic.* New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984
[23] Waite, Robert G. L. *Vanguard of Nazism, The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918-1923.* Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press, 1952
[24] Caballero, Manuel. *Latin America and the Comintern 1919-1943* Cambridge University Press 2002 (1986).
[25] Hallas, Duncan. *The Comintern: A history of the Third International*. Chicago, Illinois. Haymarket Books, 2008.
[26] Riddell, John. *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!: Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920*. Vol. 1. New York, New York: Pathfinder, 1991.
[27] 'Eisenachers' and 'Lasallians'

Socialist Party of Germany in 1875.[28] Three years later they would experience their first major challenge, as Otto von Bismarck attempted to squash the Party with anti-Socialist laws in effect from 1878 to 1890. Nevertheless, the Party survived, and they rapidly grew in popularity until the start of World War I, usually receiving the most votes in Parliament, but being prevented from exercising any real power due to the Prussian three-class voting system, which gave disproportionate influence in politics to those with paying the highest property taxes.[29] In spite of hardships, Socialists came out stronger than ever in 1890, with a far more radical political program. Karl Kautsky's[30] Erfurt program in 1891 replaced the Gotha program which had until then guided the Party's politics, with the new program proclaiming the eventual fall of Capitalism. Nevertheless, as Schorske notes "the Erfurt program was designed for a non-revolutionary period, one in which the working class was growing in numbers and political self-awareness, but was still too weak to make a serious bid for power."[31] Many of its older members experienced work under illegality, maneuvering around Bismarck's laws intended to stifle their growth and influence, but a new generation, joining the Party *en masse* brought with it a different perspective.

In contrast with the early underground development of the Socialists from 1878-1890, the period from 1890-1914 not only meant greater freedoms for the party, it also meant working under new conditions. On the one hand, trade unions now became a strong force independent of the SPD, and with growing influences over the Party, the SPD leadership was forced to learn to negotiate its politics for revolution. Many working people saw the need for practical measures,

---

[28] At this time the Party adopted the Gotha Program, which received a harsh criticism from Marx in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*.
[29] Fulbrook, Mary. *A Concise History of Germany*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, MA. 1991. 125-126
[30] Also known as the 'Pope' of Socialism for his important role in writing numerous works popularizing Socialism, and for his leading role in the SPD.
[31] Schorske, Carl E. *German Social Democracy 1905-1917, The Development of the Great Schism.* Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA. 1985. p. 6

and while the SPD was their Party, the revolutionary rhetoric did less for them than what trade-unions could offer. As Schorske notes, unions "provided what the party could not directly give: a measure of economic security in the here and now. Tangible benefits exerted a more immediate attraction on the working man than the more rarefied ideas of socialism, especially after the end of Bismarck's overt persecution. Thanks to the vigor of capitalist development, and to the skill of the unions in exploiting the possibilities it offered, trade-unionism acquired a momentum and a *raison d'etre* of its own."[32]

A debate between "centralist" and "localist" unions also developed in this time period as these grew in number and size throughout the 1890's, over time surpassing the size of the SPD in influence.[33] The 'centralists' corresponded to those that sought to centralize the trade union movement in Germany and whose politics were generally more practical, avoiding conflict with employers and seeking cooperation. The 'localist' unions however were radical and strong in big cities, and sought to resist the "establishment of a paid bureaucracy…as tending to create vested interests which would militate against vigorous prosecution of the class struggle."[34] Their struggle against the bureaucracy was correct insofar as it anticipated a growing reformism that would influence the party. This new bureaucracy "viewed its successes not, like the party radicals, as part of the process of the organization of the proletariat for revolution, but as triumphs in and for themselves, to be further expanded within the framework of the capitalist order."[35] The localists would lose over time against the centralist tendency, but the radical politics of those local unions would reappear as the old order fell in 1918.

[32] Ibid. 13
[33] Ibid. 8-16
[34] Ibid. 10
[35] Ibid. 15

On the other hand in this period Germany saw unprecedented economic growth, and those who lived through it did not clearly live to see the cyclical crises of Capitalism Marx[36] spoke of. This is to say that many new workers and Socialists did not necessarily see capitalism as a system to overthrow, and if they did, it was primarily in theory and not in practice. In fact, many workers instead saw their standard of living improve rather than decline, making the party's Maximum program[37] more a utopian abstraction than a visible necessity. In part due to these favorable economic conditions, revisionism was on the rise both in theoretical and practical terms, represented by Bernstein's writings and the influence of unions on the party respectively. Edward Bernstein was an older member of the SPD, whose stay in England and contact with the Fabian socialists isolated him from the party's inner workings and the experience of state repression. He argued that the phenomenon of Capitalist economic crisis was over, and thus that the party should stop focusing on revolution and radical solutions. Rosa Luxemburg replied to his argument in *Evolutionary Socialism* with her famous pamphlet *Reform or Revolution*, tearing apart Bernstein's argument, and arguing in favor of continuing revolutionary principles, as she correctly predicted that Capitalism had changed as much as Bernstein believed. As the years went by, the union bureaucracy of the party's right wing gained more power, and the radical left, true to the theory of an older generation of Socialists, progressively lost its influence. As increasing tensions grew among major European powers, Socialist parties lost interest in

[36] In the 19th century a series of economic crises took place in Europe, which, contrasted with the unprecedented growth before World War I, made some believe something fundamentally different was taking place. Marx observed many of these events in the 19th century, and in *Das Kapital* concluded that Capitalism had a tendency toward crisis.
[37] Ibid. 6. The Erfurt program was written to bridge a compromise between the various factions of the party. The 'Minimum Program' consisted of reforms which would allow the Party to grow and for the working class to reap in benefits. The 'Maximum Program' consisted in the eventual goal of Socialism, which they thought would come about throw these reforms, allowing the Party to grow over time and take political power: "…the Erfurt program provided a basis of compromise. To the revolutionaries, the idealists, it said in effect, "Patience! The time is not yet…To the reformists...it said "Reforms are the first task. Pursue them. But remember, you must fight for them."

orthodoxy[38] and gave way to patriotism, making the anti-war rallying cry of Jean Jaurés[39] and other leading anti-war Socialists unsuccessful in stopping the First World War.

While in hindsight World War I seems inevitable, for many Socialists at the time the events of 1914 came as a surprise. In the years leading to the war, two major congresses of the Second International[40] released statements condemning war. Both at the 1907 Stuttgart and 1912 Basel conferences the Socialist International, the hundreds of activists gathered approved resolutions stating that, if war broke out, all parties would work for its "speedy end" and "arouse the population…to hasten the overthrow of capitalist rule."[41] However, when 1914 came, their prior statements were harder to live up to. The SPD, while having originally issued a manifesto calling for opposition to the war on July 25th, by August 1st changed its stance and its deputies voted to support the effort, leading Lenin to believe the *Vorwärts*[42] article he received had been forged.[43] It was without a doubt shocking, considering the rhetoric of the original manifesto of July 25th stated that the "class conscious workers of Germany, in the name of humanity and civilisation, send up a strong protest against the war-mongers…Not a drop of the blood of a German soldier can be sacrificed to the thirst for power of the governing group in Austria and imperialist appetites for profit."[44] Within a few weeks however, the majority of Socialist Parties helped their governments begin one of the bloodiest wars in history, with a few exceptions.[45] The many years of peace made the reality of war abstract, and many believed they had to defend their countries

[38] That is, the orthodoxy of older generations that read Marx, Engels, and maintained the need for revolution.
[39] Tuchman, Barbara W. „The Death of Jaures" in *The Proud Tower: A Portrait of the World Before the War, 1890-1914*. Random House: New York, New York. 2014.
[40] The international organization of Socialist Parties that existed from 1889-1916.
[41] Hallas, Duncan. The Comintern: A history of the Third International. Chicago, Illinois. Haymarket Books, 2008.
[42] One of the central newspapers of the SPD.
[43] Broué op. cit. 44-45
[44] Ibid. 44
[45] The Italian Socialist Party 'PSI,' discussed below, was an important exception.

against invasion. Likewise, the revolutionary thought of many party leaders did not necessarily correspond to the thoughts and feelings of the various Socialist Parties' rank and file members.

After the fact, many tried to understand how the party's revisionism was able to take control and lead the country into a highly destructive war. Grygory Zinoviev, in his *The Social Roots of Opportunism*,[46] argued that the change in the composition of the SPD from predominantly workers to a greater proportion of "petty-bourgeois" elements with different interests created an ever-increasing 'opportunist' group within their ranks. This is to say that he believed that a greater number of members within the Party were no longer factory workers, but bureaucrats, or professionals who did not understand the working conditions of industrial proletarians. Broué cites another work by Zinoviev[47], where he looked at statistics from the SPD in 1907, showing how by 1914, only 14.9% of members in the SPD were labeled "workers" by the party itself. This meant that for him, the rest of the members were now lawyers, businessmen, and bureaucrats, who according to Zinoviev did not have worker interests in mind.

For Schorske[48] however, the SPD's decision to support the war effort was completely consistent with the revisionism that had been developing for decades. As Barbara Tuchman's[49] account describes, the Social Democrats who strongly opposed war were in a minority. The Party ties to the unions made it difficult for Party members to say anything that could threaten their popularity. There was an all-or-nothing attitude toward the question of war, as different Socialists in different countries were afraid that if only one country's workers went on strike, it would allow the opposing country to defeat them, win, and most likely invade. The strike would

[46] Zinoviev, Grygory "The Social Roots of Opportunism" in *War and the Crisis in Socialism*. Marxists Internet Archive. Accessed October 14th, 2015. https://www.marxists.org/archive/zinoviev/works/1916/war/opp-index.htm
[47] Broué op. cit. 22
[48] Schorske op. cit. 285
[49] Tuchman op. cit.

have to be international, or there would be no strike. These fears would show themselves on August 4th of 1914, when the Party voted for war credits. It would take until December of that same year until opposition became visible with Karl Liebknecht's[50] memorable and lone protest vote. This would create the foundation for the eventual creation of the Independent Social Democratic Party, and eventually the Spartacus League and the KPD.

The Anti-War Movement and the USPD

What would become the German Communist party (KPD) had its origins in the Spartacus League, and its origins in turn lay in opposition to German involvement in World War I. After Karl Liebknecht decided to vote against the war in December of 1914, opposition slowly increased within party ranks of the party. The problem's roots were in the "Party discipline" policy of the SPD, a policy which forced its members to vote in accordance with the majority after discussions, in an effort to avoid splits in the party. This policy meant that in 1914 even the radicals of the Party voted for the war credits that they in principle stood against. It took the escalation of the war, the high numbers of victims, the increased repression within Germany and additional escalating factors to finally convince Party members to break Party discipline. It was the Zimmerwald conference of 1915 which first attempted to organize international opposition to the war.

The Italian branch of the Second International, the PSI[51], called for this meeting to try and begin an organizing effort in opposition to the war. The conference was held in the town of

[50] On December 2nd of 1914 Karl Liebknecht famously broke party discipline and voted against war credits, setting off a precedent that would eventually lead to a split in the party, and later to the foundation of the Spartacus League. He would become, along with Rosa Luxemburg, one of the main two leaders of the Communist Party in Germany (KPD) before being murdered along her in January of 1919 by the *Freikorps*. Karl Liebknecht was also the son of Wilhelm Liebknecht, who was one of the founders of the SPD.

[51] 'Partito Socialista Italiano'

Zimmerwald in neutral Switzerland from September 5th to the 8th. This conference, while originally small, would begin organizing forces which would later create the first Communist Parties after the war and which led the efforts against the Second International. As attendees grew in numbers, differences became evident between those who sought to move past the Second International to create a third, and those did not see a split as necessary. Unlike Lenin, who from the very start of the war was convinced of the need to create a new International of Socialists separate from the "corrupt" Social Democrats, many radicals such as Luxemburg spoke against splitting the Party, even as late as 1917.[52] Along with this difference, a majority rejected Lenin's proposal to turn "imperialist war into civil war" against each country's capitalist class.[53]

Nevertheless, Lenin was not alone in his ideas. After his lonesome protest in 1914, others began to joining Karl Liebknecht in protesting against the Party's policies. On March 20th of 1915, Otto Rühle joined him in voting against the war, and other members walked out before the vote in protest.[54] During this time, Liebknecht, despite being in his 40's, was called to the front on numerous occasions to prevent his political activity. None of this stopped his organizing activity however, and by May of the same year Liebknecht was confident enough to start publishing propaganda amongst soldiers, in particular a pamphlet entitled *The Main Enemy Is At Home!,* where he argued, similar to Lenin, that "the main enemy of the German people is in Germany: German imperialism, the German war party, German secret diplomacy. This enemy at home must be fought by the German people in a political struggle, cooperating with the

[52] Broué. op. cit. 71
[53] Hallas op. cit. 20
[54] Broué op. cit. 74

proletariat of other countries whose struggle is against their own imperialists."[55] Throughout the rest of the year, Liebknecht's activities began to worry the Party, who feared repression from the German government. In Berlin, a minority within the party began publicly opposing the war, as was the case in cities like Bremen, Leipzig, and Halle.[56] Due to the increasing repression on the part of the government and the SPD against its own activists, many went underground, and decided to start publishing a journal called *Die Internationale,* a group with connections to Zimmerwald, using its articles to write against the war.

In January 1916, an anonymous letter began circulating signed "Spartacus," giving the latter Spartacus League its name. Those involved in writing these letters included Paul Levi, Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin, Franz Mehring, Karl Liebknecht, and many others who would later form the central committee of the Spartacus League and the first Communist Party of Germany. Although *Die Internationale* and these letters were censored in various ways by the government, this did not stop the group from successfully organizing protests. Many actions had already taken place throughout 1915 and early 1916 to protest food rations at the time. Broué describes how only in the first few months after the war started, food became scarce: "Soon everyone's earnings, even those of skilled workers, tended towards a 'minimum diet', which itself was gravely endangered by rationing and shortages. Bread was put on ration on 1 February 1915. Next, it was the turn of fat, meat, and potatoes…[Food only] provided one-third of the necessary calories."[57] On one occasion, 1,000 women demonstrated May 1915 in front of the Reichstag for peace. In June of the same year, a protest within the party gathered 750 activists, newspaper editors, and trade unionists to publish a text condemning the executive of the Social

[55] Liebknecht, Karl. "The Main Enemy Is At Home!" Marxists Internet Archive. July 1, 1904. Accessed April 16th, 2016. https://www.marxists.org/archive/liebknecht-k/works/1915/05/main-enemy-home.htm
[56] Broué. op. cit. 77
[57] Ibid. 59

Democratic party. The *Internationale* group, growing in confidence, called a protest against the war on May 1st 1916. When this action prompted Liebknecht's arrest, 55,000 protesters gathered to protest on his court day in June. Rosa Luxemburg and Clara Zetkin were other anti-war activists thrown in jail at this time, but this did not stop brewing tensions, as repression nevertheless had its limits.

The growing discontent within the SPD's rank and file due to increased repression within the Party[58] culminated with a split in 1917. In early January of that year a conference of opposition SPD activists was held in Berlin to discuss the protection of party 'minorities' who sought to defend activists from expulsion prevent regional newspapers from being seized and shut down. The executive of the party reacted strongly to what it saw as a 'factional' bloc within the party, and purged 'minorities' in the party and even 91 local organizations.[59] With this top-down split of the party, those activists who were expelled met during Easter to form the Independent Socialist Democratic Party (*Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) also known as the USPD, with 170,000 staying with the SPD and 120,000 joining the new organization. The Spartacists would compose the left wing of this party until their split in 1918.

In 1917, the large public protests and strikes took place. The first stage of the Russian revolution in February gave the Spartacists hope that they were on the right path. In the early months of the year work stoppages were reported in various cities in Germany, so the Spartacus League took the chance to spread pamphlets informing workers about the political changes in Russia, and to push for the same sorts of strikes in Germany. Sporadic small strikes took place,

[58] In particular, the censorship of regional SPD newspapers critical of the war effort.
[59] Broué op. cit. Ibid. 79

but nothing substantial took place until April 15th, when it was announced that the weekly bread ration would be cut from 1,350g to 450g. The following day, a strike of 400,000 workers took place. The following months saw workers and Socialists becoming bolder in their efforts against the war, and the SPD, along with the army, found themselves in a position where they could no longer contain mass discontent.

November Revolution

On October 28 of 1918, orders were given to prepare ships to go to sea in the northern German city of Wilhelmshaven. There were rumors that the German General High Command was preparing to trigger another battle in the Northern sea in a last-ditch effort to have a stronger bargaining position with the Allied powers, who, in peace talks, were seeking to treat Germany as Germany treated Soviet Russia in the Brest-Litovsk[60] treaty earlier that year. As sailors heard the news, panic spread, and revolts took place on ships. Fearing severe repression from authorities, the sailors organized a street demonstration on November 3rd, during which 9 soldiers were killed by a patrol and 29 were wounded. This severe event emboldened the already rebellious soldiers and sailors, who then formed and elected a council 20,000 strong to represent them.

As news of repression spread to other German cities, the USPD and the SPD[61] called for workers councils to be formed in support of the sailors. Councils were formed throughout numerous German cities and took over their local governments, many of them armed. However, one city remained immune: Berlin. Seeing the inertia, Spartacists attempted to call for a strike,

[60] The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed between Soviet Russia and Germany on March 3rd of 1918. It was notoriously harsh against Russia, and forced them to give Germany huge sums of land and money under threat of a continuation of the war on the part of the Germans.

[61] Broué and Harman both persuasively show that the actions of the SPD at this time were taken to avoid the spread of radical militancy and to control the councils movement.

without success. Nevertheless, the SPD leadership realized that if they did not act, they would be overwhelmed by the workers they were meant to represent in the capital. They asked the Kaiser to abdicate voluntarily, so as to give the impatient masses some form of sign that a political change would take place, and in the hopes of preventing further escalation. On November 8th the Spartacists again called for a general strike, this time with a huge response. Soon after, other USPD members joined and helped spread pamphlets throughout Berlin. As workers heeded the call, the military High Command attempted to use soldiers to stop the revolt, but this instead led the soldiers to fraternize with the striking workers. The Spartacists, along with the Revolutionary Shop Stewards[62] took the initiative and told protesting soldiers to take over the imperial palace and the police station.[63]

By the following day the situation was out of the SPD's control, leading Prince Max von Baden, the Prime minister, to designate SPD leader Friedrich Ebert as his replacement. However, something had to be done about the masses outside, who were approaching the Reichstag and other governmental buildings in massive numbers. The SPD then called for a general strike, five hours after it began.[64] In these few hours not one but two German Republics were proclaimed, one by Scheidemann of the SPD at the Reichstag, and another[65] by Liebknecht at the imperial palace. For Liebknecht, this was the beginning of the revolution. For the SPD leadership however, this was an early attempt to put a stop to it. Harman tells just how reluctant the leadership was, minutes before and after the two Republics were founded: "When one of the huge columns of workers and soldiers marched up outside the Reichstag, deputies rushed to one

[62] A radical group of unionists from Berlin. Many of them would later join the KPD.
[63] The revolutionaries placed Emil Eichhorn at the head of the police, whose later removal in 1919 triggered the Spartacist Uprising.
[64] Haman op. cit. 46
[65] Specifically, a 'Socialist' republic.

of Ebert's colleagues, Scheidemann, who was taking a meal in the Reichstag restaurant, and begged him to speak to the crowd and calm them down. Reluctantly, he left his soup and went to one of the balconies…Scheidemann's colleagues were not exactly happy with his efforts. Ebert screamed at him afterwards: 'You have no right to proclaim the republic.'"[66] Allegedly, Ebert actually wanted a constitutional monarchy,[67] but the revolution moved too fast to make these plans a reality.

Huge changes were rapidly taking place, and the councils now governed Germany. This was one of the first clear signs for revolutionaries that they faced a revolutionary situation, and not just an uprising of any sort. Why, though, were the councils so important to revolutionaries? For Socialists who looked to Russia, a large council movement in Germany (whose size grew to the point of people calling this a *Räterepublik*, or a "council republic") was seen as the equivalent of the Soviets (or workers councils) in Russia, and were in many cases modeled after them. These forms of organizations claiming to rule on behalf of workers, soldiers, and others represented a direct challenge to parliamentary power, which revolutionaries hence saw as a challenge to bourgeois power. Pierre Broué dedicates a section of his book to the question of the councils, and calls these months "The Period of Dual Power,"[68] referring to the period until the parliamentary elections when a council government ruled in Germany alongside the Reichstag. For revolutionaries, the spontaneous spread of councils seemed to show that people were moving further left and were following the example of the Russian Revolution. The council movement meant more direct democracy, as when councils took shape within factories[69] workers would

[66] Harman op. cit. 46
[67] Waite op. cit. 2
[68] "Dual Power" is a term used to describe a situation where two competing governments exist in a country. In this case Broué uses it to compare Germany and Russia during their revolutions, as two bodies competed for power.
[69] Councils also represented lawyers, doctors, soldiers, and many other sectors of society, but for the revolutionaries the workplace was the center of struggle for revolution.

vote directly for representatives, which in turn served as a strong challenge the SPD-dominated conservative unions whose structure was far less democratic, and who regularly worked with the industry and business leaders of the country.

Broué explains in detail what happened between November of 1918 and the parliamentary elections in January of 1919. Throughout all of Germany, council governments were set up during the days after the Kiel mutiny. Many Independent Socialists from the USPD and Spartacists quickly pushed for the formation of these councils early on, and thus found themselves in key positions of power in cities like Berlin, Munich, Chemnitz, Hamburg, and other major cities where the creation of these provisional governments now existed. Broué briefly compares this situation with Russia in 1917:

> In reality, the chances of a German soviet revolution appeared on November 1918 to be more serious than those of a Russian soviet revolution in February 1917. To be sure, the councils in all the workers' centers were divided between the two influences of the SPD and the USPD. In Russia, the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries were in the majority across the country, including the Petrograd Soviet. In Germany, on the contrary, the revolutionaries, left Independents, International Communists and Spartacists, partisans of the dictatorship of the proletariat, led some of the most important councils…The essential difference between the German councils in November 1918 and the soviets in February 1917 lies in the place which the old workers' parties and trade unions occupied in them. This is explained in the first place by the different traditions in the two countries, which in Russia saw soviets become the form of organisation *par excellence*, whilst in Germany the political and trade-union organisations had been for a long time a permanent and determining factor in working-class life.[70]

While the comparison is difficult in two such different countries, what is important to understand is that many in Germany were creating councils precisely *because* of the Soviet

[70] Broué op. cit. 158-159

government, whereas in Russia many of these Soviets were spontaneous. In Germany the Spartacists and Left Independents[71] initially caught the SPD government and the military by surprise, and thus were also initially in a position to move forward with the revolution. However, Broué's point about the trade unions is important, as their influence, tied with the SPD's massive apparatus, made it difficult to contest their hegemony through councils.

A key date for the months to follow was November 10th, the day the Council of People's Deputies was formed in Berlin, the institution which served as the Executive of councils nationwide. This was a decisive day in which the rules for the national administration of council governments was to be decided. The SPD, anticipating the 'divisive' rhetoric of the leftists, printed 40,000 pamphlets on November 9th in anticipation of the meeting, calling for no "fratricidal struggle."[72] The tactic of the SPD was to put forth a message of 'unity' against the messages of the left, which pushed councils as the one and only form of government.[73] The SPD managed to spread its propaganda quickly so as to ensure that soldiers would see it as a question of "the people" against the councils, and proposed to call for a parliament. This was a success, as while Liebknecht spoke that day he was regularly interrupted with chants of soldiers shouting "Unity! Unity!" as well as armed threats from the audience.

Then came the decisive vote, as members chose how they would be represented in the executive. The first idea was to have 9 delegates for soldiers and 9 for workers. Many of the USPD left, along with the Spartacists, pushed for greater representation among the workers, as they in the factories they overwhelmingly had stronger support than the SPD. However, the

[71] The leftists within the USPD, many of whom saw the Russian Revolution as the model to follow in Germany. Ernst Däumig is one of the most well-known of these activists. Many of these would later split with the USPD and help form a larger Communist party in 1920. See discussion below on the VKPD.
[72] Broué op. cit. 153
[73] The SPD would continue to use this rhetoric of 'unity' against Communists and radicals for years to come.

rowdy, angry, and confused crowd of soldiers began chanting "Parity! Parity!" and the SPD once again had its way. In the end 12 soldier delegates controlled by the SPD were decided on, and 12 worker delegates, 6 USPD and 6 SPD. The SPD won a crucial victory already on the second day of the revolution, gaining more disproportionate representation, and with it the ability to shut down the revolutionaries' attempts throughout the country. Seeing this decision, Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg refused to take part in they saw as a violation of democracy. The day ended with Ebert at the head not only of the Reichstag, but also of the Councils government.

In the following weeks, the battles over power took place throughout the country between the SPD and the left. The SPD pushed to vote based on a territorial basis and by districts, something that would allow them to reach to the broader population, and a tactic they were familiar with. In Dresden for example, this gave them 47 out of 50 seats in the workers 'college' and 40 out 50 in the soldiers 'college.' In other places such as Berlin, Bremen, Frankfurt, and Leipzig, the leftists managed to organize voting according to the 'principle of the dictatorship of the proletariat,' meaning that voting was organized in factories by providing voting rights in proportion with units of production, thus making more crucial factories have a stronger say. Nevertheless, whenever the USPD won a large majority at the workplace, the SPD appealed for equal representation based on the decisions made on November 9th and 10th, and successfully won parity in places where they were in a minority. This they did in places where they were at a disadvantage, but in the opposite cases the SPD "was not interested in parity where it was strong. In Stuttgart, the USPD had only four seats total out of 15," and here the SPD had no interest in 'parity.'[74] The SPD would then proclaim on November 13th that "We have been victorious, but

[74] Broué op. cit. Ibid. 161

we have not been victorious for ourselves alone. We have been victorious for the entire people. That is why our slogan is not "All power to the soviets" but "All power to the people.""[75]

In spite of these SPD victories, throughout these crucial weeks whatever control the left Independents and Spartacists had, they used to abolish parliament locally and form local worker militias with whatever weapons were available. Nationally, workers won important decrees and reforms as well:

> As early as November 12, the Government announced the introduction of an eight-hour day…A decree of December 23, 1918, regulated wage agreements…The Government also introduced universal suffrage for all men and women of twenty years and upwards…All public institutions were abolished that had been constituted in accordance with any other principle. This involved the disappearance of the Prussian Upper House, the former Prussian Lower House that had been elected in accordance with the three class suffrage…"[76]

It was without a doubt a political revolution that affected every level of various governing institution. The issue was that the social revolution that sought to give workers more control over their lives slowly died out. These efforts would largely therefore be defeated by the end of 1918, and the councils would lose form. With every important vote, the Independent left lost momentum, and the SPD took over more and more spaces. What came next in December, January, and February was for the most part defensive actions on the part of Communists[77] and Independent Social Democrats throughout Germany to defend the rights they gained in the process of the revolution through councils. Slowly, the counter revolution against the councils

---

[75] Ibid. 164
[76] Rosenberg, Arthur. "The Government of the People's Representatives." In *A History of the German Republic.* Methuen and Co. London, 1936. p. 36-37
[77] By the end of the year, the Spartacists were now part of the Communist Party. See discussion below.

set in, and in mid-December the SPD and the center USPD won the vote to hold Parliamentary elections on January 19th.

The Military, the Freikorps, the Spartacist Uprising, and the deaths of Karl and Rosa

The SPD was completely aware of what the councils meant both for the Spartacists and their own power within unions and government.[78] Two crucial actions were taken by the SPD at the beginning of the revolution in November to prevent the Spartacists from taking over the councils. The first and most important was setting up control in the councils themselves as seen above, and the second was to find an army to defend the government from the thousands of armed workers who now sought revolution throughout the country.[79] With the end of the war and the soldiers' revolts, much of the army had been completely dissolved, and the new government needed to find something to stop what could otherwise have turned into a victory for the revolutionaries. What looked like revolution and hope to the Spartacists and their allies however looked like "disorder, insecurity, plundering…[and] Disunity, Licentiousness, and Chaos" to those who opposed it, such as the SPD and high military officials. These were the same people who would start calling Spartacists, Communists, and their allies 'terrorists' throughout this period.

Therefore, on November 9th, the very day of the revolution, Ebert, seeing this 'chaos' throughout Berlin, called General Wilhelm Groener of the military leadership seeking help in forming a new defense force. Groener quickly agreed, but under certain conditions. In exchange for the aid of the army, Ebert and the SPD government would be forced to negotiate every single policy with the armed forces, or else he said they would not "feel responsible" for the results of

[78] Parliament resumed only in January of 1919.
[79] Even up until 1923 many factory workers still had control of arsenals of weapons from 1918.

their execution.[80] What this meant is that without negotiating with the military, new government policies would be left defenseless in their implementation. According to Waite, behind what many saw as Ebert's 'betrayal' of the revolution was rather a politician doing what he could in to prevent the country from collapse, and to defend it against what there also saw as the threat of violent dictatorship as a threat to order and democracy.

These military agreements would put Ebert's government at the hands of authorities whose interests went against those of a large sector of the population on a daily basis. What to the radicals seemed simply a unified bourgeois government, from the SPD's point of view was a difficult negotiation of politics with the old Prussian military apparatus. However, knowing the hatred with which many of those in high command saw the current revolution, the Berlin council under the leadership of left Independent Ernst Däumig voted on December 12th to create a "Volunteer Civil Guard."[81] This was one of the first attempts to create an army autonomous from the old Supreme Command to defend the Republic, and one which would serve to defend the revolution. The demands of the council government of Berlin also asked that all ranks of distinction in the army be dissolved, and that High Command be dismissed entirely. Ebert invited both representatives of the military and from the People's Commissars and Soldiers Councils. From Ebert's point of view, he was negotiating with both parties. However, Ebert was once again threatened with leaving the Republic defenseless if the demands of the 'radicals' were met. On December 20th the meeting was a victory for the old forces of the military, which only escalated the already brewing tensions between the Councils government and the Ebert-Groener alliance.

[80] Waite op. cit. 7
[81] Ibid. 8

At this point, an armed group of soldiers led by Dorrenbach[82] took over the Imperial Palace in Berlin. Ebert then called the military, and while they had early victories, the political coordination between the USPD and Spartacists soon helped gather thousands to defend Dorrenbach and the soldiers by quickly riding cars through the streets of Berlin warning of a "Monarchist counter-revolution" at the Berlin palace.[83] Emil Eichhorn, the independent serving as chief of police, supported the takeover as well and brought armed workers and soldiers to support him. Within hours, thousands surrounded the palace. Many of the attacking soldiers broke discipline and joined the protesters at the site, causing the army to fall apart. In their first attempt to stop the revolution, the German Supreme Command had failed.

Waite calls this the turning point in the November Revolution, as he believed that the defeat of the army on that day was the high point for the revolutionaries. As the army failed, Ebert, Groener, and others talked about the possibility of using volunteer corps recruited from the old army to reorganize a large force. Both leaders decided to move forward, and proposed putting social Democrat Gustav Noske at the head of the new force. Noske was currently the governor of Kiel, who had successfully brought order to the region after the soldiers' revolt by coopting the councils.

On December 27th he arrived in Berlin, ready to take on his new responsibilities as Minister of National Defense. He was told to deal with the situation in whatever way he saw fit. He immediately collected an army from various volunteer former soldiers who were bitter and who had struggled to adapt to civilian life after defeat. Many of them were looking for an excuse to fight and were deeply anti-Communist, which is why many also later volunteered to fight against

[82] A sailor in charge of one of the first councils in the north.
[83] Waite op. cit. 11

the Bolsheviks during the Russian civil war. However, while no single ideology or thought united them, racist undertones were always present in their pamphlets, one of which warned of the Poles (that is, the Communist Spartacists) pressing into German soil.[84]

During this time, while the USPD left and the Communists[85] had lost much of their political power through councils, their success at the Imperial Palace on Christmas gave them new momentum. Their leading role in stopping the military from taking the palace back had brought them closer in contact with various forces, and the news of the dismissal of Eichhorn from his post as head of police gave the Spartacists and Independents a means to unite workers. In late December and early January, the SPD and its allies launched a campaign of defamation against Eichhorn, accusing him of receiving "Russian gold" in exchange for his role in the revolution along with the charge of armed robbery.[86] On January 4th the Prussian cabinet dismissed him and assigned a replacement to his role, but Eichhorn refused to leave. On the evening of that same day, Liebknecht, Luxemburg, and other radical leaders met with various council members and left Independents to decide what should be done in response, and by the next morning had decided to hand out a flier which said that the "revolution was at stake" and that their freedom was threatened. The idea was to call for a protest, without any further specific plans.

What happened next astounded the organizers, and caught them off-guard:

> the protest developed on a scale which surprised the organisers themselves. The heart of the capital was occupied by hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, all the way from the Siegesallee to the Alexanderplatz …What we saw [that day] in Berlin was perhaps the largest proletarian mass action in

[84] Ibid. 39
[85] By now the Spartacists had formed the Communist party back in December. See following section for discussion of the Party's founding.
[86] Broué op. cit. 238-239

> history. We do not believe that there were demonstrations on this scale in Russia. From the Roland statue to the Siegesallee, the proletarians were marching, rank upon rank. There were marchers far away in the Tiergarten. They had brought their weapons, and they carried their red banners. They were ready to do anything and to give anything, even their lives. It was an army of 200,000 such as no Ludendorff had never seen...It was then that the incredible happened. The masses were there very early, from nine o'clock, in the cold and the fog. The leaders were in session somewhere, deliberating. The fog grew heavier, and the masses were still waiting. But the leaders deliberated. Midday came, bringing hunger as well as cold. And the leaders deliberated…At the police headquarters, the guns were aimed, there were sailors at every corner, and in all the rooms overlooking the street there was a seething mass of soldiers, sailors and workers. Inside the leaders were sitting, deliberating. They sat all evening, and they sat all night, and they deliberated. And they were sitting at dawn the next morning – and still deliberating. The groups came back to the Siegesallee again, and the leaders were still sitting and deliberating. They deliberated and deliberated and deliberated."[87]

While those 'deliberating' were aware of the mass demonstration outside, what they were discussing was to be decisive for the revolution's fate. During this meeting, a very lengthy discussion took place. The question essentially was whether calling for an insurrection and a takeover of government was possible, and if it were safe to do so with the present circumstances. At this point Liebknecht and Luxemburg's differences of opinion became evident. Liebknecht saw it as a moment for action, and began pushing for an offensive tactic to bring down the Berlin government, believing Dorrenbach's suggestion that they had the manpower available to do so.[88] Luxemburg disagreed, and her thoughts during this time would be important for the steps Levi would later take as she "was of the opinion, which seemed reasonable, that even if they could aim at bringing down the Ebert government in Berlin, such an initiative would be senseless,

[87] Broué, op. cit. 241-242
[88] Ibid. 241-243. Dorrenbach actually misled Liebknecht in his calculations. There were soldiers on the side of the revolutionaries, but none of them had been consulted, and the number of weapons available was also an exaggeration.

because the provinces were not ready to follow."[89] This mode of thinking would be shared by many revolutionaries who saw the danger of insurrections or uprisings being cut off and crushed. In these days, Rosa Luxemburg also wrote her pamphlet *What Does the Spartacus League Want?*, where she famously stated that they would never "take over governmental power except in response to a clear, unambiguous will of the great majority of the proletarian mass of all of Germany, never except by the proletariat's conscious affirmation of the views, aims, and methods of the Spartacus League."[90] From the beginning, even seeing the large numbers of forces on their side, Luxemburg sought instead to build a large support network and not take unnecessary risks.[91] This was the beginning of a long discussion of tactics which would haunt not only German Communists, but also the Comintern in its first years. Essentially, when would one know that an insurrection was possible? Was it just numbers, weapons, people? Was it enough to take over one city without others? If they did not have enough support, how and when would they build for it, before or after a seizure of power?

In the end, after much skepticism from many of those present, the meeting decided with by a large majority to move forward with the takeover of the Berlin government. The next day, they put forth all means available to call into the action the huge numbers of people from the previous day, to no avail. A maximum of 10,000 instead were present, and one commentator said that these people "were not ready to take power."[92] The Communists and their allies had sprung into

---

[89] Broué op. cit. 240-241

[90] Luxemburg, Rosa "What does the Spartacus League Want?" Marxists Internet Archive. December, 1918. Accessed November 28, 2015.https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/12/14.htm
Levi would later cite this passage on numerous occasions due to the fact that he agreed that an insurrection or takeover of political power could only happen after careful preparation, and not at the first sign of insurrection. This particular citation was important because Levi would use it on various occasions to explain why he stood against the policies of many of his fellow Communists.

[91] See discussion below on founding of KPD.

[92] Broué op. cit. 246

too early,[93] and were forced to make a tactical retreat, but it was too late. A group detached from the 10,000 occupied the main building of the SPD newspaper *Vorwärts* as well as its printing shop. The participants scattered, some taking up arms, some fleeing, and others asking the fighting to stop. The following days the discussion became difficult, as to order the occupiers to leave would officially mean giving up on all they had won in the revolution, and yet continuing the occupation could mean sacrificing lives for nothing, as they already received news that Gustav Noske was preparing his troops. Negotiations were underway to stop the fighting, but Noske moved on with his troops, killing whatever occupiers were left. Many of the KPD leadership went into hiding, knowing that the *Freikorps* were calling for the killing of the 'Spartacist leaders.'

As the days passed, the SPD government led by the *Freikorps* was able to remove occupiers from the *Vorwärts* building and other regions of the city, killing over a hundred along the way as well as arresting various activists, prompting many Independents to leave the Communists alone in the struggle. As repression worsened, Luxemburg and Liebknecht refused to follow their fellow activists and leave the city, as they did not want to leave fellow activists and workers alone in the middle of violent repression. [94] Although they had a good underground network, troops arrested them both on January 15th and executed them both the night of the 16th.

Paul Levi and the Founding of the KPD

After the deaths of Luxemburg and Liebknecht the radical left in Germany found itself in an uneasy situation, and the KPD, from the time of its founding, faced a complex predicament

[93] Or too late, considering the huge numbers from the previous day. However, it is impossible to know whether the leaders could have led all of those people toward an insurrection. What is clear is that the people who followed their leadership were not ready for a violent overthrow of government.
[94] Broué op. cit. Ibid. 255

regarding the SPD as well. The SPD, the party responsible for the creation of the largest working class movement in the world, was now also responsible for carrying out the repression and murder of leaders and members who died fighting for the ideals it once held. The Communists were divided from the beginning over what to think about their former party. Without a doubt the leadership was now an enemy to them, but they still needed the working class rallied around the old Party's apparatus to be successful in their project of a German revolution. The SPD had a strong hold in the working class; according to historian Werner Angress, it had the "advantages of tradition, experience, and organization, all of which had a stronger appeal to the average German worker than anything the upstart KPD could offer…In short, the SPD was as much an institution as it was a political party, and it could confidently claim and receive the loyal support of most of its adherents."[95] Some German Communists treated the SPD with pure hatred, while some, like Levi, tried to take a milder approach to the SPD, but more importantly to the USPD.

Paul Levi first gained recognition through his involvement in the anti-war effort as the German representative for the Zimmerwald Left bureau.[96] He was known for his excellent oratory skills and his rigorous intellectual mind. However, along with his intellect came a haughty attitude, a "bourgeois lifestyle," a maid who cleaned his home, and a huge collection of Chinese jade and Egyptology, all of which was used against him by Party members who did not like him or his leadership.[97] Perhaps the greatest flaw in Levi however was his elitist attitude and his harsh language. While none of the sources deny his tremendous intelligence, they nevertheless all agree on the problem of his harsh language and manners.[98] Regardless, after his

[95] Angress op. cit. 86
[96] Broué op. cit. 87
[97] Ibid. 301-302
[98] Broué, Angress, Fowkes, and Carr.

close friends were killed in 1919 he assumed responsibility for the party and worked tirelessly for it.

Levi's leadership position in the aftermath of the murders of 1919 was not necessarily one of choice[99] (in fact he had to be "begged" to take this position[100]), and neither was it decided on officially by the Party (as most members were avoiding Noske's troops), but in spite of all this leading Communists in hiding believed he was the best candidate to lead the Party. Levi had been acquainted for years with major radical figures such as Lenin and Luxemburg in organizing against the war. Older activists in the SPD who would later work with the Communist Party saw him as the "heir and disciple of Rosa Luxemburg."[101] He was very close with the latter, had served as her lawyer on various occasions, and become good friends with her. He therefore commanded respect from many of the older generation, whose experience in the SPD gave them a very different understanding of their old party than those who never participated in it, or were too young.[102] Along with his close relationship to Luxemburg, Levi also revered her ideas, which would create difficulties for him while leading the Party.

The first Communist Party of Germany[103] was founded at the end of the year in 1918. Some in the party believed the split had come too late, and others too early. The first believed that the founding of a Party for revolution months after the beginning of a revolutionary period was a mistake as it did constrained their actions to the workings of the USPD. The latter rather believed that the USPD had served as a great vehicle to spread the ideas of the Spartacists within the rank and file of this massive Party, which faults aside, commanded a tremendous amount of

[99] Broué. op. cit. 40
[100] Ibid. 882
[101] Angress op. cit. 112
[102] In particular many of the rank and file of the Communist Party throughout this period, those who wanted action at all costs and saw the SPD as just one more bourgeois Party. See comments below about KAPD.
[103] I am referring to the KPD (s), in contrast to the latter KAPD, KPD, and the VKPD here.

respect from millions of working people in Germany. Levi would change his mind when it came to this issue, but what was important to him in 1918 was to follow in Luxemburg's footsteps. The founding of this Party however showed difficulties none of the Spartacists had expected.

Already at the first congress of the KPD Levi, Luxemburg, Liebknecht, and other members of the *Zentrale*[104] faced important political differences with the general body. As Fowkes says, "many of the participants [at the congress] were utopian radicals, who looked forward to an imminent seizure of power." [105] In light of the revolutionary upheavals and fervor of 1918 many people believed that revolution was around the corner, and that it was only a question of taking arms for a takeover of government. In particular, many Bolsheviks from afar believed this was the case in much of Europe all the way until 1923, leading to notable differences of analysis between Russian and Western European Communists, and validating much of what these impatient activists had to say in Germany at times.[106] Levi would later take the time to explain that this was not so simple, but during the late months of 1918 and the tragic events of the Spartacist uprising, the general confusion and chaos that ensued made it hard for those caught in the midst to clearly think through the situation around them.

At the founding congress of the KPD (s)[107], leading Spartacists read political speeches to decide on a program. Levi gave a speech[108] urging members to take part in the parliamentary elections of January 19th, 1919. Luxemburg was still alive, and supported this speech. This was an important statement, in which he argued for participating in the first ever mass elections in the

[104] The central committee of the Communist Party.
[105] Fowkes, 1984 op. cit. p. 21-22
[106] Discussed below with analysis of Levi, and the differences he had with the Comintern's leading members.
[107] That is, KPD (Spartacus League). They would change their name once a merger with other forces led them to change their name, as the Spartacus League had gained a bad reputation throughout various circles and many did not want to be associated with the name.
[108] Fernbach, *Address to the Founding Congress of the KPD* 2009.

country that no longer had the three-class franchise, and which took place in the middle of revolutionary changes. He took a careful approach in explaining that the councils[109] are the priority for Communists, and that a parliament or national assembly are not an end but only means to move forward. However, the rank-and-file membership of the party believed that this participation would be a waste of time, and that radical tactics were more appropriate.[110] Part of their rationale saw the parliament as a direct threat to the recently created workers and soldiers councils. This was, after all, "The Period of Dual Power,"[111] and these fears were not unfounded: the parliamentary regime *would* eventually win out over the councils, wiping them out almost entirely by 1923. The antagonism between the councils and Parliament was not in dispute, but the KPD position in the face of this antagonism was. The revolutionary fervor of the time made most Communists see only two alternatives: revolution or nothing. Levi considered this argument, and pointed out that in his speech that Communists would only have been able to take power in three districts of Germany, and that even in that case they would have remained isolated, following in on Luxemburg's.

Instead, he proposed thinking from the perspective of the masses, not purely from the Party. His main argument thought precisely from the very concrete standpoint of the vast majority of the population in Germany:

> Just consider the following situation. The National Assembly is convened. For months to come, it may well dominate the whole political picture of Germany, and you cannot prevent this. It will stand at the centre of the political movement in Germany. You will not be able to prevent all eyes from looking at it, and even your best supporters having to orient themselves towards it, informing themselves and ask what is going on

[109] A direct-democracy form of government, pictured after the Soviet model of workers councils. Communists saw this as an important precursor to a Socialist government and a revolution.
[110] Fowkes op. cit. 21-22
[111] Broué, Pierre. "The Period of Dual Power." In *The German Revolution: 1917-1923*, 157-88. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006.

> in the National Assembly. It will enter the consciousness of the German proletariat, and against this fact do you really want to stand and act outside?[112]

With this idea in mind Levi sought to push to the Party to realize that regardless of however much influence they had, the majority of Germany would go out and vote, and however many votes they did or did not receive would help them know how much power they actually had. The Party however voted this down, and decided not to participate. Levi would criticize these members was that at a time when 20 million people went to exercise their political rights by voting, the KPD thought itself "cleverer than the masses" [113] and isolated itself during an important political event. Unlike many Communists at the time, Levi believed the masses were more important than the Party, an idea he borrowed from Rosa Luxemburg. [114] Levi, like Luxemburg, approached the masses from their point of view, while Lenin approached the people from the point of view of the Party first.[115] In Russia the only ones with access to revolutionary ideas originally were precisely the intelligentsia, whereas in Germany a large section of the population had already been exposed to socialist ideas. Levi also justified his arguments in favor of participation in the national assembly by pointing out that the Bolsheviks themselves partook in said forms of government when given the option. The majority of the Party nonetheless most

---

[112] Fernbach op. cit. 41

[113] Ibid. 91

[114] Luxemburg, Rosa. "Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy: Leninism or Marxism?" Marxists Internet Archive. July 1, 1904. Accessed April 16th, 2016. In this pamphlet, which was an early critique of Lenin's view of the Party, she said: "The fact is that the Social Democracy is not *joined* to the organization of the proletariat. It is itself the proletariat." While Levi was far more nuanced, he shared Luxemburg's trust in the masses, and at various points saw that the Party was in fact far behind the masses in terms of the revolution.

[115] Lenin, in his *What is to be Done?* focused on the centralization of the Party to create discipline. Lenin's theories were very much tied to a context where the relationship between the party's numbers and the masses was that of a *very* small elite trying to coordinate efforts in a country whose geography was not adequately backed by railroads and infrastructure to make communications nearly as fast or efficient as in Germany. He also believed that class-consciousness had to be developed from "without," or through a central party of professional revolutionaries. As Carr explains, in Russia only the petty bourgeoisie and not workers were exposed to Marx and his theories, hence Lenin saw the need for the socialist consciousness to come from the "intelligentsia" that could provide it, just as Marx and Engels "belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia" and thus, in Russia the intelligentsia would lead.[115] Many of these ideas Rosa Luxemburg fundamentally disagreed with. See Carr, Edward Hallett. "The Foundations of Bolshevism" in *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*. Vol. 1. London: Macmillan, 1953.

likely associated this use of "bourgeois" institutions with the SPD's participation in government prior to 1918, or rejected them in favor of working on direct actions. Considering the anarchist tendencies of the Party's base, it made sense in this context that Levi's call to participate in the parliamentary elections would be ignored, and would lose the vote. He knew that the importance of participating in elections lay not in the hopes of participating in governments, but rather measuring[116] and building the support for communists throughout the country.

As head of the party starting in 1919, Levi faced a growing opposition from day one with a radical opposition that saw in him a "rightist," or rather, a conservative figure who held back the revolution. This Party base was influenced by what Levi claimed was Anarchism[117] (or "Syndicalists,"[118] as many called themselves) and included many activists who saw revolution in a simplistic manner, trying to hastily push for it without necessarily analyzing what the preconditions necessary for such an event to take place. For the older generation, revolution was something they had been building toward for decades, whereas some of the newer radicals in Germany saw the Russian revolution, witnessed strikes and rebellions, and concluded that taking overthrowing the government was only a question of willpower. The original *Zentrale* of the Spartacus League had older experienced members who understood the importance of having popular support, and of building that support among the masses. The new *Zentrale* had many members that saw anything shy of armed struggle then and there as 'opportunism.'

---

[116] Levi would later cite Engels and Lenin in saying that elections could be used to measure the level of consciousness of the proletariat. See below on discussion of '*Unser Weg*'

[117] Discussed below with Levi's pamphlet *Against Putschism*

[118] A revolutionary idea put forth by anarchists during the turn of the century. They argued against the need for a revolutionary Party and for political participation in elections, and instead focused on union struggles, which they saw as the core revolutionary praxis. The IWW, or Industrial Workers of the World, is one of the best examples of these organizations, as well as the CNT in Spain, whose membership grew over a million during the height of the Spanish Civil war in the 30's. Many Marxists were influenced by these ideas during this time as well, creating a mix between Anarchism and Marxism which many Party members shared, consciously or not.

Soon enough, Levi would have other issues on his mind, namely the crisis of the Party in the aftermath of the "white terror."[119] In a letter to Lenin in March of 1919, he reflected on the political situation in Germany.[120] Here he outlined another recurring issue the Communists would face throughout the revolutionary period, the problem of partial strikes. During the period from 1919-1923, certain areas of Germany would produce recurring strikes, as well as workers in direct opposition to the Ebert government. In particular, industrial areas such as the Ruhr[121] region, or later Communist strongholds such as Saxony and Thuringia, Independent Social Democrats and Communists found strong centers of resistance to the SPD. A wave of strikes took place in 1919, and would sporadically continue in the following years. However, these strikes were for the most part disconnected from one another, making it easy time and again for the government to put them down. This was Levi's main concern when he wrote to Lenin in this letter. Communists would attempt to take power in various regions with small groups, attempts that only reflected the eclectic nature of the strikes that took place. However, whereas workers' strikes usually had direct political or economic demands in mind and included the participation of upwards of tens of thousands, the communist coup attempts were smaller, and had less support. Levi would soon have to turn his attention to the latter, as the Party began to it wanted action without delay.

Against Putschism

1918 and 1919 were years of revolutionary uprisings not only in Germany, but throughout Europe in general. Many activists at the time looked to the East, understanding the Bolshevik model as the way forward, with various interpretations of what that meant. In 1919,

[119] A reference to the brutal repression of the *Freikorps*, in reference also to the White army in Russia.
[120] Fernbach, *Letter to Lenin,* 2009
[121] In the Ruhr especially, a "red army" was created which, at its peak, had tens of thousands of workers. However, how this army was easily crushed by the *Freikorps* due to its messy organization. It would be one of the first of its kind in Germany, one which would inspire Communists to take up arms for years to come.

revolutionaries in Hungary would take power for a few months and found the 'Hungarian Soviet/Council Republic,' which lasted from March of that year until August. Throughout Germany various uprisings by radicals created short-lived socialist[122] republics, one of the most famous being the 'Bavarian Soviet/Council Republic' in 1919. However, if these experiments were short-lived, according to Levi, it was because of very concrete reasons. In his analysis of both situations, he began developing his stance against "putschism," or the act of attempting to take power too early without the masses. In many of the aforementioned governments, small groups of Communists along with other radicals took over state offices, without necessarily having any mass support. Just as Luxemburg criticized Lenin for "Blanquism,"[123] Levi criticized revolutionaries of his time for trying to carry out a revolution in small groups, with no connections to the masses. Likewise, Levi now had to also take a position not only on what he considered premature Communist uprisings, but also revolts on the part of workers and masses that came too early. For Levi, these were the sorts of issues in Munich and Hungary.

After Independent Social-Democrat Kurt Eisner proclaimed the Bavarian republic in November of 1918, his assassination, combined with news of a revolution in Hungary, eventually led to a coalition government of anarchists, Independent Social Democrats, and Communists lasting from April to May of 1919 in the name of the councils. What Levi refers to in his work was the government established under the leadership first of Ernst Toller, and later of Eugen Levine, a well-known Communist of his time. With Toller a council republic was declared, and after a right-wing reaction threatened this "first soviet-republic," a "second soviet-republic" was maintained after Levine and others sought to defend the gains of the revolution. These consecutive governments would fall after being crushed by the *Freikorps*, as was the fate

[122] Here I am referring to those Socialists who stood against the SPD who would later become Communists.
[123] Refers to the thought of Louis Auguste Blanqui, a socialist in the 19th century that believed a revolution could be carried out by a small professional conspiratorial core of members taking the state.

of many other Communists at the time who were isolated from one another. This took place only a month after the severe wave of repression hit Berlin and other parts of Germany, making it very difficult for activists in those areas to show solidarity or gather support.

Levi absolutely disagreed that this government represented any form of real government or "soviet"[124] in an article he wrote August 4th of 1919. After all, he saw this as a "putsch, a very clumsy one at that, not staged by the working masses, but by a handful of literati."[125] To counter the actions of the Munich Communists, Levi argued that throughout Germany, under similar conditions, "we followed the tactic of evading armed struggle…even in the face of an offensive act by advance of the counter-revolution, because a victorious conclusion of an armed struggle appeared impossible. This tactic was applied with all our consent in Bremen, in Braunschweig, in Leipzig, in Gotha, Erfurt, indeed everywhere."[126] He saw it as necessary to organize nationally before making any more attempts at an offensive attack. The government was on the offensive and revolutionaries had no real means to defend against the *Freikorps*, as they did not have enough mass support. Levi claimed that the Party[127] stood behind him at this time in his criticism of the events in Munich, saying that "our Party stood with its trenchant criticism in the forefront of the revolution; so far, there existed everywhere complete agreement on the conduct of our Munich comrades."[128] Levi claimed that while Eisner's government was proclaimed on November 7th in front of thousands of supporters, the radical governments were the result of militants acting on behalf of the people without necessarily having their support, in addition to only working within one city. He further asserts that "The Munich comrades themselves clearly

[124] Fernbach, *The Munich Experience: An Opposing View*, 2009
[125] Ibid. 48
[126] Ibid. 50
[127] In Berlin at least.
[128] Fernbach op cit. 48

recognised that this Munich Republic lacked any relationship with the Bavarian and particularly with the German proletarian revolution."[129]

What is important about Levi's analysis here is that it would mark a pattern in his thinking, where he saw radicals acting without the masses as a factor that would doom the revolution. His most clear early analysis comes through when he saws that revolutionaries

> are often required to tread along different paths from those of the masses. The masses have as yet not completely understood our programme—otherwise we would already have reached our goal. They often continue along other paths than those desired by us, in which case we have recourse to criticism. No one among us has any scruples on this score, because the difference between us and the masses usually consists of our wish for action, while the masses remain passive. It is for this reason that it is particularly hard for us when the reverse is the case, when the masses proceed with action while we have to tell them that the action is useless or injurious to the rest of the revolution. If the masses proceed with actions which are only pseudo-revolutionary and in reality can only lead to setbacks, it is our duty to step forward with warnings and criticism, as was done by the Munich comrades. To place ourselves, however, at the head of the movement, if the masses move ahead nevertheless, though it can only lead to trouble—that obligation we do not have.[130]

This 'obligation' is a reference to what happened to Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht earlier that year. As far as possible, he wanted to avoid the Party sacrificing itself again like it did in January, where against all odds Luxemburg and Liebknecht both decided to stand with the people who led the occupation of various buildings, which by that point were scattered, unorganized, and had little mass support left. Levi early on did not see the revolution as a given, nor did he see the prospect of revolution anywhere in the near future. As will be discussed below, his major difference early on with members of the KPD, the Comintern, and others, was that right after the Spartacist uprising he believed the bourgeoisie was leading a counter-

[129] Ibid. 48.
[130] Ibid. 52

offensive, making him see the need for a defensive posture of the Party, while others still saw that the energy of 1918 still existed, making an offensive tactic for the Party the appropriate one.[131]

As for the Hungarian revolution, Levi wrote an article in 1920 in line with his previous analysis. [132] Like what he saw in Bavaria, in Hungary Levi again criticized premature actions on the smart of small groups on behalf of a vast majority they had little to no connection to. Here for the first time Levi argued that the revolution failed not because the bourgeoisie was too strong (in fact, it was incredibly weakened), but rather because the Communists were too unorganized, scattered, had little connections to the masses, and because they scared off the population on numerous occasions through what people saw as 'terrorism.' In Marxist terms, this analysis marks the difference between subjective and objective factors. [133] He said, again citing Rosa Luxemburg, that what is "decisive is not the negative action on the part of the bourgeoisie but the positive action on the part of the proletariat."[134] He repeats this point later on when talking about the bourgeoisie in Germany,[135] an important argument because he stresses the subjective forces of the working class and the party rather than seeing the collapse of the ruling class as a simple and mechanical transition. This understanding was also connected to his understanding of consolidating power, not just taking it. He was thinking beyond a coup, and toward actually (and realistically, as far as possible) leading a successful revolution. However, before this would be possible, Levi believed changes in the Party were necessary.

Purge of the "Syndicalists"

[131] Broué, op. cit. p. 878
[132] Fernbach, *The Lessons of the Hungarian Revolution*
[133] In a general sense, subjective factors refer to the strength, numbers, consciousness, and organization of the political forces in question at a given time. Objective factors refer instead to the economic situation, mass-consciousness, the class structures, i.e. the factors given in a society at a given time, which are independent of the will of our agency.
[134] Fernbach, op. cit. p. 75
[135] Ibid. 121 in *Our Path: Against Putschism*

1919 was a year of heavy repression and minimal coordinated activity within for the KPD. The heavy repression of the *Freikorps* managed to isolate every single uprising by radicals they could find and crush them. On top of this, the Party was becoming associated with putschism and terrorism throughout Germany instead of with politics, and Levi had had enough. Not only were they being defeated militarily, but the SPD helped push propaganda against Communists in many cases. The actions of Communists had been damaging the image of the Party more and more, turning workers against them.[136] Some of these included sabotaging workplaces and destroying railroads all in an effort to somehow 'inspire' the masses into action for revolution. Rationally, the opposite happened, as these violent tactics only reinforced the idea that the SPD protected workers, while Communists were 'terrorists' who only sought to destroy. Levi therefore worked to change the image of the party as quickly as possible, knowing that violence in itself did absolutely nothing to help their cause at that time.

During a speech to the Party in October of 1919 at Heidelberg, he analyzed the political situation the KPD found itself in.[137] He made it clear that they were still too weak to take over government, and that 'Syndicalism' was responsible for many mistakes the party had made in practice. He explained that Syndicalism only saw revolution as "a purely economic process,"[138] and therefore saw no use in contesting political institutions. It saw the factory as the main place of struggle, and that workers need only unite in large strikes to destroy bourgeois society, leaving

[136] See Fernbach, op. cit. *The World-Situation and the German Revolution* written April 1920. In this speech he gives an overview of the political situation in Germany and internationally. He pays special attention to making criticisms of other Communists in Germany who, with the help of the red army, at times acted against workers through sabotage actions that hurt the workers in the area, such as blowing up a mine. Levi recalls: "The fact is that the masses experienced the threat of sabotage not as directed against capitalism, but against them, and they began to see the Noske guards, who had already been hailed to them as saviours [sic] from sabotage, no longer as the main enemy, but, in places, even as a kind of liberator." Gustav Noske was a Social Democrat placed in charge of the *Freikorps*. Levi uses this example to explain how people who originally saw the Communists in good light, later turned against them as they bypassed the council movement to turn toward violence.
[137] Fernbach, op. cit. *The Political Situation and the KPD*
[138] Ibid. 56

the question of state power aside, as it would allegedly fall on its own. Levi of course agreed that strikes were important, but for him their importance lay in the education of the working class to understand their own political power, and therefore as a *precursor* to the understanding that the bourgeois state's interests were antagonistic to their own. He also viewed the existing political institutions much like the old SPD before the war did, namely as a means to spread propaganda and the Party's message. Most importantly, he argued that 'direct action' in itself would not change workers' consciousness, but rather that the party had to take the lead from the masses. Like Luxemburg, he argued that workers' consciousness developed through the course of political struggle, and that the Party only represented the site where the "proletariat joins together,"[139] and not a separate entity which would alone show the way forward. In this speech Levi for the first time laid out a coherent plan for the Communist Party, its tasks, and its ideology. He alludes to the work and knowledge of revolution, which for him cannot be brought about by a few revolutionaries who could teach the masses, "…but only by the will, belief, the readiness for sacrifice and the clarity of the broad masses themselves, from which the necessary 'thoughts' and 'organizational form' arise completely of themselves."[140]

At the end of the speech Levi also set a list of principles that defined the Party's views. What became clear however to those who heard him, is that he was purging the Party by saying, in the last principle (number 7), that "members of the KPD who do not share these views as to the nature, organisation [sic] and action of the Party have to be excluded from the Party."[141] While others such as Karl Radek[142] agreed with him on the issue of anarchist influences, they

[139] Ibid. 65
[140] Fernbach, op. cit. 65
[141] Ibid. p. 69
[142] First emissary of the Comintern to Germany, and leading member of the Comintern. Radek was despised by Rosa Luxemburg for his lack of principles, his lies, and his constantly-changing views. He was expelled from the Polish Socialist Party in 1912, but would become important later on as the main source of communication between Russia and Germany during 1919-1920. In these years he led the effort against Levi.

disagreed with the necessity to split the Party.[143] He therefore sought to have all anarchist influences leave the party, so that it could focus on its political tasks without sectarian influences. Angry members therefore left the Party, and a split took place immediately.

The split had various effects, some negative, and others positive. Perhaps the most negative aspect was the breaking of ties with many important unions and cities throughout Germany, especially in Berlin which had been the center of struggle for the Spartacists. The membership of the Party dropped from close to "107,000 to around 50,000 members. Its strongest organizations, those in northern Germany, the Rhineland, parts of Saxony, and nearly all of Berlin[144] joined the seceding faction and founded a rival Party in April 1920."[145] This rival faction was the KAPD, or the Communist Workers Party of Germany. This party combined all of the "ultra-left" members who had pushed for what Levi called "putschist" tactics since the beginning of the revolutionary upheavals. However, as was the case with many other politically extremist activists at the time, they had little experience behind them to back up their preferred tactics. Ruth Fischer, Arkadi Maslow, and Ernst Reuter or "Friesland" were all associated with the Berlin Communists, who, according to Angress, only had a few years of activist work behind them.[146]

The positive aspects, however, were that Levi could focus on building a better image of the Party to the public, not having to worry about the discipline of the rank and file, for the time being. Many of those who did not leave agreed with the need for a patient organizing effort to build the Party. Widespread dislike for, and distrust of Communist tactics created during and after the revolution affected not only the middle class but also the majority of Labor."[147] Levi

---

[143] Carr op. cit. 137
[144] Fowkes op. cit. 45 The Berlin branch in particular dropped its size from 12,000 before the split to 800 for the KPD.
[145] Angress, op. cit. p. 44
[146] Ibid. 90-91
[147] Ibid. 90

hoped to alter that, offering a new course for the Party by purging the membership he believed was the root cause of these issues. Although the party had a new course after the split, it took place during a time when their political life was paralyzed due to ongoing repression. Censorship was still enforced, so the Party would not be able to legally print their newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* until December of that year. Levi also had to serve a prison term which started weeks after this split, only days[148] before the Kapp-Putsch, one of the most important events in the history of the Weimar Republic.

The Kapp-Putsch and the Communists

Unfortunately for Levi, the Kapp-Putsch took place while he was imprisoned in February and March of 1920, and the party's response only showed how little the split had done to eliminate their political sectarianism. This putsch was an unsuccessful attempt by right-wing forces to take power via a coup designed to roll back the political gains made since 1918 by the SPD and other forces on the left as well as putting the old military elite back in a position of power. While they had support of sections of the armed forces and successfully took over Berlin, a day after the coup attempt, on March 14th 1920, a general strike was proclaimed to defend the Republic, but at which time a key force was missing: The Communists. The rift with the SPD led to some Communists to see the SPD as equally reactionary as the right-wing military forces. The Zentrale, with the absence of Levi and other older members who were also in prison, decided that no action should be taken, saying that the party would not "lift a finger"[149] to defend the government that killed Rosa Luxemburg. Later that day, as they realized that the general strike was immense and that they had isolated themselves, the Communists changed their decision, but "by then the party had lost every opportunity to play a leading role in what proved to be the high

[148] Broué op. cit. 358
[149] Quote from the issue of *Die Rote Fahne*, the Party newspaper, from that day, cited in Harman, Chris. *The Lost Revolution: Germany 1918 to 1923*. London: Bookmarks, 1982. p. 187.

point of working-class solidarity in the era of the Weimar Republic."[150] The USPD and SPD immediately reacted and supported the strike however, leading the effort against the putsch successfully. This fiasco gave even the most conservative of SPD union leaders a chance to be seen as saviors to the working class while making Communists embarrass themselves with workers. The following elections would show the result of this mistaken tactic, as while the USPD gained a lot of previous SPD votes going from 2.3 million to 5 million, the Communists only ended up with 2.1% of the votes, a little under 600,000.[151]

After the Kapp-Putsch, Levi sought to again recreate the image of the Communists in the public eye. Days after the coup attempt, Levi addressed a group of SPD-influenced workers at a general assembly of factory committees. He stated that the Communists made a mistake and should have called for workers to arm themselves under the slogan 'defend the Republic.'[152] This would have been the slogan accompanying a call for a general strike, so that they would have regained some of their lost power from 1919, using the momentum of the mass-strike to do so, and knowing that the *Freikorps* would not have been able to react quickly enough. This strategy, he argued, would have been appropriate under the circumstances workers faced. Before the Kapp-Putsch, on January 13th, 42 workers had been killed in front of the Reichstag and 105 wounded after protesting a bill that sought to eliminate the political powers of the councils once and for all.[153] Parts of Germany were under a state of siege, and members of the USPD had been arrested. In the previous weeks, workers in highly industrialized areas such as the Ruhr had been fighting to keep their weapons. Levi's idea was that the Party should have pushed worker demands forward during the strike so that after it, they would be in a stronger position to bargain

[150] Angress, op. cit. p. 47
[151] In the previous elections, the SPD polled at 37.9% while the USPD 7.6%. In the latter in 1920, the SPD vote dropped to 21.7% while the USPD rose to 17.9%.
[152] Broué op. cit. 377
[153] Lindemann op. cit. 104-105

against the SPD government. He explained this in further detail at the 4th congress of the KPD that summer. If workers were to take arms, Levi argued that they would have come into conflict with the SPD government eventually, who would have wanted to take their arms away as they had in the previous months with Noske. Likewise, he argued the KPD should have called for the arrest of the leaders of the coup attempt. In theory this would have created a rift between many workers and the SPD, pushing their consciousness further to the left, as the Social Democratic government would have been too passive in this situation. Specifically, his idea would have been a defensive strategy, and not an offensive one. Giving workers a chance to regain their initiatives from 1919 meant a defense against the government. He also tried to restore relations with other Parties. After conservative trade unionist Carl Legien asked the USPD to form a coalition government in response to the failed right-wing coup, Levi decided to respond to this by saying to the USPD that the KPD would not work against a USPD coalition government, but would rather behave as a 'loyal opposition.'[154] The USPD had done what the KPD failed to do, and that was to take influence away from the SPD during the Putsch attempt. Levi saw it as a time to improve relations with a Party that German workers now saw as the best option on the left outside of the SPD. This new position of the Communist party, while it had various critics, would later favor the KPD months later when the members of the USPD faced the possibility of joining the Comintern, and therefore, the KPD itself.

The Comintern, the ECCI, and the German Left

On October 12th, 1920, the USPD met with members of the KPD and Zinoviev at Halle, Germany to determine whether or not the organization would join the Communist International. This Congress would be the most important for the KPD at the time, as when it ended the new

[154] Lindemann op. cit. 105

KPD[155] grew to the highest membership it would have in the entire period of the Weimar Republic. Before the congress, Zinoviev and the ECCI[156] sent an open letter to all USPD locals, asking them to discuss admission to the Communist International. During this time Levi joined KPD and USPD members in publishing various articles explaining why they believed joining the Comintern was necessary or not, with Levi arguing for joining. At the Halle congress, representatives were sent for a long discussion on the subject of admission. When Zinoviev spoke, he did so for more than 5 hours in bad German, but with "an authority which enabled him to win his greatest oratorical triumph in an already distinguished career."[157] In part due to the speech, the Communists won, bringing a majority of the Party over to their ranks with a vote of 236 to 157.[158] Hundreds of thousands of Socialists joined the ranks of the KPD as a result of this vote, giving the party a new name of "United Communist Party of Germany," or VKPD, and bringing the numbers up to half a million as Fowkes claims or between 500,000-600,000 according to Broué.[159] [160] It was, however, not the power or influence of the KPD but rather the Comintern's, which persuaded the USPD left to join them.

The Comintern was founded in March 1919 with the purpose of serving as a Party for world revolution. The Bolshevik leadership at the time believed that Europe was supposed to be an immediate target for revolution due to its much stronger working class and its industrial capacities. Russia was still seen as 'backward' by most Socialists, and the idea of Russia being the sole Communist country would not be accepted until 1923. Therefore, Russia *needed* to spread the Revolution in Europe, not only because this was what Marx and Engels had predicted

[155] The VKPD, or the "United Communist Party of Germany."
[156] The Central Committee of the Comintern.
[157] Broué op. cit. 439
[158] Angress, op. cit. 72
[159] Fowkes op. cit. 205
[160] Broué op. cit. 443

would happen, but also because of the circumstances after the Revolution. The first congress of the Comintern took place under very difficult conditions for the would-be Communists. The Germans had just come out of the shock of "white terror,"[161] and Russia was economically isolated. For years now many saw that the Second International of Social Democracy was corrupt, having voted for a disastrous war, having led a bloody repression against workers in their own countries, and most importantly, having left the project for revolution behind. While dozens of delegates from numerous European countries attended, the new International still was not able to organize, nor lead. However, in the following months, it would begin making contacts worldwide, and would become on the daily more involved in the workings of parties throughout Europe. However, its involvement would not only grow throughout time, eventually swallowing up the previous autonomy that Communist parties had in their early years.

In considering the connections between Soviet Russia and Germany at the time, and the apparent dis-connect between European Social Democracy and Russian Bolshevism, of utmost importance is understanding the specific conditions present both in the European parties and Russia. E. H. Carr dedicates a long chapter to the year 1919 in the course of the Russian Revolution, naming it "The Year of Isolation." Caught in the midst of a Civil War, this was the same year in which the Communist International was established, and a difficult year at that as it was also the year in which Russians started looking west to spread revolution, with almost no sources of information available. The former Entente powers had blocked Russia off during the Civil war, and the isolation was successful while it lasted. To understand why Paul Levi's and other Europeans' politics differed so much from the Bolsheviks', acknowledging the bad

[161] This is the term many Communists at the time used to refer to the bloody anti-Communist repression that took place throughout Europe after the revolutionary wave. The term "white" most likely refers to the White army in Russia that fought against the Bolsheviks during the Russian civil war. Many German members of the *Freikorps* were actually involved fighting the Bolsheviks on the Eastern front during this time, making the term "white" appropriate.

communication between both regions is incredibly important. Carr brings us into the time period, giving us a sense of the unfortunate context in which the Comintern tried to help European Communist parties establish themselves:

> Everywhere frontiers were closed. The *cordon sanitaire* had become a reality. Even foreign newspapers reached Moscow irregularly or not at all; Lenin's writings of this year are full of complaints of the difficulty of obtaining accurate or up-to-date information of foreign happenings…In spite of the most optimistic estimates of the prospects of world revolution, there was probably never a time when the Soviet leaders had less material possibility of promoting it than in the six months which followed the foundation of Comintern; there was certainly never a time after 1917 when the parties of the extreme Left abroad faced their problems with less aid or less interference from Moscow. After the foundation of Comintern all contact with the German Communist Party seems to have been lost; and for a long period nothing was known of it in Moscow except that the *Rote Fahne* appeared illegally but regularly in Berlin, and that there were similar communist journals in other German cities.[162]

It was therefore the case that Bolshevik Russia was unable to provide any support to all of those facing severe repression throughout Europe during a crucial time. What is important to note is that during the crucial year for the revolutionary wave in Europe, many were *just* beginning to understand the specific conditions of European countries, or were simply ignoring them and at times trying to create a unified grand strategy for Communists everywhere. E.H. Carr talks about Lenin's famous pamphlet *Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder* in this light. This pamphlet was published the following year, but in many ways reflected a misunderstanding of European politics that many Bolsheviks shared. Carr took issue with the premise that "traits of the Russian revolution were likely to be reproduced on an international scale," and with it the assumption that the 'right' and 'left' of Communism were the overall the

---

Carr, op. cit. 131-132

same and should be dealt with using the same tactics and strategies internationally. This was one of *the* major assumptions of the Comintern, and one of the central points of contention between figures like Levi and their Russian counterparts. It was an assumption which would continue throughout the existence of the Comintern, and would be pushed to its extremes later on. Most importantly, Carr argues, the Bolsheviks seemed to have a misunderstanding of what Social Democracy meant to European workers and thus "underestimated the proportion of the workers in western countries who had derived benefits from resort to democratic procedures and could not easily be weaned from the belief in the validity of these procedures. Lenin never really understood why "reformism", which meant nothing in Russia, was a persistent and successful rival to the teaching of revolution in Western Europe, why illegal action, which was accepted as a matter of course by Russian workers, aroused strong prejudices in the west, or why the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, which raised no ripple of indignation among Russian workers, should have shocked large numbers of western workers."[163] It was an important difference between those in Russia who saw European workers as inherently revolutionary, which would mean that they only needed to separate from their 'reformist' union leadership, and those in Europe who knew just how passive workers were after 1918. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the way Lenin and the Bolsheviks treated leadership created tension with others like Levi or Luxemburg, who saw the masses as far more important than the party. Changing the consciousness of workers in the west was not an equal task to that of workers in Russia, whose education sometimes largely came from the party itself. In the West, Carr argues, where an "already highly developed" bourgeois democratic tradition existed, the Bolsheviks misunderstood a task which was "different from anything that had confronted…[them], and far more subtle and complicated…this difference explains why the prescriptions offered to the West

[163] Carr, op. cit. 181

by the Bolsheviks, and afterwards by Comintern, so often seemed inadequate and inapplicable."[164]

To give an example, Lenin sent a letter to German Communists after Levi split the Party in October of 1919. Upon hearing the news, Lenin urged the Party not to split if agreement still existed on the question of supporting the "Soviets" against bourgeois parliamentarianism. Interestingly enough, he saw the danger of splitting the Party in terms of maintaining unity on the left against the "Kautskyites," or what he saw as leftists akin to Social Democracy.[165] What is interesting is that he prioritized eliminating any favorable SPD influences over kicking out the anarchist-influenced membership. This was in part due to his misunderstanding of the conditions in Germany. One of the biggest disagreements between European socialists and the Bolsheviks was precisely the question of whether socialists should ally themselves with the ultra-radical left or the moderate left. Defending the latter position were those who sought to ally themselves either with parties closer to Social Democracy (both the SPD and the USPD[166]) and push them further to the left, as opposed to others who wanted ally with the borderline-anarchist left that sought action and slow down their enthusiasm. For Lenin and many other Bolsheviks, the second was a safer course, offering a guarantee that Communists would be involved in actions and not hesitate to strike when necessary. For Communists such as Levi however, a safer course meant allying the Communists with the left wing of Social Democracy and carefully showing the masses why reformism would not work. According to Angress:

> Levi's attitude was determined by his basic disagreement with the Bolsheviks on what direction the future course of the KPD should take. Lenin continued to believe that the mass of workers in western Europe were fundamentally revolutionary, and were only restrained by their "opportunist" leaders from throwing their

[164] Ibid. 181
[165] Carr op. cit. 139-140
[166] Independent Social Democratic Party. Formed before the end of the war as a split with the SPD, and whose left wing would house the Spartacus League later on.

> lot with the Communists. Once these leaders were removed from their positions of influence, the rank and file would soon support the only true revolutionary movement—Communism. Levi, the disciple of Rosa Luxemburg, and far more skeptical than she had ever been, was convinced that in Germany, at least, the process of revolutionizing large masses of workers would be a long and difficult uphill struggle…Both men wanted the left wing of the USPD to join the Comintern, preparatory to a subsequent merger with the KPD. But whereas Levi was primarily interested in facilitating this political marriage by being conciliatory to the Independents, Lenin was more concerned with devising safeguards against the possibility that a merger would bring "opportunist" elements into the Communist movement. To guard against the danger of creating a mass party in which lukewarm revolutionary sentiments might prevail, the Bolshevik leaders toyed with the idea of bringing into the projected party the same radical firebrands who had split away from the KPD at Heidelberg in October 1919. Apparently Moscow deemed comrades afflicted with "left-wing infantile disorders" less dangerous to the cause than proletarians suffering from the cancer of "reformism" or "opportunism.[167]

Isolated from the conditions Germans were working in, Lenin found it hard to understand Levi's and others' pessimism and skepticism for the prospects of a revolution inside their countries. The pessimistic attitude however was specific to Levi and only a few others internationally at the time. Many other European Communist leaders respected and trusted the Bolsheviks almost unconditionally, even if they disagreed with them. Serrati, who would later be kicked out of the Comintern along with half of the PSI, would still say at this point: "What am I [exclaimed Serrati] compared with comrade Lenin? He is the leader of the Russian revolution. I represent a tiny communist socialist party."[168]

As Carr notes, 1919 was a year of defeats for the Communists, especially with the failures in Bavaria and Hungary. While Radek disagreed with Levi on the question of splitting the party,

[167] Angress op. cit. p. 65-66
[168] Carr op. cit. 199

he did however agree (for a while at least) that revolution was not around the corner, but rather would take time to build. Carr quotes Levi in summarizing this point of view:

> The revolution, which consists not of a single blow but of the long stubborn struggle of a class downtrodden for thousands of years and therefore naturally not yet fully conscious of its task and its strength, is exposed to a process of rise and fall, of flow and ebb….The notion that mass movements can be created on the strength of a particular form of organization, that the revolution is therefore a question of organizational form, is rejected as a relapse into petty-bourgeois utopianism.[169]

This is a belief he already held in March of 1919, a view the Comintern would only *begin* to agree with mid-1921. Levi, however, was not alone. In November of 1919, Radek, Levi, and Zetkin all drafted theses for the "western European secretariat of Comintern,"[170] a document outlining European conditions and prospects for revolution, all agreeing that "revolution, even on a European scale, will be a prolonged process." [171] Soon after these theses were published, Nikolai Bukharin[172] criticized this idea of revolution upon meeting with Radek in Moscow.[173] This fundamental disagreement between Europeans and Russians provided the context for Levi's trouble both at home with Bolshevik-minded Germans, and abroad with the Bolsheviks themselves. In 1919, however, the first congress showed a relatively open-minded attitude on the question of different Socialist parties around the world. This congress differed from the second, held in 1920, in two aspects. At the time of the first congress, the Civil War isolated Russia, but also kept the Bolsheviks separate from Europe. The isolation and weakness of the Russians at the first congress contrasted however with the peering eyes and confidence of Russians in the

---

[169] Carr op. cit. 139
[170] This organization was intended to be the European office of the Comintern, providing information to Moscow on Europe and how developments progressed there. It was quickly dissolved however after a competing organization appeared in Amsterdam and often contradicted the German-led group.
[171] Carr. op. cit. 140
[172] The main theoretician of the Comintern after Zinoviev's departure in 1926.
[173] Carr. op. cit. 140

second. 1920 was the big year for the Comintern, but also described by *Die Rote Fahne* as a year of "Crises everywhere. Solutions nowhere: this is the signature of the year 1920."[174]

In the second congress, the Bolsheviks saw themselves as having the possibility of defeating the Polish army and moving into Europe with the Soviet army. The civil war took the Red Army closer and closer each day into Europe, convincing many that the arrival of Bolshevik soldiers would inspire a working class uprising in Poland and Germany. According to Zinoviev, at one point during the 2nd congress Lenin invited three Germans to speak, including Levi. He claimed that according to Leon Trotsky's estimates, the Soviets would arrive in Germany within a few days. Lenin then asked them: "In your opinion Comrades, what forms will the uprising take?" The three Germans could not believe what he proposed, and thought it absurd. Ernst Meyer gave a skeptical response which angered Lenin, and upon directing the question at Levi, the latter remained silent. Lenin ended by saying "In any case, you ought to know that we of the Central Committee [of the Russian C.P.] hold quite a different opinion."[175] This sort of thinking informed the "theory of the offensive."[176] During most of the 2nd congress the Russians spoke with great confidence, thinking that they would definitely win the war and bring with it revolution to Europe.

The second congress made many key decisions, and it was in this context of Bolshevik confidence that the 21 conditions were drafted and approved by the ECCI.[177] These were not conditions to be negotiated, but rather fully accepted without exception for any party or organization that wished to join the Comintern. Among these conditions were the requirement that all Communist parties switch their name from "Socialist" to "Communist," and that they

[174] Cited in Angress op. cit. 86
[175] Ibid. 67
[176] See below in discussion of March Action.
[177] The central committee of the Comintern.

combine legal and "illegal" work. Two of the conditions, 20 and 21, were particularly upsetting to many European parties. The first required that at least two-thirds of the affiliates' new central committees be associated with the Comintern prior to the 2nd world congress, and the last condition stipulated that all members who did not abide by these conditions had to be expelled from the new parties automatically. This created tension as it put many potential affiliates in a situation where their parties were *forced* to split or otherwise not join. This was essentially the case with the Halle congress discussed above where the USPD split. This, however, was a success story, which was not the general trend. As we will see below, in Italy the PSI, who wanted to join *en bloc* yet disagreed with one or two conditions, was forced to split into a much smaller party.

Broué talks about the difficulties in the composition of the ECCI during this time as well, whose members' "experience was limited, not to say rudimentary, and many showed distinct leftist tendencies. They knew little about the workers' movement of Western Europe, and, on the other hand, were convinced of the superiority of the Russian experience, with which they felt closely identified."[178] These members were the ones who would be sent throughout Europe as representatives of the Comintern, and who, in many cases, led pushes to split parties or make other key decisions in organizations whose histories they did not understand.

Latin America for example is an interesting case study for the Comintern's weaknesses in this regard. Manuel Caballero's book *Latin America and the Comintern 1919-1943*[179] gives an overview of the somewhat obscure history of the International in Latin America, a region the Comintern "discovered"[180] only in 1928. His account is important in that it highlights the tight

[178] Broué op. cit. 872
[179] Caballero, Manuel. *Latin America and the Comintern 1919-1943* Cambridge University Press 2002 (1986).
[180] See ibid. Chapter 4 "The Discovery of America" p. 65-75. What is meant by this is that before 1928 the Comintern generally ignored Latin America as a region with revolutionary potential.

control the International held over the region even as early as 1919, many times giving precedence to Russian or European voices on key decisions affecting the strategy and tactics of the parties dealing with completely different conditions than those seen in Europe at the time. At the second congress for example, M.N. Roy, a well-known Indian Communist[181], struggled to convince the present delegates that perhaps Europe was only one of the *many* foci of struggle worldwide, arguing that without the aid of colonial peoples capitalism would not fall.[182] This was not well-received at first, as Zinoviev, being at the head of the International, still held the 'orthodox' view that industrialized nations would lead the 'backwards' peasant nations in the struggle against capitalism.[183] Many of the Parties in the continent had little to no say in their own decision-making, and an illustrative example was the fact that M.N. Roy would be one of the founders of the Mexican Communist Party, and the main theoretician of Latin America for the Comintern was a Swiss Communist Jules Humbert-Droz. It was the fact that the Comintern so early on had this tremendous power that created rifts early on, as well as bad understandings of other countries' and Parties' conditions.

Both Broué[184] and Caballero[185] agree that the commonly held notion that the Comintern only later became a highly vertical organization was a myth. At the second congress in 1920 it was decided that at every convention of the Communist International, a vote would be held to determine how much voting power each section would have. The Executive Committee however had the last word on these decisions, and early on also had the power to expel both individuals and entire parties. There was also the fact that many Communists at the time stood completely against the practice of 'Federalism,' something they saw as stemming from the worst practices of

[181] Also, incidentally, the founder of the Mexican Communist Party.
[182] Caballero op. cit. p. 21
[183] Ibid. 78
[184] See Broué op. cit. "The Problems of Centrism"
[185] Ibid. 17

Social Democracy. [186] In practice, this meant that giving different parties the ability to design different strategies for different contexts and political situations was out of the question. This could to an extent explain why it was difficult for people like Levi to argue for a different strategy, for Roy to argue for the colonial peoples, and for Latin Americans and move away from the idea of the industrial proletariat as the leader of revolution and to offer a different perspective in majority-peasant countries. None of this is not to say that the task the Comintern faced was easy. On the contrary, in 1920 it not only held a Congress for Europe, but also the famous Baku Congress in Azerbaijan designed for the "Peoples of the East" had an attendance in the tens of hundreds representing dozens of countries. There is no doubt that the Comintern, at least at first, worked primarily to serve its goal as the party of world revolution.

Nevertheless by 1921 a then still isolated Soviet Russia signed a commercial treaty with Great Britain in order to alleviate the economic strain. As the plan of strengthening the revolution through further revolutions slowed down, the Soviet government saw itself for the first time negotiating between foreign policy as *government* and foreign policy for *revolution*. In case the worldwide revolution failed, good relations with other countries would be necessary to improve trade. Caballero shares an anecdote from the second Congress, where M.N. Roy protested over the fact that the congress refused to condemn a massacre of former delegates at the hands of Kamal Pasha followers in Turkey. "The desire to maintain good relations with both Turkey and England, which the encircled Soviet government needed so badly, weighed heavily upon the Comintern."[187] While early on this contradiction remained contingent, later on the Comintern would begin to favor protection and defense of the Soviet Union over the project of

[186] Ibid. p. 17, p. 25
[187] Ibid. p. 22

world revolution.[188] In 1920 this was not yet the case, but it did soon become evident that the structure of the Comintern and its actions alienated many potential allies away, and would in turn alienate them from the masses they wanted to lead to revolution.

Conflicts within the VKPD, the 'Italian Question,' and Levi's Resignation

After the Halle Congress, with the VKPD as the new party, in January 1921 the Communist leadership (Levi and Radek) wrote a letter to appeal to "to all the workers' organisations, parties, and trade unions"[189] alike to agree to certain conditions, such as arming of workers for self-defense, defending workers' living standards, among other demands.[190] While the union leadership throughout the country rejected the letter and most historians such as Angress[191] and Carr[192] wrote that this appeal was not successful as a tactic, Broué showed in more detail that it was.[193] The list of demands in the letter appealed to rank-and-file workers who saw their leaders turning against demands they saw as legitimate, and the tactic pushed the executive of the ADGB[194] to threaten to expel any unions that endorsed it. As members, union leaders, and union locals were expelled, these were encouraged by Communists to form assemblies and push the conservative leadership to listen to their demands. In cities such as Essen, Halle, Chemnitz, Leipzig, Berlin and others, workers made demands to their conservative union leadership, and in the following union elections, Communists made various gains in a variety of union locals.[195] The following month, the leadership of the national German trade unions presented many of the same demands to the SPD government, showing the widespread influence of the tactic despite leadership opposition. This was also a great example of the sort of strategy Levi had in mind, one

[188] Ibid. p. 150-151
[189] Broué op. cit. 470
[190] Harman, op. cit. p. 207
[191] Angress. op. cit. 92
[192] Carr. op. cit 332-333
[193] Broué. op. cit. 471-472
[194] *Allgemeiner Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund*, the confederation of German trade unions founded in 1919.
[195] Broué op. cit. 472

where workers came before the party, and one where they would lead struggles throughout the country, instead of the rank and file trying to take over government or use force.

The problem with this tactic however is that while it was popular with many, it infuriated the ECCI[196] due to their logic that this was a 'rightist' tactic and therefore avoided revolutionary action, as well as confusing much of the new membership that had "opted for joining the KPD…in the belief that world revolution was imminent, and that their new Party would soon lead them into action."[197] This would begin to recreate tension within the Party, as well as reaffirm the ECCI's opposition to Levi and his leadership. Levi had also pursued a political tactic many found strange. On February 2nd of that year, he gave a speech to the Reichstag calling for a German alliance with Soviet Russia, arguing that Germany currently existed as an "oppressed nation" and that in its isolation should seek friendship with Soviet Russia, the "leader of the oppressed throughout the world."[198] Overall it was a speech against the Versailles treaty and for unity with a sentiment many shared across political lines in Germany, namely that Soviet Russia was not only an important potential ally, but was also the best ally against the allied powers. He therefore called to "join the front of the oppressed" in an effort to make propaganda. While this political move seems odd, if Carr is right, then in Germany there was a great deal of pro-Russian sentiment, even from the conservative military forces, who sought a practical means to fight against the Allied powers.[199] It was also true that more workers than those within the KPD liked and looked up to Russia as an example.

However, the ECCI and many other Communists in Germany saw that these sorts of political moves were seen as obstructing the Party's potential during what they believed was a

[196] The central leadership of the Comintern.
[197] Angress, op. cit. p. 90
[198] Angress. op. cit. 94
[199] See Carr op. cit. "Russia and Germany"

time for revolutionary action. While Lenin and Trotsky had been in agreement with Levi on most decisions he had made up until then,[200] many members of the Comintern were not, especially when they began to see him as a "right" Communist, in particular due to his willingness to work with Social Democrats at a time when most Communists were outright hostile to them, and in accordance with their misunderstandings of the situation from far away. These sorts of tactics not only created mistrust and tension between Russian and German Communists, but also led to political ruptures within other parties in Europe, such as the Italian PSI.

On January 15th 1921, the PSI met for its Party congress in Leghorn, and by the end of the day the Party was split. One of the main points of discussion on the agenda was centered on the 2nd Comintern congress and the application of the 21 conditions to the PSI. This was the equivalent for the PSI as the Halle congress had been for the USPD. Three different points of view developed in the course of the congress, one being the 'right' perspective which rejected the use of violence and the dictatorship of the proletariat, the second being that of the left-wing led by Bordiga and Gramsci who saw the need to immediately apply all 21 conditions, and lastly the 'Unity Communists' led by Serrati who did not see the need for a split with the right wing, and who rather wanted to have a long discussion so that the party could apply the 21 conditions for specific Italian conditions, without splitting the Party. He and others thought that there was no need to change the name from 'Socialist' to 'Communist' for example, as their Party had successfully opposed the war and had not betrayed their principles. Serrati had also agreed with the 21 conditions at the second congress of the Comintern, but had said that he wanted to wait until conditions were right to expel the right wing,[201] considering that he believed most of the

[200] Broué makes this case throughout his book, showing how Lenin endorsed almost all of Levi's tactics at the time.
[201] He specifically wanted to wait until the right wing of the Party made an 'opportunist' decision, which would show that they were not with the revolution or Italian workers.

Party would otherwise not understand why a split was necessary.[202] Two guests of crucial importance were there, which would greatly influence the outcome of the meeting: ECCI representatives Matyas Rakosi and Kristo Kabakchiev, both of whom were instructed by the Executive of the Comintern to get the 21 conditions applied without delay, even if that meant losing Serrati and his followers.[203] Much of the Comintern thought they had already seen enough in the past year to determine that Serrati was an 'opportunist,' especially after his failure to support the large uprisings in 1920.

Italy's Party came out of a failed revolutionary upsurge in their own country from 1919-1920, known as the *Biennio Rosso*, or the 'two red years.' During this period, peasants in in impoverished areas took over land and workers took over factories, creating councils much like those in Russia and Germany. While many saw this as a revolutionary opportunity, the PSI in general remained silent and refused to aid these workers and peasants. By late 1920 the revolutionary wave was over however, and a wave of repression followed, giving Fascism in Italy a decisive impetus to grow.

Although Hallas presents the actions of Serrati and others in the PSI as a misguided failure,[204] it is important to keep in mind that not only did the PSI leadership believe it was acting with Lenin's approval, but it they also had one of his letters with which they supported their actions, specifically Serrati. Lindemann writes that the letter "warned the party to exercise great care before taking revolutionary action and specifically advised that before a proletarian dictatorship could be established it would be necessary to have the support not only of "all of the industrial proletariat" but equally that of the rural proletariat…support the party certainly did not have by late 1919 or early 1920. Thus Moscow seemed to be recommending a postponement of

[202] Broué op. cit. 475
[203] Ibid. 477
[204] Hallas op. cit. 57-62

revolutionary action for some time…"[205] This statement went against the revolutionary action Bordiga and other radicals proposed at the time, giving Serrati more legitimacy. Similarly, it gave Serrati Lenin's support, much as was the case with Levi. All of this is important to note because when the split finally came in the Italian party, the Comintern turned entirely against Serrati and in favor of Bordiga, who would lead the PCI the (Communist party of Italy), after the split. It was difficult to discern at times what the Comintern agreed or disagreed with, and who they would favor at any given time. There was also a trend at times when it was unclear who was in charge in Russia, and whose messages were considered valid when many sought leadership from the Bolsheviks. There were times when Lenin would send approving letters but the Comintern Executive would send opposite messages, and vice versa. At many times during this period of difficult communication, letters would be lost along the way, intercepted by police or purposefully withheld by members seeking to gain advantage. Due to the few channels of communication and the difficulties travelling between the Soviet Union and Germany, it was overall difficult to keep everyone up to date on the situation in their respective countries. Hallas, although acknowledging that Serrati and others in the 'centrist' section of the PSI failed to lead or aid Italian workers during the revolutionary upheavals in 1920, nevertheless thought the split was rash, and pushed away a massive section of the party with great potential.[206] The fact that in 1924 Serrati led the left wing of the PSI to join the Italian Communist party shows that his expulsion was problematic, as too early on the Party cut itself off from a great deal of influence it could otherwise have had while Fascism grew in numbers.

[205] Lindemann op. cit. 116
[206] Ibid. 60-61

On February 24, 1921 Levi made a speech[207] to the Zentrale of the VKPD on a variety of topics, in particular the ECCI, the KAPD, and the "Italian question."[208] In the first place, Levi already began to feel uncomfortable with the ECCI making an agreement to accept a KAPD presence at various talks, and eventually at the congress. They were not given the right to vote, but they were invited to speak at the Congress and in many ways the ECCI gave priority to them over the KPD, due to the ECCI's priority pushing the KPD back into revolutionary action. He also was fundamentally frustrated with the fact that the ECCI had rushed a split within the Italian party, and though he knew little about their political situation and conditions, he found Serrati's position at the 2nd congress agreeable, and felt he could relate to it. Levi was also present at the meeting in Leghorn, and could not believe that how the ECCI emissaries had acted. This was only the beginning of an issue that would lead to his departure and split with the party later on. The VKPD was therefore not consulted on whether the KAPD should be allowed to be at the congress, showing an attitude that began to mark Moscow's policies from then on.

Here he also outlined for the first time the idea that Communists in Germany should have "offensive" tactics for the Party, but with a specific meaning. By this he meant that the Communists "do not damp down from any conflicts that arise, but, rather, bring them to a head, sharpen them, and do all we can to force the bourgeoisie not to delay its conflicts but to fight them out directly and immediately…our task is to bring matters to a head so that the German bourgeoisie is forced into a violent resolution of its differences and forces to fight out the conflict now and at this moment."[209] This important passage shows how Levi understood the strategic

---

[207] Fernbach, *The Beginning of the Crisis in the Communist Party and the International* op. cit. 95

[208] A debate that took place at the Second Comintern Congress over the question of membership into the International by the Italian Socialists. Levi argued that the Comintern should work with Serrati as he had trade unions on his side, whereas others argued that only the Socialists that accepted the 21 conditions for membership to the International set in the first congress could join. The latter would win, and this would later be used against Levi as evidence of standing against the Comintern.

[209] Fernbach, op. cit. 95

escalation of conflicts, unlike other Communists. What he is saying is that Communists must "force" the bourgeoisie into a violent conflict, meaning that the bourgeoisie would fire first. As the Kapp-Putsch showed, a clear first aggression on the side of the right-wing movement led to a massive general strike against them. The open letter tactic had placed rank-and-file against union leadership (many of which were tied to the SPD and USPD), and so the idea was to force the bourgeoisie to use violence or make mistakes at a time of crisis, so that those who stood with them did so openly, leading the workers away from the other Socialists and toward the Communists. This was similar to the aforementioned tactic Levi had proposed after the Kapp-Putsch of rearming workers to push the SPD into the offensive against them. By forcing the Social Democrats to act first, it would expose their allies in the military and their political priorities, giving Communists an excuse to propose an alliance with Soviet Russia as a solution to work against their own bourgeois government.

His discussion of the Italian question however was the more detailed in his speech than other analyses. Levi pursued what to him seemed like the best politics to stay in touch with the masses, as he usually did. In this case, Serrati, whose politics at the time were closer to the USPD than the Communists (and whose had many more connections to trade-unions), in general accepted the 21 conditions of the Communist International but had a few objections. In this context the hard-liners from the ECCI and many others outright objected any compromise, whereas Levi saw a situation where the majority of Italian workers were willing to work with the Communist International, on the condition that their leaders accept as well. This latter point was the point of contention, and Levi made himself clear:

> We would have been able to reach the masses, but only by also taking their leaders. And that we refused to do…It is correct that the majority of Italian Communists support the Third International and acknowledge their adherence to it, but, organisationally, they remain outside of it…How are we to proceed with the

> construction of a Communist Party in Western Europe? One thing first of all: the Communist International can be one of two things; it can either be an organisation of Communists in the strictest and most exclusive sense, or it can be the organisation of the masses whose political understanding is not something firmly fixed, but who are led by Communists and, above all, are prepared to accept Communist discipline.[210]

For Levi, tactics and strategy should be flexible so as to incorporate the masses into their ranks. He saw a better path forward as one where they could incorporate more people into their ranks, and over time teach them through "mutual political learning and experiencing"[211] that would shape both the new members and the Communists themselves. His most important statement on the Italian question came toward the end of his speech as he said that the masses "are told Serrati is a traitor. The masses do not re-adjust their ideas that quickly; they have to recognise, from the concrete questions of their daily struggle, that a split is necessary."[212] He protested at the way he saw the ECCI had prematurely split up a Party with no need to do so.

Nevertheless, despite his careful theoretical arguments, one of the emissaries of the Comintern had followed him to Berlin after Leghorn. Two days before Levi gave his speech addressing the Italian question and his issues with the ECCI, Rakosi made a stop at the KPD Zentrale's meeting. He made a violent attack against Levi, accusing him of supporting Serrati's 'tendency' against the ECCI. He demanded that the Zentrale take back its conciliatory statement from February 1st of that month[213] and that they stand with the ECCI's position. The Zentrale voted this down, but Rakosi continued. He made a threat to Levi and the Zentrale, saying that the split at Leghorn should serve as an example to them, and that if necessary there would be "splits, ten times over if need be, whether in Italy, France or Germany, in the interests of political

[210] Fernbach, op. cit. 103
[211] Ibid. 104
[212] Ibid. 110
[213] Broué op. cit. 486 A statement in support of Serrati.

clarity."[214] Later in the meeting, two members of the Zentrale reintroduced the motion put forth by Rakosi, and this time it passed by 28 votes to 23, condemning the February 1st statement and showing its support for the ECCI over Levi. Days later, the co-chairmen of the Zentrale Levi and Däumig, as well as three other leading members of the committee resigned in protest of what had taken place. Radek and Zinoviev later rejoiced that Levi had left, and even believed that he had been treated too lightly.[215]

The March Action and Levi's Departure

The word "disaster" is not enough to describe the effect that the March action had on the German left. Whatever trust the Communists had developed over two years with the German people was now gone,[216] and while they would later be able to regain it slowly throughout the Weimar period, the membership in the Party would never again reach the levels of pre-March 1921.[217] In his own words in the opening of *Unser Weg,*[218] Levi described the consequences: "At the time that I planned this pamphlet, Germany had a Communist Party with half a million members. When I came to write it eight days later, this Communist Party was shaken to its foundations, and its very existence put in question."[219] This event also illuminates some of the most extreme issues with Russian (particularly the ECCI) involvement in the Party.

In the early days of March 1921, three emissaries of the ECCI arrived in Germany, most notable among them Bela Kun, the former leader of the Hungarian uprising.[220] As Carr relates, Kun, along with Rakosi and other Hungarians, were exiled after their short-lived government fell. They moved first to Vienna, but were forced to flee from there as well. Exiled in Russia,

---

[214] Ibid. 486
[215] Ibid. 487
[216] Most importantly, the roughly 500,000 people who voted for the Party, and the numbers of workers in crucial regions throughout Germany that followed them.
[217] Fowkes op. cit. 205.
[218] Discussed below.
[219] Broué op. cit. 119
[220] Angress, op. cit. 119-120

they were given a place in the ECCI, with responsibilities "out of all proportion."[221]All of these members found a home in the central committee of the Comintern, positions with responsibility that, in cases such as this one, conferred a great authority on their words and advice to other Communists. Their purpose in Germany this time was unknown, and it was also generally unknown to most sources as to why the emissaries were sent in the first place.[222] However, a general trend seemed to have been growing at the time internationally with regards to what next steps should be taken in Germany after Levi's resignation.

Broué brings to light the mood of the ECCI after Levi's resignation, focusing on Karl Radek as their messenger. There was both talk of a "passivity" in the German Party combined with Radek's statement on behalf of the ECCI calling for the German Party to be "activated."[223] From his writing we can see a general mood in the ECCI and among Russians that the VKPD was too inactive, and that it was missing chances of responding to the alleged radicalization taking place throughout Germany. There was too much propaganda, too little action, and Levi was seen as the main cause of this inertia. Radek also blamed other members of the *Zentrale* of being too "conciliatory" with Levi, and that it was time to move past him. One can get a sense from a confidential letter Karl Radek sent to various members of the *Zentrale* of these ideas at the time:

> Levi…is engaged with dividing the Party in a catastrophic way…No one here is thinking of a mechanical split, nor of a split of any kind, in Germany. Our task is to make the left wing the leading force…Everything depends on the world situation. If the division between Germany and the Entente widens, and in the event of war with Poland, we shall speak. It is precisely because these possibilities exist that you must do all you can to mobilise the Party…If today you do not do everything, by incessant pressure for action, to impart to the Communist masses the idea that they need to engage in action, you will

[221] Carr, op. cit. 166
[222] Broué op. cit. 492, Angress op. cit. 119-120
[223] Broué op. cit. 491

> again let slip a decisive moment. In this moment of political decisions of worldwide significance, think less about the 'radical' formula than about action, setting the masses in motion. In the event that war comes, think not about peace or about mere protests, but about taking up arms.[224]

This passage from him is attune to Carr's comment that Radek's opinions were "notoriously volatile."[225] His politics since the beginning of the November Revolution changed day to day, depending on the circumstances. Reflecting on the Spartacist uprising, he said "It is not possible to seize power if we do not have the majority of the working class behind us."[226] This statement can be contrasted a statement he wrote for the VKPD's congress, a statement placed before the congress and passed with little discussion. In it, he claims that a Party of "hundreds of thousands" must not win supporters through "propaganda" but through "deeds," a statement later used by Communists to justify armed insurrection.[227] This statement was clearly aimed at Levi, as Radek, like other members of the ECCI, grew more impatient with him day by day.

As mentioned above, it was also the case that many of the former USPD members in the new VKPD were members looking for action and revolution. The growth in the membership of the Party and its new influence among unions was a sign for many that the Party had new, powerful capabilities throughout Germany. Angress adds further detail when he comments that the spirit of the new rank and file "was in sharp contrast to the continued cautious policies of Levi. The result was a progressive dissatisfaction with the *Zentrale* among the Party membership, a development which…led to an increase of independent activities on the part of local Communist organizations. By far the most serious effect of this trend was an increase in

---

[224] Cited in Broué op. cit. 492
[225] Carr, op. cit. 338 (footnote)
[226] Cited in Broué, op. cit. 287
[227] Angress. op. cit. 75

sporadic underground work."[228] The new large Party only had a few months as a united organization behind it, and as such still did not function as a cohesive whole. The importance in this regard is that the growing intolerance of the ECCI for a seemingly passive *Zentrale* coincided almost perfectly with a growing impatience of the members of the Party who wanted action and revolution.

It was against this backdrop that Kun arrived in Germany. Rakosi who had already showed his character at Leghorn, was with him. Broué described Kun in a dreadful manner, referencing his leadership in Hungary during the Hungarian Soviet Republic:

> [Kun] had 'White' prisoners from Wrangel's army executed, in breach of the pledge given to them. Lenin spoke at first of having [Kun] shot, but finally was satisfied with sending him on a mission to Turkestan. Kun was a courageous but mediocre man. Lenin never concealed his low estimation of him, and that he was partly responsible, thanks to his opportunist errors, for the final collapse of the Hungarian conciliar republic…He was vigorously opposed amongst the Hungarian emigres, criticized particularly for his use of factional methods, and for not shrinking either from threatening or corrupting people. Nonetheless, he was an important figure, a member of the ECCI…and his work there caused him to be regarded as an unconditional supporter of Zinoviev.[229]

It is not certain what Kun was doing in Germany, but it is clear that he met with various Communists leaders, and argued for what would be called the "theory of the offensive." Broué seems to imply that from the evidence available at the time, Kun acted on his own accord, with the expectation that the ECCI would support his actions.[230] As he spoke to various members, he encouraged them to think about taking the offensive, even if it meant provoking an action through sabotage. He also spread the idea that war between Britain and the United States was imminent, something Levi later used against him. The general mood of Communists in 1921 had

---

[228] Angress op. cit. 105
[229] Broué, op. cit. 493
[230] Ibid. 494

moved so far to the left that at the third congress of the Comintern, Lenin would later say that the only correct political stance he could take was on the "extreme right flank."[231]

A series of confusing and unclear circumstances early in 1921 led the Communist Party to call on workers to start an insurrection, one which led to brutal repression, arrests, deaths, and a general distancing of workers from the Party. What happened in March of 1921, is that after having resigned from the Zentrale over the Italian question and Rakosi's involvement Levi left town to go to Leghorn and continue speaking with his Italian comrades on the subject matter. In the meantime, the German government in Prussian Saxony took a bomb plot in Berlin[232] as an excuse to begin investigating Communists and harassing workers who still had weapons in the region which had been a Communist stronghold for a few months now.[233] The province had been in a state of siege for various months in 1920, as it was one of the most radicalized industrial areas in the country. Workers here would regularly call unexpected strikes, steal equipment from their workplaces, and would sometimes even attack guards.[234] Military officials falsely reported that the Communists were building an army and were planning a putsch, using this as an excuse to send policemen to Mansfeld.[235] This action happened to coincide with Kun's idea to start the revolution, making official claims partly true, as *Zentrale* called for every worker to take up arms on March 17th.[236] While this slogan in itself seemed to be calling for a defensive measure, in fact the KPD soon showed that it wanted more. On March 20th *Die Rote Fahne* published an article threatening both USPD and SPD workers, with the title "He Who Is Not For Me Is Against Me!"

---

[231] Hallas op. cit. 57
[232] The KPD and East German historians claimed the government organized the plot itself.
[233] In the Prussian elections in 1921, the KPD obtained 197,113 votes next to the USPD with 74,754 and the SPD with 70, 340.
[234] Angress op. cit. 128
[235] It is true that throughout Germany many workers and Communists still had weapons hidden. However, what is not true is that the KPD was in charge of any of these small armies. See Angress op. cit. "Genesis of the March Uprising"
[236] Angress op. cit. 142

and called for workers to string their leaders from lampposts. Meanwhile, the SPD used its newspapers to call for the workers in the region to avoid being provoked by the actions of the police, and to avoid violent conflict. The Zentrale of KPD had directed the Halle district members to start revolutionary action immediately. Local KPD Party leaders used false information to tell their Party members that armed uprisings were widespread, and that fighting had already begun in the region.[237] On March 21st, the Party called for a general strike, yet workers did not respond. At this point the Party decided it would do everything in its power to provoke an armed uprising. Local leaders were now skeptical, but a *Zentrale* KPD member was now in the region calling for a mock-kidnapping, violence against local workers, and attempting to dynamite a factory and a worker's cooperative, all with the intention of 'arousing the masses' from their 'passive attitude.' None of these were successful, and when violence did break out, it was not under the control of the Communists. In the meantime, the KAPD refused to work with the KPD in the midst of the insurrection. The KPD managed to destroy railways however, which only alienated railway workers from the cause.[238] In an attempt to spread the insurrection once it began, the KPD called for a strike in Berlin in solidarity, but as their facts and information were wrong, they changed the information halfway through the call for protest, and the response was minimal.[239] Only in Hamburg did the Party have some success, yet only with the unemployed.

Overall, the Party did not have the confidence of the majority of German workers, who in many cases did not understand their calls for violence, and were alienated when violence was used against them. Whatever armed struggles took place where small, scattered, and generally only antagonized the workers they sought to incite into action. Numerous people were injured

[237] Ibid. 144
[238] Ibid.149
[239] Ibid. 155

and killed, and by summer of this same year, the Party's numbers dropped by over 100,000 members.[240]

Whether the government actually provoked the Communists, or whether it was simply Bela Kun's influence, Communists managed to use extremely violent methods in pursuing what was called the "theory of the offensive," or the idea that revolution was imminent and that Communists had to escalate conflicts as much as they could. Some Communists went into workplaces, attacked those that worked there, and took their weapons. Broué describes the extreme actions some Communists carried out: "[They] used every means, including force, to attempt to set off a general strike. Groups of activists tried to occupy factories by surprise in order to prevent the entry of the great mass of non-Communist workers, whom they called 'scabs'. Elsewhere, groups of unemployed clashed with workers on their way to work or at the factories."[241] It was later revealed that Bela Kun had come to Germany to push this theory forward, and there was speculation that this theory had been driven by the Russians' desire to escape the isolationism and avoid having to continue the policy of the NEP.

Outside the Party: The Struggle Levi's Struggle with the ECCI

Levi's most well-known work is *Our Path: Against Putschism*[242] usually referred by its shortened name in German, *Unser Weg*. In it, Levi outlines what he believes to be the tactics and strategies of Communists as against other radicals, notably anarchist (or those Communists, who, according to Levi acted in a similar fashion) influences in Communist theory and practice. It was a direct response to the March Action and its consequences. It was also controversial when published due to the fact that it publicly criticized the Party at a time when it was weak. In Communist circles this was seen as a dangerous move that could endanger the Party, as he broke

[240] Ibid. 168
[241] Broué op. cit. 501
[242] Fernbach, op. cit. *Our Path: Against Putschism*

with 'Party discipline,' and Party discipline was enforced to ensure at least the appearance of unity toward the public after a disaster. Leading Bolsheviks and Communists writing on behalf of the Comintern called Paul Levi a 'traitor,'[243] yet also said "even if Paul Levi were nine-tenths right in his views on the March offensive, he would still be liable to expulsion from the Party because of his unprecedented violation of discipline and because, by his action, in the given circumstances, he dealt the Party a blow in the back."[244] This pamphlet would for the most part seal his expulsion from the Party entirely, even if he would later defend himself in *What is the Crime: The March Action or Criticizing it?*[245] against various accusations.

In the first pamphlet, Levi spoke to the Party in a harsh tone attempting to explain why their understanding of revolution, state power, and insurrection were all wrong. He said that a major mistake many Communists made was seeing only the proletariat, and failing to understand the "relationship of Communists to all other classes and strata in the struggle against capitalism, who all work together for the fall of the bourgeoisie."[246] Here he made an argument for recruitment of the petty-bourgeoisie and 'non-proletarian' workers, whom he saw as 'all anti-bourgeois,' thus also pushing the Communist Party to expand its horizons. He encouraged Communists to look at and understand the peasantry and artisans, whose class interests varied from place to place and depending on their social conditions. Sarcastically, he wrote that while Communists' theories proposed that these classes would fade away with the further development of industry, "if someone is going to die, you do not win them as a friend by prophesying their death each day."[247]

---

[243] Broué op. cit. 530
[244] Ibid. 531
[245] Fernbach, op. cit. *What is the Crime: The March Action or Criticizing it?*
[246] Ibid. 123
[247] Ibid. 126

He gave an overview of what conditions existed in Russia before the Bolsheviks took power and then compared them with Germany. He also provided a list of statistics showing the numbers of votes Communists had in different regions throughout Germany and compared them with the SPD and the USPD. Levi laid out a careful argument under three subsections so that readers could understand what the conditions were in Germany before the uprising and why these were not sufficient for any form of revolutionary takeover: a) "What is the numerical relationship of the German Communists to the German proletariat?" b) "What are the preconditions for a conquest of state-power by the proletariat?" and c) "How is state-power to be conquered?"[248] In the first case, Levi showed that compared to the USPD and the SPD, in the Prussian parliamentary elections of 1921 the KPD made up a fifth of the total votes for what he called 'workers parties.'[249] Within these, he stated that within the unionized movement, out of roughly 7 million workers, Communists could say that one in sixteen or one in fourteen were Communists, which though it seemed low, was "nothing to be afraid of. For, in revolutionary situations, such proportions shift very quickly, while, on top of the numerical influence, there is also, or should be, the intellectual influence."[250] He quoted Lenin in this article to remind his audience that while bourgeois elections were not a means to take state power, they did indicate the inclination of those voters to solve the political problems which faced them. He stressed this because he knew that both within the VKPD and the KAPD there were still many who doubted the importance at all parliamentary elections, which Levi found important as a means to measure their own strength. If we also remember Rosa Luxemburg's program,[251] Levi was working within the same light. He wanted everyone to understand that a *clear* majority within the

[248] Ibid. 130
[249] Ibid. 131
[250] Ibid. 133
[251] *What Does the Spartacus League Want?*

working class was a definite prerequisite for Communists to take any sort of risky action. He did this to show that the Party was, in fact, not ready to lead an insurrection to take power.

In the second section he confirmed this by quoting Lenin again in explaining what the conditions for the takeover of power in Russia were, namely an "overwhelming majority among the proletariat; (2) almost half of the armed forces; (3) an overwhelming superiority of forces at the decisive moment at the decisive points" in important cities and regions.[252] Levi argued that while the army did not have the same importance in Germany, it was important to understand that the KPD had absolutely no influence over it. He argued instead that in Germany a strong hold over both industrial regions such as Rhineland-Westphalia and influence over railwaymen would be enough to replace the need for an army, but in these groups they also did not have anything close to a majority of votes.

In the last section he referred to the specific needs to conquer state power. Again, he quoted Lenin to show his fellow Party members that they were far from any of these preconditions. Here Lenin argued that a majority in key regions and working class strongholds was important, but that for the takeover of the state through insurrection one needed "(1) growth of the revolution on a country-wide scale; (2) the complete moral and political bankruptcy of the old government…(3) extreme vacillation" in political opinion.[253] Whether this argument was suitable to explain what happened in Russia is not important, but rather what is important is that Levi was tactfully arguing through Lenin, whose words commanded a great deal of respect, to show fellow Communists that they had not understood the type of thinking and planning that went into the Russian revolution they so greatly admired. Levi applied Lenin's logic to Germany, and most importantly persuasively argued that there was no sign anywhere of a complete 'moral

[252] Fernbach op. cit. 134
[253] Ibid. 136-137

and political bankruptcy' of the government in 1921. The SPD, while its votes declined in some cases, still commanded a great deal of respect from the people and the leading institutions in Germany.

This long explanation served a variety of purposes, but the most important was showing just how ridiculous the 'theory of the offensive' actually was, and how out of touch with German political conditions many members were. He quoted excerpts from other member's speeches and pamphlets that assured themselves not only that they should "force the fate of the Party and of the revolution itself" but also, even after they realized how disastrous the action was as it took place, said they should "try and achieve a withdrawal in good order, create conflicts, *incite the security-police, incite all counter-revolutionary elements. If we succeed in creating…the movement in this way,* clashes will take place…"[254] He showed his audience how little thought-out much of their insurrectionary measures were, and that they did not even understand the theoretical basis[255] behind any of it. He said that Communists cannot act for the needs of Communists, but rather must only act when "the proletariat sees the necessity of struggle" and "does struggle," at which point Communists are to lead through well-guided political slogans and only with the confidence of their audience.[256]

He ended his text by criticizing the ECCI, who had already ignored the KPD's wishes on numerous occasions and acted against their authority. He protested against the confidential agents of the Comintern that acted over the authority of the respective Parties, never working the leadership of respective parties throughout Europe before making decisions.[257] As Bela Kun represented the Comintern, he saw it as partially their fault that the March Action had taken

[254] Ibid. 142
[255] Using the Engels quote at the beginning of this paper.
[256] Fernbach, op. cit.146
[257] Ibid. 163

place, and accused them of being "isolated" from Western Europe.[258] Levi finally opened up about his issues with the ECCI and the Comintern:

> They never work with the Party leadership in the country, but always behind its back, and often against it. They [the ECCI] get a hearing in Moscow when others do not. It is a system which cannot possibly fail to undermine all confidence in joint work, either amongst comrades on the executive or in the member parties. These comrades are for the most part useless as political leaders, and moreover are quite insufficiently familiariased with these problems. A heart-breaking situation results. There is no political leadership coming from the centre. All that the Executive does in that direction is to send appeals which reach us too late, and excommunications which come too soon. Such a political leadership on the part of the Communist International can lead to nothing but a catastrophe…The Executive acts no differently than a Cheka, projected beyond the frontiers of Russia—an impossible situation. To demand precisely a change, so as to prevent the incompetent hands of incompetent delegates from again grasping hold of the leaderships in different countries, to call for a political leadership and to protest against a Party police does not mean demanding independence.[259]

Here, he was in many ways anticipating the growing chokehold the Comintern would develop over Parties worldwide. More than an issue of authority, Levi argued that the Comintern was terribly organized, and therefore did not understand those Parties it sought to lead. It is important to make this distinction because Levi, as the leader of the *Zentrale*, had many times argued for a strong centralized leadership. His issue with the Comintern was not one of centralized authority, but bad leadership and practices. His criticism all throughout focused on their rush decisions, their lack of communication, and their tendency to make decisions without consulting individual Parties.

Levi would be kicked out of the KPD for publishing this pamphlet, and his text *What Is the Crime?* served as an appeal to this decision. He also made an appeal in a letter to Lenin at that

---

[258] Ibid. 161
[259] Cited in Broué op. cit. 514-515

time, explaining to him why he acted the way he did with his pamphlet, but while Lenin had defended his actions for years, he could not agree with what he saw as breaking Party discipline. Whether mistakes were made by Levi or not, it is clear that for a long time tensions had been brewing. To the claim that he broke Party discipline, he responded by saying that twice he was denied the ability to appeal to the ECCI before publishing his pamphlet, and after he did, some even turned to his side, among them many old Spartacist members. He also appealed to various other circumstances where other Communists had publicly criticized the Party, without such harsh conditions.[260] He believed it was the duty of the Party to self-criticize for the public after such a huge mistake, and even cited a text where Zinoviev had previously said the mistakes made during the Kapp-Putsch were so oblivious, they should not be regarded as 'private matter' of the central Committee but rather should be discussed in the open.[261] He also showed Zinoviev's hypocrisy, having been one of the few Bolsheviks who in November of 1918 condemned the plans to take state power by refusing to act with the Party. What most bothered him was the fact that while the KPD was to blame for a disaster, the ECCI and the Zentrale continued to say that the uprising had been a success, denying the disastrous nature of the events. Later on, when they began changing their mind, the ECCI claimed the struggle had been 'forced' upon them.[262] To this debacle, Levi cites a conclusive phrase here, explaining two years of frustrating politics by citing Lenin: "To throw the vanguard alone into the decisive battle, before the whole class…this would not only be a stupidity, but an actual crime."[263]

After the Party: The KAG and joining the SPD

[260] Ibid. 190-194
[261] Ibid. 194
[262] Ibid. 179
[263] Fernach op. cit. 187

After Levi left the Party, his political positions over time turned completely against the Bolsheviks. At first however, he tried to continue working as a Communist by forming the KAG[264] or the 'Communist Working Collective' along with other members who had left the Party, including Ernst Däumig. This was not intended to be a Party in itself, but rather to be a group that would work outside the KPD to latter join it if its politics improved. After a conference of the group, it created a list of demands it thought the KPD should follow to improve its relations with other parties. Among these were a demand for "complete material independence" from the Comintern, for the KPD to have greater control over publications, security from the ECCI's interventions in the Party, and two more demands asking the Party to change its policy to work with all revolutionary workers, including a new trade union policy.[265]

As this working-group failed to make any changes, in 1922 it was dissolved to join the SPD along with the majority of the USPD. In an article explaining why he and others who followed him were joining the new SPD, his discourse shifted from revolutionary rhetoric, to a more straightforward defense of the Weimar Republic. He stated how while he believed that he and other revolutionaries failed in their project, the SPD likewise had failed the Republic, citing the Republic's incredible instability. He believed that above all, to save the Weimar Republic, the Party had to maintain a strong connection to workers, or otherwise 'be lost.'[266] He now saw the Communist Party and the Comintern as purely a tool of Russian foreign policy, but believed that the SPD still had a duty to work with Communists. His call for unity in many ways saw the

[264] *Kommunistische Arbeitsgemeinschaft*
[265] Fernbach, op. cit. 213
[266] Ibid. 298

danger in recent political assassinations[267] were leading to a growth of right-wing extremist politics, and said that "if they workers parties do not stand together, they will fall together."[268]

Conclusion

Paul Levi continued his work as a lawyer and successfully got to the bottom of the murders of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, he continued his work with the left wing of the Social Democratic Party, and he also continued to write. However, after his departure from the Party, he for the most part no longer had any interest in revolution. In his introduction to Trotsky's *The Lessons of October*,[269] we can see his new attitude toward the Russians. Levi wrote a brief summary of his disagreements not only with one of the key leaders of the Russian revolution, but also with the German Communists and their strategies at a crucial time for action in 1923, which he again believed was not a moment for Revolution in Germany. During this time he also wrote an introduction to Rosa Luxemburg's *The Russian Revolution*, a book that gave him a theoretical basis from which to attack the Bolsheviks in their policies as heads of state. In these two introductions was a long list of criticisms, which would later turn him completely against the Soviet Union, seeing the purges of the Party in the late 20's with Leon Trotsky and others as a consequence of the bad policies the Soviet Union had followed up until then. Levi was without a doubt tired of everything he had seen, and his experience with the German Communists had much to do with his falling out. Nevertheless, it is important to remember how actively he tried to work with the KPD to change the way it functioned, and how he advocated for a change within the Comintern's structure. Pierre Broué dedicated two entire chapters to Paul Levi in his massive work on the German Revolution to give him the recognition he believed he deserved in

[267] Matthias Erdberger and Walther Rathenau
[268] Fernbach op. cit. 307
[269] Fernbach, op. cit. *The Lessons of October*

this historical time period.[270] While Broué also gave Radek a chapter of his own, it was instead to explain why he *was not* of the same caliber as Levi. As Broué says, after the deaths of Liebknecht and Luxemburg and Levi's expulsion distancing from the Party "there was no person in the international Communist movement, and in particular Germany, comparable to the Bolshevik leaders."[271] He used this to say how, at international congresses, Paul Levi was one of the few who spoke to Lenin, Trotsky, and other leading Bolsheviks, as pairs.

Whether Levi could have remained within the Party under different circumstances, and whether he could have made a change, I believe structural impediments would have made this impossible in the long run. One of the key issues Broué's book brings to light are the inherent flaws in the workings of the Comintern from the beginning. What is clear in this case however is that the Comintern, as addressed in Levi's early criticisms, would transform into a rigid central authority that forced parties around the world to submit to its policies, correct or not. Another inherent issue was the radical ultra-leftism without the Party. From the beginning German Communists saw themselves as being able to directly fight the state with force, and as historians have shown[272], the militarist tendencies of the German radicals would continue throughout the Weimar period.

For all of these reasons I see Ian Birchall's 2015 article[273] on Levi as misguided. He cites Paul Frölich as one of his main sources to make a case against Levi. While it is true that Levi's attitude was his worst quality, Paul Frölich is a reliable source as a witness of the events, but not as a political commentator. Frölich, from the beginning, was in the extreme left wing of the Party, and in fact was one of the oblivious members that sought to 'incite' police forces and

[270] See chapter 22 "Paul Levi: A German Conception of Communism" and chapter 45 "Paul Levi: The Lost Opportunity?"
[271] Broué, op. cit. 872
[272] Weitz, 1992 op. cit.
[273] Birchall, Ian. "Paul Levi in Perspective." Historical Materialism 23, no. 3 (2015): 143-70

members into violence in 1921 during the March action.[274] His judgment on Levi is difficult to take seriously, not only due to Frölich's political incapacities, but also due to the fact that he was one of Levi's main targets in his arguments against ultra-left Communists throughout this period. Birchall's argument also makes it seem as if his use of Clara Zetkin, one of Levi's closest friends, would work against Levi, but it hardly does that. Zetkin was one of the most important women Communists at the time and one of the oldest, commanding great respect. She left the Party with Levi after Rakosi's intervention, and later found her way back to the Party. Birchall uses a letter of Zetkin's where she criticizes Levi's little effort to return to the Party as an argument against him, but it hardly does more than show that he was exhausted in dealing with an impossible Party. He also uses a recently published biography[275] of Levi in French in his article, but also adds little to his argument. Birchall also concludes that Levi's purge of the ultra-leftists in 1919 was a mistake and was not careful, but offers little evidence to give a detailed view of Levi's politics in order to convince the reader to the contrary point of view. I only agree with Birchall in his assessment that Levi's understanding of Russia after he left the KPD was far too simplistic. In conclusion with this point, I believe that while Levi as a person did not have the best personality for leading a Communist Party, in leading an organization full of members against him, dealing with an opposition from the Comintern's ECCI, and leading the Party through a difficult time, he nevertheless had an immensely profound political and theoretical analysis that many Communists at that time lacked. If he left for the SPD and decided not to return to the Communist Party, he had good reasons to do so.

[274] Fernbach, op. cit. 140
[275] Frédéric Cyr, *Paul Levi, rebelle devant les extremes*. Presses de l'Université Laval. Québec, 2013.

Perhaps however one of the most important differences between Levi and the rest of the Communists during his time is that by the summer of 1920[276] he already believed the revolutionary period in Europe was over. What this meant is that his different understanding of a Communist Party was very much in line with the idea that revolution was not on the horizon, but rather something more like a 'Maximum Program' for the Communists, making his project more like that of the SPD in 1891 than the Bolsheviks in 1917. This was also important because it puts his push for a united front into context. A united front strategy meant taking a defensive stance by allying the Party with the other Socialists. An offensive strategy would have meant the Communists could call the masses into action, control various unions, and even lead an insurrection, none of which were possible or true at the time. In many ways Levi predicted what would later be called the 'second period' by Nikolai Bukharin:

> The general appreciation of the whole of post-war developments must be divided into three periods. The first period was the period of acute revolutionary crisis, particularly in European countries. It was the period in which revolutionary development reached its highest stage, when an enormous revolutionary wave swept over Europe. The culminating point of this period was reached in the years 1920-1921…The defeat of the proletariat in Western Europe served the bourgeoisie as the political starting point for further developments. Those defeats, and particularly the defeat of the German proletariat, marked the beginning of the *second* period of development in Central Europe and Europe as a whole. This was the period of the capitalist offensive, the period of defensive proletarian struggles generally, and defensive strikes in particular. It was the period of the stabilization of capitalism…[277]

In this sense, there were structural impediments that Levi faced and would not have easily been handled differently by someone else. Throughout the German Communists a militarist idea became hegemonic and would remain so, especially under circumstances where the Comintern

[276] Broué, 2005 op. cit. 878
[277] Caballero op. cit. 19

encouraged this line on numerous occasions, during Levi's leadership and after. Whatever chances Levi had of changing the course of the Party died out when the Comintern, together with German Communists, encouraged the left-wing he had kicked out to join the Party and the international once more. Later on in the Weimar period, because of the expulsion of "rightists" within the Soviet Party, a similar line would be adopted in Germany, kicking out whoever had any sort of sympathy toward any 'right' Communist forces at the time. Although the 'lefts' and 'rights' in Communist parties involves using relative terms, in Germany what this meant was that Paul Levi tried to win over those people who in theory originally supported the Russian revolution, but may have had reservations, as the Italians Party did with Serrati. Paul Levi was therefore not just another revolutionary, but one whose lessons in this brief period help us understand that very early on Communists in Europe did have a chance to become mass parties with wider support, but that strong sectarian politics prevented them from doing so. He also helps us understand why a European revolution did not take place, as early on few saw it as something to be patiently built, with mass support as the key factor involved. Above all and most importantly, Levi teaches us that a revolution cannot be created simply with force or violence, but rather with mass support combined with a strong leadership and an understanding that revolutions are complex processes prepared through careful, rigorous, and deep understandings of what an insurrection really entails.

Bibliography

Adler, Alan. *Theses, Resolutions, and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International*. London: Ink Links, 1980.

Angress, Werner T. *Stillborn Revolution; The Communist Bid for Power in Germany, 1921-1923.* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963.

Beradt, Charlotte. *Paul Levi: Ein Demokratischer Sozialist in Der Weimarer Republik*. Frankfurt Am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969.

Birchall, Ian. "Paul Levi in Perspective." *Historical Materialism* 23, no. 3 (2015): 143-70

Broué, Pierre. *The German Revolution, 1917-1923*. Edited by Ian H. Birchall. Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2005.

Caballero, Manuel. *Latin America and the Comintern 1919-1943*. London: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Carr, Edward Hallett. *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*. Vol. 3. London: Macmillan, 1953.

Fernbach, David. *In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Writings of Paul Levi*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

Fowkes, Ben. *Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic*. New York, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.

Frölich, Paul. *Rosa Luxemburg; Her Life and Work*. Translated by Johanna Hoorneg. New York, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972.

Luxemburg, Rosa "Fundamental Significance of the Russian Revolution" in *The Russian Revolution*. Marxists Internet Archive. 1918. Accessed November 30, 2015. https://www.marxists.org/archive/luxemburg/1918/russian-revolution/ch01.htm

Gruber, Helmut. *International Communism in the Era of Lenin; a Documentary History.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1967.

Hallas, Duncan. *The Comintern: A history of the Third International*. Chicago, Illinois. Haymarket Books, 2008.

Harman, Chris. *The Lost Revolution: Germany 1918 to 1923*. London: Bookmarks, 1982.

Lenin, Vladimir Ilych. "What Is to Be Done? The Burning Questions of Our Movement." In *Selected Works*. Vol. II. New York, New York: International Publishers, 1943.

Levi, Paul, and Charlotte Beradt. *Zwischen Spartakus Und Sozialdemokratie; Schriften, Aufsätze, Reden Und Briefe.* Frankfurt Am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969.

Lindemann, Albert S. *The Red Years: European Socialism Versus Bolshevism, 1919-1921*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974.

Peter Hudis, and Kevin B. Anderson. "The Mass Strike, the Political Party, and the Trade Unions." In *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*. New York, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004.

Rees, Tim, and Andrew Thorpe, eds. *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919-43*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.

Riddell, John, ed. *The German Revolution and the Debate on Soviet Power: Documents, 1918-1919 : Preparing the Founding Congress*. New York, New York: Anchor Foundation: Pathfinder Press, 1986.

Riddell, John. *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!: Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920*. Vol. 1. New York, New York: Pathfinder, 1991.

Riddell, John. *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!: Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920.* Vol. 2. New York, New York: Pathfinder, 1991.

Riddell, John. *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite!: Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920.* Vol. 2. New York, New York: Pathfinder, 1991.

Schorske, Carl E. *German Social Democracy 1905-1917, The Development of the Great Schism.* Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA. 1985.

Tucker, Robert "Marx on the History of His Opinions." In *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed. New York, New York: Norton, 1978

Weitz, Eric D. *Creating German Communism, 1890-1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Zinoviev, Grigory. "Excerpts from the Official Statement of the Communist International Executive Committee on Comrades Serrati and Levy." Marxists Internet Archive. May 7, 1921. Accessed October 25, 2015.