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1
Background (1921–1924)

I

By 1921, the revolutionary firestorm that had seemed about to consume all Europe four years earlier had died back to a few smouldering embers – in Soviet Russia only. Even there, in the 'proletarian fatherland,' the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921 could be interpreted as a retreat to capitalism, marking the end of any real effort to achieve the totality of the Marxist dream. The great international workingman's revolution was not, then, to be international at all, it appeared, and might not even be especially revolutionary.

And yet, internationalism was at the very core of Marxist doctrine, its most unchallenged tenet. The enemy – capitalism – was no national monopoly. In his search for labour to exploit and markets to plunder, the capitalist had penetrated every continent, every country. The manifestation of capitalist internationalism was imperialism, and it was Lenin's great theoretical contribution to Marxism to show how imperialism was inevitable to capitalism, and a source of short-term strength to it, but equally, the guarantee of its ultimate overthrow. It was in the backward nations, the colonial and semi-colonial countries most ruthlessly ravaged for bourgeois gain, that the weakest link in the capitalist chain would be found, and broken, Lenin wrote. And when it broke, the whole interconnected system would break with it. The revolution had to begin somewhere specific, of course, in some country or other, probably a backward one, but it could not stop there. The capitalists would not let it. They could not, for the system was composed of interdependent parts, and for it to survive anywhere it had to flourish everywhere. So a capitalist counter-revolution would quickly confront any proletarian revolution with a decisive challenge. If the revolution could not overpower capitalism's bastions of economic and military strength, in the west, it would fail that challenge and be crushed. To survive, then, it had to spread. The proletarian had to be as internationalist as his bourgeois enemy.

Somewhat crudely stated, that had been the dogma, and it remained so into 1921. But it was increasingly difficult to square what the theories indicated should happen with what the facts demonstrated had not. The bourgeoisie had exhibited no great delight in the persistence of Soviet

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power but had abandoned the direct assault on it. Soviet leaders were convinced the respite was only temporary. They credited it, publicly, to the efforts of sympathetic western workers' organizations which had campaigned against the intervention. Less openly, however, many nurtured suspicions that bourgeois restraint might also be attributable to the distasteful concessions to capitalism Soviet Russia had to make in adopting NEP. The enemy might tolerate a Russia which was revolutionary in name only, in which Nepmen flourished and kulaks waxed fat and cynicism grew and revolutionary fervour evaporated. The bourgeoisie might feel it did not have to murder the revolution; it was in the process of committing suicide. Lev Trotsky surely felt the force of that argument, and probably Lev Kamenev and Grigorii Zinoviev did, too.

The Cause, in any event, was clearly in jeopardy. The west would either crush it in combat or let it crush itself in compromise. The only escape from the tragic dilemma was to spread the revolution, to take the offensive, to arouse the workers to action in the European centres of capitalist power. The proletarians of all nations had to unite on behalf of their beleaguered brothers in the first workers' republic. The question was how to unite them. Bravely sounding the tocsin in 1917 and 1918 had produced disappointing results. Revolutionary phrase-making and flag-waving from the east had not been enough. The bourgeoisie had been too clever to let itself be overthrown by such elementary tactics. Something more subtle, more compelling, and more permanent had to be found – a new tactic, good for the temporary ebb of revolutionary enthusiasm as well as for the long-term surge of dialectical necessity. It was in 1921 that the Communist International, since 1919 the self-appointed general staff of the world-wide revolutionary army, came up with its recommendation – the tactics of the united front.

II

The united front was a device, an expedient, a contrivance. The intensity with which Communists themselves stressed such descriptions testified to their concern that misguided comrades might distort the united front into something it was not supposed to be, an end in itself. It was a tactic of the moment, for temporary use only in set, specific, historical circumstances. When the circumstances changed, the tactic would have to be reconsidered, and altered to suit the new realities.

At the moment, however, western Europe was in a state of suspended political animation. The bourgeoisie had managed to stabilize its posi-

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tion, partially and provisionally, and thus earned itself a brief respite from revolutionary nightmares. Bolshevik-controlled organizations had nowhere succeeded in winning a majority, even of urban factory workers, and in most countries Communists constituted a tiny, feeble, divided and discouraged minority of the population at large. In such conditions, even though the long-term revolutionary pressures would continue to mount, capitalism might remain entrenched and apparently secure not for months, but for a matter of years. The recovery could not be permanent, of course. The inexorable laws of Marxist science proved beyond question that revolutionary opportunities would open up in the future as they had in the past. When they did, therefore, Communist parties had to be prepared to take advantage of them. They had to build bridges, now, bridges across which the masses, the 'broad proletarian masses' as the orators invariably put it, could be led, at the right time, to their historic destiny. The united front tactic was designed to build those bridges, during the current respite, for use in the future.[1]

It consisted, most simply, in winning over the workers by making common cause with them and their leaders on basic and not especially revolutionary issues – often bread-and-butter issues of wages, hours and working conditions, occasionally broader issues such as the struggle against Fascism or the agitation against war. On such issues, the Communist stand coincided with that of the social-democratic politicians and trade union bureaucrats to whom most western workers, unfortunately, still pledged their allegiance. So Communists could offer the reformist organizations an alliance. However much we may differ from one another in theoretical fundamentals, they could propose, we are as one on these practical, immediate issues. Let us therefore sit down together and discuss how we might work together to achieve the results we both say we want.

Common action to achieve common objectives, that was the kernel of it. It involved no compromise of principle, no dilution of dogma, no

[1] The outline of united front tactics which follows derives mostly from documents in Karl Radek, *Piat' Let Kominterna*, Two Parts (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo 'Krasnaia Nov',' 1924), Part II, pp. 140–53, 274–8, 417–19, 461–74. The most helpful summary in Russian is Iu. L. Molchanov, *Komintern: u Istokov Politiki Edinogo Proletarskogo Fronta* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo 'Mysl',' 1969). In English, see Cyril L. R. James, *World Revolution, 1917–1936: The Rise and Fall of the Communist International* (London: M. Secker and Warburg, 1937), pp. 168–74. I have also profited from ideas and materials in Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International 1919–1943: Documents* (London–New York: Oxford University Press, 1956–65), II, 1–3, 22–23, and *passim*, and Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky 1921–1929* (London–New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 56–65.

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organic union with quitters, defeatists or traitors. Indeed, the whole purpose of it was to expose the temporary allies, to their own followers, as the cowards and renegades they were, and thus to storm the reformist citadel from within. Communists knew the social democrats were reluctant to take the fight for any of their professed goals very far, not so far as to provoke the bourgeoisie into retaliatory action. When it came to a crisis, when, in spite of their reluctance, the battle was joined, reformists would – inevitably and conspicuously – abandon the battlefield and flee to the enemy. Communists knew all this, and said so quite openly, even as they offered such potential renegades the united front.

Of course, the social democrats could refuse even to talk with men who execrated and pilloried them so mercilessly. But to do so would seem to prove they were more concerned for their dignity than for their professed principles. Rejecting the united front, then, would give the Communists valuable propaganda ammunition. So would accepting it. Communists would then insist the battle had to be fought totally, unconditionally, no matter what the cost and however extreme the methods. Inevitably, the workers would note the Communists' energy and devotion and single-minded ruthlessness and contrast it with the passivity and empty rhetoric of their own leaders. At the decisive moment, when the Communists appealed to the workers directly over the heads of the reformist functionaries, they would respond. They would come over. The bridge would have been prepared for them.

If countering the united front challenge involved risks for the social democrats, however, posing it successfully put the Communists in jeopardy as well. Pose it too aggressively and too militantly and the reformists could rightfully dub the proletarian vanguard a band of sectarians and dogmatists, not worth associating with. Pose it too moderately and with too much deference to delicate reformist sensibilities and it would probably be accepted, but the acceptance could trap the Communists in a maze of opportunism which would obscure their own principles and muffle any compelling call to the proletariat when the crisis came. The menace of sectarianism on the left, then, and the catastrophe of opportunism on the right, delineated the very straight and very narrow path of Communist orthodoxy in the employment of united front tactics.

To avoid either trap, Communist organizations had to remain united, disciplined, and absolutely true to their principles. They had to devote especially diligent study to the experience of their sure-footed Russian

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comrades, who had so triumphantly avoided all ideological pitfalls.[1] They had to be acutely sensitive to timing, to know precisely when to pass from passivity to action, from preparing the revolution to waging it. All negotiations with the reformists had to be conducted in the open, without camouflage or secrecy, so that the responsibility for the breakdown of the talks, or for the subsequent betrayal of agreements reached, could be clearly placed. Prior to that *dénouement*, and in preparation for it, Communists should maintain their separate identity, continue to propagandize their own ultimate objectives, and most essentially of all, insist on their absolute right and duty to criticize – indeed, to revile – those whom they had made their temporary allies.

The whole matter of collaborating with the ideologically corrupted became a major preoccupation of the Communist International, the Comintern, in 1921.[2] The issue was too immediate to be avoided. The relationship of the Chinese Communist Party to the Kuomintang, for example, hung on its resolution. So did the future of the comrades in Germany. Recent revolutionary efforts there had smacked more of farce than drama, but the Party had scored promising gains at the polls in both Saxony and Thuringia, posing the problem of how to react to Social Democratic offers of parliamentary coalitions in the state legislatures.

That the decision was made for the united front we know. How and by whom it was made is not so clear. Angelica Balabanova, at one time very close to the Comintern inner circle, reported later all significant Comintern decisions were made in fact by a secret committee of the Russian Communist Party.[3] If such a committee did exist, its membership surely included Zinoviev, the Comintern chairman, and the two Soviet

[1] This educational process was dubbed 'Bolshevization' and came strongly into vogue in 1924, in circumstances we shall be concerned with later. See below, p. 63.

[2] My information on the adoption of united front tactics by the Comintern in the years 1921–3 derives from Radek, *Piat' Let Kominterna*, Part II, *passim*; Deutscher, *Trotsky*, pp. 56–65; Jane Degras, 'United Front Tactics in the Comintern, 1921–8,' in David Footman, ed., *International Communism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1960), pp. 9–22; Franz Borkenau, *The Communist International* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938), pp. 164, 226–37; Michael T. Florinsky, *World Revolution and the USSR* (London: Macmillan, 1933), pp. 87–106; Degras, *Communist International: Documents*, II, 26–51; Lewis Lorwin, *Labor and Internationalism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1929), pp. 235–40; and U.S. Congress, House, Committee on Un-American Activities, *The Communist Conspiracy: Strategy and Tactics of World Communism*, Part 1. *Communism Outside the United States*, Section C. *The World Congresses of the Communist International*, House Report 2242 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1956), pp. 106–52.

[3] Angelica Balabanova (Balabanoff), *My Life as a Rebel* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1938), p. 246.

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members of the Comintern's Executive Committee (the ECCI), Nikolai Bukharin and Karl Radek. For matters of high policy, Trotsky would be brought in, and of course, if he were well enough, Lenin. At the risk of unduly stressing a negative, one must emphasize that Stalin was not in the inner circle at all. He had little use for the International anyway. He was convinced it was incapable of organizing a successful revolution anywhere, and dreaded the possibility it might interfere in the internal affairs of the Russian party and government. He shunned Comintern meetings, consistently declined invitations to address Comintern Congresses, and after securing his grip on the movement in the late 1920s, allowed only one more Congress to take place at all.[1]

So any decision on whether to implement the united front would have been made by Zinoviev, Bukharin, Radek, Trotsky and Lenin. The first two, antagonists on so many other issues, were allies on this one: both opposed the new line. They were overridden by Lenin, Trotsky and Radek, all three of whom spoke for the new line at the 3rd Comintern Congress in June and July, 1921. Although no precise commitment to the united front was adopted at the Congress, the slogan that emerged, 'To the Masses!' clearly implied a change of course. The theses on tactics as much as acknowledged that workers, far from being in a militant mood, were docilely following their reformist leaders, and that a frontal attack by Communists on those leaders would net the Party precisely nothing. To get 'to the masses' in such circumstances, without making distasteful overtures to the leaders, was clearly impossible. The united front was not specifically mentioned, much less precisely delineated, but it followed inevitably from the conclusions of the Congress.

The details were worked out by December, 1921, when the ECCI issued specific directions for achieving the united front, and the whole new line was ratified by the 4th Comintern Congress in November, 1922 after Trotsky made a strenuous appeal on its behalf. Opposition to the new line was conspicuously vocal. The French, Italian, and Spanish parties were particularly bitter about being obliged to cooperate with social-democratic elements they had long damned as the worst enemies of the working classes. The Congress labelled their position 'sectarian,' even though Radek threw them a sop in his assurance the leadership intended no merger with the social democrats, but rather 'to stifle them in our embrace.'[2] The final resolutions adopted proclaimed united front

[1] The material on Stalin is from Isaac Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography*, Rev. Ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 388–93.
[2] Cited by Degras, 'United Front Tactics' in Footman, *International Communism*, p. 11.

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tactics indispensible, and the delegates even approved active Communist participation in coalition 'workers' governments,' an ambiguous phrase left diplomatically undefined.

A decisive test of the new line seemed to be emerging in Germany.[1] A bitter party wrangle had developed there centered around the question of how far the German Communist Party, the KPD, should go in co-operative efforts with the Social Democratic party, the SPD. The KPD right, including the Party leader, Heinrich Brandler, interpreted the somewhat equivocal wording of the 4th Comintern Congress's united front resolutions as authorizing parliamentary coalitions with the SPD, even to the point of participation in SPD-controlled state governments. The left wing, led by Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow, denounced the whole idea of parliamentary methods as basically alien to Communist principles, and condemned the SPD in particular as a front organization for the bourgeoisie. The row was conducted with uncomradely vigour, and Moscow had to step in in April, 1923 to call a halt to the argument. Four leftists were added to the KPD Central Committee, in return for which the left wing toned down its overt protests against the united front.

Unity was essential if the party were to rise to the revolutionary possibilities that seemed to be opening up so rapidly in Germany. The French occupation of the Ruhr had produced an accelerating economic and political crisis culminating, in August, in a massive strike effort, the fall of the federal government, and the emergence of a new government, under Stresemann, in which the SPD agreed to participate. Communist Party membership grew dramatically over the summer, and to sanguine enthusiasts, the 'German October' was at last in sight.

As early as July, 1923 the KPD called for a Comintern decision on revolution. Radek, the International's representative in Germany, felt the situation was not yet ripe, and counselled caution. So did Stalin, from the sidelines and with no great energy, and then shrugged off the problem for others to resolve. Zinoviev and Bukharin, vague about details, were nevertheless strongly for action. So too, with somewhat less enthusiasm but somewhat more willingness to work out the practical

[1] For the immediate impact of the German revolution of 1923 on Comintern policy, I have relied on the following: Ruth Fischer, *Stalin and German Communism* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), pp. 291–383; Radek, *Piat' Let Kominterna*, Part II, pp. 409–502; Deutscher, *Trotsky*, pp. 141–6; Deutscher, *Stalin*, pp. 390–3; Borkenau, *Communist International*, pp. 235–53; Degras, *Communist International: Documents*, II, 18–22, 62–5, 68–72, 90; Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 1901–1941*, trans. and ed. by Peter Sedgwick (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 169–75.

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details, was Trotsky. So that is the way the decision went, in late August, 1923, and the following month Brandler showed up in Moscow, doubtful about the whole affair – he never claimed to be a revolutionary commander and was nervous in the role – but willing to yield to the superior wisdom of such crafty veterans as Trotsky.

The plans were duly elaborated, and Radek and Georgii Piatakov, the former Kiev sugar millionaire, were delegated Comintern agents-in-charge. Brandler was to return to Saxony and accept the SPD invitation to join the state government there. He would then take advantage of his official status to, first, arm the workers, and then, proclaim the revolution. It was assumed the rank-and-file of the SPD and the trade unions, and perhaps many of their leaders as well, would answer the call. Thus, for the first – and last – time, the Comintern did precisely what it had been established to do: decide scientifically when, where, and how a revolution should be launched, and dispatch the experts to make sure the plan was carried through smoothly.

But it was a clumsy plan, drawn up at too great a distance by men who knew little of local conditions. The specific instructions that went with it were contradictory, confused and impracticable. The result was a fiasco from beginning to end. Very shortly after Brandler joined the Saxon 'Government of Proletarian Defence,' the German army marched in – armed with weapons supplied from the Soviet Union! – and deposed it. There was practically no resistance. The Social Democrats and the trade unions rejected Communist proposals for a retaliatory general strike and proclamation of armed insurrection, and it was soon clear the masses of workers were unprepared to back any such extreme reactions. At the last minute Brandler asked permission to cancel the call for revolution, and Zinoviev, back in Moscow, quickly agreed. But the news of the change of plans did not get to Hamburg on time, where the workers, with more spirit than good sense, rose, fought, and were crushed. In the aftermath German Communism lost its legal status for a matter of months and its soul forever. And as for the Comintern, nobody but rabid right-wing western politicians – and its own functionaries – could ever take it very seriously again. 'The Comintern was a corpse,' Ruth Fischer wrote.[1]

The attempt to assess the blame for the disaster produced minor masterpieces of comradely vituperation, or 'self-criticism,' as the official thesaurus prefers. Stalin and Zinoviev, well-launched on their campaign to destroy Trotsky's political influence, blamed him on the ground that

[1] Fischer, *Stalin and German Communism*, p. 365.

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it was his plan that had failed, his supporter, Radek, who was on the spot, and his protégé, Brandler, who had capitulated at the eleventh hour. Trotsky responded that since his plan had been cancelled, with Zinoviev's consent, it had never been given a proper trial, and attributed the failure to Stalin, who had opposed the revolution from the beginning, and Zinoviev, who had betrayed it in the crucial final hours. The German leftists, Fischer and Maslow, blamed Brandler and his 'opportunism', a transparent euphemism for his adherence to the united front tactics which were the official Comintern line. They also attacked Trotsky, who was assumed to be Brandler's protector. The revolutionary plan could have succeeded, they claimed (thus, in effect, complimenting the work of the author of the plan, Trotsky) had not Brandler cancelled it. With the backing of Zinoviev and Bukharin, they got Brandler ousted from the KPD leadership in 1924.

All this was nightmarishly distorted, and the political line-ups that emerged in early 1924 defy all the standard generalizations in elementary textbooks of Soviet history. The 'leftist' Trotsky, the advocate of permanent revolution, with his 'rightist' associate Brandler, were condemned by the 'rightist' Bukharin and the 'leftist' Zinoviev for not being revolutionary enough, in spite of the fact it had been Zinoviev who cancelled Trotsky's revolutionary plan. Only two men had assessed events accurately, Stalin and Radek, both of whom had urged caution: now each blamed the other for the failure of the revolution neither had wanted. One can make no sense out of all this, except to note all major participants found themselves innocent of all blame for the debacle.

Clearly, however, the rout required reconsideration of those united front tactics which had been so central to the whole effort. Two of the three authors of the united front doctrine, Trotsky and Radek, had been disgraced following the German debacle, and the third, Lenin, died in January, 1924. The united front could not be publicly repudiated, however. That would imply a propensity to err in both Lenin and the Comintern leadership generally. But dexterous reinterpretation of authoritative texts can accomplish the same results as repeal, and that was the direction the Comintern seemed to be moving in early 1924. An Executive Committee statement noted that alliances with social democrats and parliamentary coalitions with anybody were, of course, foreign to the essential spirit of the united front. The united front must be pursued not so much from above, through overtures to reformist leaders, as from below, by agitation among the working masses. Brandler was blamed for the German failure. He was pronounced guilty

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of opportunism and of failure to realise that the united front was 'only a method of revolutionary agitation and mobilisation.'[1] The aim had always been to destroy the social-democratic factions, not support them. Social democracy was merely 'fascism wearing a socialist mask.'[2] Left-wing leaders, with their strong and subtle appeal to the masses, were more dangerous than rightists, and the object should be their 'political annihilation.'[3] It would seem that if the united front concept were not already dead, such language would quickly kill it. But such was not to be the case. Ideology showed its usual remarkable power to recuperate from reality. By the end of the year 1924 Communist leaders were developing a new project to be achieved through united front tactics, the penetration of the international trade union movement.

Efforts to rally trade unions to more than merely national organizational banners date back to at least the end of the nineteenth century. Some degree of success in what was called 'vertical organization' had been achieved prior to the First World War through the so-called International Trade Secretariats, the Miners' International, the Transport Workers' International, and so on – organizations of trade unionists in specific industries. Attempts to go beyond that and achieve a 'horizontal organization,' incorporating complete national trade union federations, produced, in 1901, the International Secretariat of Trade Unions, a very loosely constructed affair which did little more than hold annual conferences for the exchange of advice, information and anecdotes. The organization was of no great importance, and collapsed ignominiously under the strain of Sarajevo.

Even while the war was on, however, plans were developed for establishing a newer and stronger international when the fighting stopped.[4] The details were worked out by a conference meeting at Amsterdam in July and August of 1919. It was, in part, an unedifying and indeed degrading display. The representatives from the Entente

[1] Degras, *Communist International: Documents*, II, 72.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 77. [3] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[4] A scholarly history of the IFTU does not yet exist. Somewhat surprisingly, one of the most competent surveys of the earliest history of the IFTU is by the leader of its rival organization, the RILU. See Alexander Lozovsky, *The World's Trade Union Movement* (London: National Minority Movement, 1925), pp. 9–24, 54–72. I have also used Georges Lefranc, *Les Expériences syndicales internationals, des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Aubier, 1952), pp. 7–35; G. D. H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought*, Vol. IV, *Communism and Social Democracy, 1914–1931*, Two Parts (London: Macmillan, 1958), Part I, Chapter IX, pp. 287–342; and Walther Schevenals, *Quarante-cinq années: Fédération syndicale internationale, 1901–1945* ([Brussels]: Editions de l'Institut E. Vandervelde, 1964), pp. 1–87.

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