DIMENSIONI E PROBLEMI DELLA RICERCA STORICA
1/2022, pp. 243-262

SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ EDITRICE

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E-ISSN 2723-9489
ISSN 1125-517X

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The "Generation of 1920": Revolutionary Rendezvous in Moscow

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Founded in 1919 with world revolution as its declared goal, only to be dissolved without fanfare by Stalin in 1943, the Communist International or Comintern developed a historically distinct form of political engagement that stood in the tradition of the European workers' movement and the modern trend to professionalize politics, yet was in many ways unique. It formulated a new political grammar, a distinctive set of rules for a new form of collective, radical engagement. Its means to this were a strictly disciplined organization, a network in part underground and in part triumphantly public, directed and coordinated by an Executive Committee (ECCI).The major rules and principles of this global political enterprise were formulated at the Second world congress in Moscow in 1920. The participants of this transnational event became the first generation of professional revolutionaries.

Keywords: Comintern, Professional Revolutionaries, Politics as a Profession, Transnational Encounters, Global Project, Gender Order.

In the summer of 1920, the Second congress of the Communist International attracted revolutionaries, radicals, and leftists from all parts of the world: Marxist intellectuals, revolutionary syndicalists, suffragettes, social democrats, anarchists, and adventurers. Comintern's borders were still porous. Moscow was to be the material and symbolic birthplace of a worldwide revolutionary movement. It was a meeting point for numerous political activists from all over the globe, young revolutionaries and long-serving politicians, anti-colonial campaigners and trade union leaders from the imperialist countries, who brought with them their different ideas about organizing the radical transformation of the existing order. In Moscow this "Generation of 1920" encountered the Bolshevik

leadership, successful revolutionaries and soon-to-be rulers over a vast national territory. In this specific historic context and particular transnational moment Moscow became for revolutionaries the whole world over the centre of a widely ramified network, a pole of international political reference, a hub of global circulation, a safe haven.

In 1920, there arrived in Moscow Hilde Kramer (1900–1974), a young translator and shorthand writer, a founding member at the age of eighteen of Erich Mühsam's Vereinigung Revolutionärer Internationalisten Bayerns (Union of Revolutionary Internationalists of Bavaria), and since late 1918 a member of the KPD who during the Bavarian Soviet Republic had acted as a courier, distributed false passports and written reports for the "Rote Fahne", and who had just escaped conviction on a charge of aiding and abetting high treason. Also a Bengali, Manabendra Nath Roy (1887–1954), who had once been sought as a terrorist and who would go on to become a globe-trotting top official of the Comintern, accompanied by his American wife, the Stanford graduate Evelyn Trent Roy (1892–1970); Jules Humbert-Droz (1891–1971), a former pastor from the Swiss Jura who would very soon be appointed secretary to the Comintern and settle in Moscow with his family; Hendricus (known as "Henk") Sneevliet (1883–1942), a Dutchman who in conditions of secrecy had set up a Communist party in Indonesia; Willi Münzenberg (1889–1940), an uneducated worker from Thuringia who would become the Comintern's greatest propagandist and one of the most important of German press magnates; and John Reed (1887–1920), an American journalist, a Harvard graduate, an eye-witness who had written the first history of the Russian Revolution; and very many others.

All of them possessed activist capital, skills and knowledge acquired in the course of political activity[1]. Political builders, they had all been involved in setting up the first Communist parties in their countries of permanent or temporary residence.

And all of them had travelled to Moscow to attend the Second World Congress of the Communist International.

In Moscow, the Bolsheviks set about converting the historically unique convergence of different political tendencies into a set of shared goals, and to marshal together their supporters and representatives from across the globe. Revolution was no abstract idea; if it were to be realized it had to be embodied. For this, the attendees had first to agree on

1 F. Matonti, F. Poupeau, *Le capital militant. Essai de définition*, in "Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales", CLV, 2004, 5, pp. 4-11.

what communism was and how a revolutionary, i.e. communist, party should function. For those present, these labels were not as fixed and indisputable as they were later to become. How could the multiplicity of political agendas be unified? How could local concerns be formulated in a universal language? How were global aspirations to be realized? How were the working masses to be reached, if communist organizations represented only a small minority? And how from spontaneous riots, strikes and uprisings, from splinter-groups and the radical fringes of social democratic mass organizations, could one build a worldwide, combat-ready organization of professional revolutionaries? Above all: how was the Comintern to appeal to, and hence harness, contemporary radical energies? Such questions will be evoked here in connection with the Comintern's Second World Congress in Moscow. Discussion of that event will draw on both the minutes of the congress and on the substantial body of historical research now available, but will not confine itself only, or even primarily, to matters of ideology or organizational structure. For while these are essential to any understanding of the Comintern, my particular interest here is in participants' personal responses. At least a dozen participants in the Second World Congress of the Comintern have given their own accounts of events[2]. How did they maintain their universal enthusiasm for the October Revolution when faced with the material conditions of everyday life in a starving Russia?

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[2] Among individuals' accounts of their experience of the Second World Congress cited here are A. Balabanoff, *My Life as a Rebel* [1938], Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1973; W. Bringolf, *Mein Leben. Weg und Umweg eines Schweizer Sozialdemokraten*, Scherz, Bern-Munich-Vienna 1965; L.-O. Frossard, *Mon journal de voyage en Russie*, published in 1921 by the French Communist evening paper "L'Internationale"; J. Humbert-Droz, *Mémoires*, vol. I, *Mon évolution du tolstoïsme au communisme*, *1891–1921*, A la Baconnière, Neuchâtel 1969; H. Knüfken, *Von Kiel bis Leningrad. Erinnerungen eines revolutionären Matrosen 1917–1930*, BasisDruck, Berlin 2008 (manuscript composed after the Second World War. The author and two others hijacked a cargo boat to make their way to Russia); H. Kramer, *Rebellin in München, Moskau und Berlin. Autobiographisches Fragment 1900–1924*, ed. by E. Günther and T. Marsen, Basis Druck, Berlin 2011; D. Peschanski (ed.), *Les carnets de Marcel Cachin, 1917–1920*, vol. II, text edited and annotated by G. Candar, B. Studer and N. Werth, Editions du CNRS, Paris 1993; W. Münzenberg, *Die dritte Front. Aufzeichnungen aus 15 Jahren proletarischer Jugendbewegung* [1930], Litpol, Berlin 1978; J.T. Murphy, *New Horizons*, John Lane / The Bodley Head, London 1941; A. Rosmer, *Moscow Under Lenin,* translated by Ian H. Birchall, Monthly Review Press, New York 1972; M.N. Roy, *Memoirs* [1964], Ajanta Publications, Delhi 1984; V. Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* [1951], translated by P. Sedgwick, New York Review Books, New York 2012; C. Shipman, *It Had to Be Revolution: Memoirs of an American Radical*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca-London 1993.

How was the Bolshevik leadership's dominance over all other congress delegates justified? What expectations did they have of their commitment to the Communist International? These are the kinds of questions chiefly dealt with in this paper.

Through the Allied Blockade to Soviet Russia

The year since its foundation in 1919 had seen substantial growth in the Comintern's membership, with the adhesion of a number of mass socialist parties, among them the Italian Socialist Party with its 264.000 members, which had gained admission to the new International, with flying colours, a few days after the First Congress[3]. Also attending the Second Congress were representatives of Europe's social democratic parties, there to sound out the intentions of the Bolsheviks and assess the relationship of forces, while from the other end of the left spectrum came radical left groups and individuals of anarchist, syndicalist, and revolutionary bent. Also present were representatives of the national-revolutionary liberation movements that had invested their hopes in the new international. The contours of this novel political venture were still unclear. This being so, and because the Russian Revolution was the only one to survive while the Bavarian and Hungarian Soviet Republics had fallen, it seemed to show the way forward. In the summer of 1920 – the Congress ran from 19 July to 7 August – Moscow was the place to be for revolutionaries from all over the world. In an endeavour to bring together the widest range of revolutionary forces, the Bolsheviks had invited to the Second World Congress antiparliamentary, council-communist, and syndicalist groups as well as members of the old social-democracy, alongside the existing early communist parties.

Not all succeeded in reaching Petrograd in time for the opening of the Congress. Civil war and blockade meant taking roundabout and sometimes hazardous routes. The south of the country was still in the hands of Denikin's army, while Makhno's forces made Ukraine unsafe. Furthermore, Poland and Soviet Russia were at war. In the Far East, the way was barred by the Japanese army, which occupied part of Siberia, though a number of Chinese and Japanese delegates managed to travel through Mongolia.

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[3] The figure is for 1920: P. Broué, *Histoire de l'Internationale communiste 1919–1943,* Fayard, Paris 1997, p. 96.

Forbidden to travel by their own governments or refused transit visas by Germany, most delegates made the journey illegally. The American John Reed, one of the few foreigners to have been involved in the October Revolution, passed himself off as a seaman, transiting Germany under a false name. The Frenchman Alfred Rosmer (1877–1964), one of a number of delegates to have left an account of their journeys, travelled from Paris to Milan and from there to Berlin via Vienna and Prague, before making for Stettin, then still part of Prussia, where he took ship for Reval (today's Tallinn), before travelling by train from there to Petrograd. The journey took six weeks[4]. The American Charles Francis Phillips (1895–1989), later and better known as Charles Shipman, had been in Europe since December 1919, having arrived there from Mexico, where he had been one of the founding members of the Communist Party[5].

Jules Humbert-Droz and Walther Bringolf (1895–1981), the two Swiss delegates, whose memoirs also recount their difficult journeys, had also to make illegal border-crossings. Humbert-Droz succeeded in sneaking out of Basel to reach nearby Lörrach on the German side of the border only on his second night-time attempt. Once in Germany, they could travel to Berlin by train. From Frankfurt, Humbert-Droz sent his wife Jenny a postcard: "All going well. Elsi"[6]. In Berlin, however, he had to wait before continuing his journey. Yet, as he told Jenny, "Since seeing James and knowing that efforts are being made to ensure a speedy onward passage I am reassured and can wait with patience"[7]. The "James" he refers to was Jakov Reich (1886–1955), also known as "Comrade Thomas", head of the West European Secretariat (WES) and the Bolsheviks' unofficial representative in the West[8].

The German capital was an important hub for those travelling to Moscow. Manabendrah Nath Roy and Evelyn Trent had been waiting there several months to continue their journey. The couple "Helen and Roberto Allén"[9] had most probably left Mexico in January in order to

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4 Rosmer, *Moscow*, cit., pp. 18-37.

5 Shipman, *It Had to Be Revolution*, cit., pp. 92-3. See also A. Elorza, M. Bizcarrondo, *Queridos Camaradas. La Internacional Comunista y España, 1919–1939*, Editorial Planeta, Barcelona 1999, pp. 19-21.

6 Humbert-Droz, *Mon évolution*, cit., pp. 356-7.

7 Ivi, p. 358.

8 On this, see Chapter 3 of B. Studer, *Reisende der Weltrevolution. Eine Globalgeschichte der Kommunistischen Internationale*, Suhrkamp, Berlin 2020.

9 The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), 495/213/277, personal files of Evelyn Roy; RGASPI 495/213/18, personal files of M.N. Roy.

attend the Second World Congress as delegates, he for the Mexican Communist Party, with full voting rights, she – under the pseudonym Santi Devi – for India, with consultative status only[10]. While in Berlin, Roy drew up, together with his wife and Abani Mukherji (1891–1937), an Indian Communist manifesto that however attracted no more than their own three signatures. Like Roy, Mukherjihad transferred his anti-colonial and revolutionary allegiance from nationalistic terrorism to the Communist International, and was likewise making his way to the Second World Congress.

The political situation in Berlin was however difficult. The police arrested any foreign communists they found and had them deported. The young Serb Voja Vujović (1897–1936) – an officer of France's Jeunes Socialistes, who in passing through Switzerland had stayed with the Humbert-Droz family and carelessly arranged to meet other young comrades in a café, among them Willi Münzenberg, himself sought by the police – promptly found himself arrested and locked up for a few days[11]. The somewhat older Humbert-Droz was more circumspect, confining himself to his room for the twelve days he had to wait before he and other waiting delegates could continue their journey.

A rather comfortable journey was had by the two French Social Democrats, Marcel Cachin (1869–1958) and Louis-Oscar Frossard (1889–1946). To Cachin's annoyance, however, the Bolsheviks paid them little attention[12], though other delegates, such as the Italians, were received with great pomp. Cachin, in fact, was seen as an incorrigible chauvinist. John Reed, indeed, found it thoroughly unacceptable that he should have been allowed into the country[13]. Willi Münzenberg, who argued forcefully at the Congress against the admission of the social democratic parties, was still fulminating at Arthur Crispien and Wilhelm Dittmann, the two representatives of the right wing of the USPD,

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10 They left in December 1919, according to G.D. Overstreet and M. Windmiller, *Communism in India*, University of California Press, Berkeley – Los Angeles 1959, p. 27. As against this, the confirmation of their appointment as the delegates of the Mexican party sent to them – in the sardonically conceived names of Roberto Allén and Helen B. de Allén – by José Allén, General Secretary of the Executive Committee, is dated 12 January 1920 (RGASPI 495/213/277).

11 Humbert-Droz, *Mon évolution*, cit., p. 358; Münzenberg, *Die dritte Front*, cit., pp. 314-5; S. McMeekin, *The Red Millionaire: A Political Biography of Willi Münzenberg, Moscow's Secret Propaganda Tsar in the West*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2003, p. 90.

12 Cachin, *Carnets*, cit., p. 434.

13 J. Riddell (ed.), *Workers of the World and Oppressed Peoples, Unite! Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress, 1920*, vol. I, Pathfinder, New York 1991, p. 33.

when he came to write his memoirs in 1930, describing them as "plaster statues of saints that no-one had remembered to put away"[14]. There was, then, no question of unity among all those assembled. Despite the Bolshevik leadership's charm offensive vis-à-vis the big European socialist parties, the political differences of the war years rumbled on, only too easily bursting into flame again.

Revolutionary Enthusiasm and the Experience of Transnational Solidarity

Like the rest of the country, Moscow in 1920 was marked by the years of world war, civil war and War Communism. The economic situation was dire. Industrial production had reached a nadir, in some sectors being no more than 10 to 20 per cent of wartime levels. Living conditions were dreadful, the population impoverished, their clothes shabby. There was little to eat, and there were beggars everywhere. As the foreigners arriving in Petrograd for the Congress would note in due course, the chairs in the Winter Palace were missing their leather, stripped off to make shoes.

Material conditions, though, were a secondary matter to delegates, who experienced them as no more than a temporary inconvenience. The real question was nothing less than the construction of a new world, at least for those who looked forward passionately to a revolutionary future. Perceptions varied with political commitments. Sceptical social democrats like Dittmann criticized Russian backwardness. Willi Münzenberg recalled that he would have "gladly thrown the fellow off the balcony" on hearing him grumble about the bathtub at the hotel. "They went on all day about the poor sanitation and saw during their visit only the battered façade of the building"[15].

The atmosphere was electric, says Alfred Rosmer in his memoirs, charged with excited expectation, resonant with keen debate. Rosmer speaks of a "true spirit of comradeship" among those present[16], swept up in a wave of solidarity that transcended national and ethnic boundaries. Roy too emphasizes in his memoirs the significance of the congress as a place of encounter and new friendships.

Not without a certain naivety, the young Hilde Kramer wrote to a friend in Berlin, recounting her experience:

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14 Münzenberg, *Die dritte Front*, cit., p. 323.

15 *Ibid*.

16 Rosmer, *Moscow*, cit., p. 44.

Of course, it's difficult for a Central European to adjust to Asian conditions, but all these outward things are overridden by the shared idea that all of us here are working for. It is just so lovely to see the Red Flag fly over an imperial palace and a Communist Congress in the throne room developing theses on the advancement of world revolution. Despite the blockade, the Russians are very well informed about political and social conditions in other countries and immediately get the right handle on emerging problems. The Third International has grown immeasurably over the space of a year. Last year, at the first, founding congress, it was a little propaganda group, in which the all-important European states were hardly represented. This time, the congress is an assembly of revolutionary leaders from nearly every country on earth. Here there are no distinctions of nationality or race. English and Indian delegates discuss together the question of their common liberation. A Polish delegate makes a long and enthusiastic speech saluting Soviet Russia's victory over Poland and enjoining another campaign against his country[17].

Kramer's Polish delegate was referring to the Russo-Polish War that had begun in 1919. While the Congress met, the Red Army was advancing on Warsaw, and the delegates attentively followed its progress, displayed on a large map. The Bolshevik leadership, Trotsky and Radek excepted, believed that with the support of the Red Army the Polish workers would rise up against the bourgeoisie. In this they underestimated the importance of the national question, for the Russians were seen as invaders rather than as liberators. The Red Army was brought to a halt before Warsaw and then beaten back, bringing to an end the attempt to export the revolution to the West by force of arms.

Delegates' enthusiasm was nourished too by other factors. Many would remember the impressive cultural productions laid on for their entertainment. As the historian Gleb Albert has shown, the Bolsheviks understood the Comintern congresses held under the auspices of the young Soviet state to be world-historic events, and they were reported in great detail by the state and party press[18]. The presence of foreign delegates not only lent prestige to their hosts, the Soviet leadership, but also represented, for ordinary members of the party and its youth organization, a living symbol of the proletarian internationalism of which they had such great hopes. The festivities organized in honour of the

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17 Letter from Hilde Kramer to "Friedel", Moscow, 22 August 1920, reprinted in Kramer, *Rebellin*, cit., pp. 138-44: 142-3.

18 G. Albert, *"Verehrte Komintern!" Dritte Internationale als politisches Symbol und charismatische Institution im frühen Sowjetstaat*, in "Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung", 2013, pp. 17-38.

delegates were thus also equally aimed at the domestic population. The opening ceremony of the congress, held in Petrograd on 19 July, was notably impressive.

The formal opening of the Congress in Petrograd, together with supporting programme and gala dinner, cost the hosts 20 million roubles[19]. "Techniques of hospitality" were not an Intourist invention[20]. In Moscow, where the Congress eventually met, the delegates were woken each morning by a soldiers' choir singing outside the hotel. Cachin was smitten, finding it "superb"[21]. Hilde Kramer, M.N. Roy, and Charles Shipman later recalled their emotion at hearing the bells of the Kremlin clock ring out the International[22]. The delegates were offered the opportunity to visit factories, where they were each time enthusiastically welcomed by the waiting workers. They took part in many public meetings and other public events, where they would be expected to speak, or to embody international proletarian solidarity by their mute presence.

It seems unlikely, though, that most delegates ever became truly aware of Soviet Russian living conditions under War Communism. Victor Serge (1890–1947), a Belgian journalist and writer of Russian parentage, a former anarchist whose real name was Victor Kibalchich, who had joined the Russian Communist Party in 1919 and who would later join the Left Opposition, certainly didn't think so, noting in his memoirs that

> The only city the foreign delegates never got to know (and their incuriosity in this respect disturbed me) was the real, living Moscow, with its starvation rations, its arrests, its sordid prison episodes, its behind-the-scenes racketeering. Sumptuously fed amidst universal misery (although, it is true, too many rotten eggs turned up at mealtimes), shepherded from museums to model nurseries, the representatives of international socialism seemed to react like holiday-makers or tourists within our poor Republic, flayed and bleeding from the siege[23].

It was not that delegates and other attendees were simply taken in by the charm of Potemkin villages. Rather, if they saw hunger, poverty

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19 A. Vatlin, *Das Jahr 1920. Der Zweite Kongress der Kommunistischen Internationale*, translated from the Russian by W. Hedeler, BasisDruck Verlag, Berlin 2019, p. 69.

20 The concept is from S.R. Margulies, *The Pilgrimage to Russia: The Soviet Union and the Treatment of Foreigners, 1924-1937*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1968.

21 Cachin, *Carnets 1917–1920*, cit., p. 588.

22 Kramer, *Rebellin*, cit., p. 95; Roy, *Memoirs*, cit., p. 350; Shipman, *It Had to Be Revolution*, cit., p. 103.

23 Serge, *Memoirs*, cit., p. 121.

or imprisonment, many of them rationalized these as the inevitable difficulties of a regime still in the process of establishing itself and consolidating the Revolution. Serge described this attitude as "a novel variety of insensitivity: Marxist insensitivity"[24].

Even so, congress delegates were chiefly occupied in discussion, negotiation, and the reading and writing of reports. Before, after, and during the congress, they gathered together for lengthy special commission meetings, plenary sessions, informal discussion groups and spontaneous discussions in the Kremlin corridors, on the streets or at the hotel.

Despite all their differences and points of contention, the congress represented for many a first experience of internationalism in practice.

The Quest for Shared Principles and a Common Language

After repeated delays, the Congress finally opened on 23 July, at the Kremlin, where the redundant imperial throne found a new role as a coat stand. Despite the difficulties of travel, it was attended by 217 delegates from 37 countries, 10 of them Asian, representing in total 67 different organizations. More than thirty came from "oppressed nations" such as China, the Dutch East Indies, India, Ireland, Korea, Mexico, Iran or Turkey[25]. Of those with full voting rights, 124 represented Communist parties, 31 non-Communist. Twelve delegates represented youth organisations[26]. Given the incompleteness of the data, any sociological analysis of delegates to the 1920 Congress can only be approximate. According to John Riddell, some two-thirds of the 176 delegates for whom information is available were less than 40 years old. The youngest, the Russian Lazar Shatzkin (1902–1937), one of the officers of the Youth International, was no more than 18. Only twelve delegates were older than fifty. It is worth noting, in terms of the later development of the Comintern and the Soviet Union, that the coming year would see at least twenty delegates join the (Left) Communist Opposition of Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) and thirteen the Right Communist Opposition around Nikolai Bukharin (1888–1938). And of the foreign delegates, three-fifths would abandon the Comintern by 1933. By 1943, when Stalin dissolved the organization, only a quarter were still members. Of

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24 *Ibid*.

25 Riddell, *Workers of the World*, cit., p. 38; R.J.C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Blackwell, Oxford 2001, p. 130.

26 G. Nollau, *Die Internationale. Wurzeln und Erscheinungsformen des proletarischen Internationalismus*, Verlag für Politik und Wirtschaft, Cologne 1959, p. 52.

those who were not, a horrifically high proportion had fallen victim to the terror of the late 1930s. Of seventy-six delegates then living in the Soviet Union, only thirteen (less than a fifth) did not suffer death or imprisonment[27]. Data on gender are lacking; the credentials committee made no special note, and there has been little later research. It can be said, however, that women represented a small minority. John Riddell gives a figure of nineteen female delegates, without offering any further information[28]. Of those women cited by name in the proceedings of the Congress, seven came from Soviet Russia, the others from Norway, Sweden, Germany, Great Britain, Denmark, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. Photographs and other sources, however, indicate that other women were also present at the congress. Only delegates, however, were officially counted and listed in the proceedings. The landscape of memory too is socially ordered: no report or memoir records the presence of Hilde Kramer, the little shorthand-typist with a gift for languages; only the speakers on the podium were worthy of remembrance. The same goes for contemporary outsiders and later historians.

The congress, which like all Communist meetings was extremely prolific of words and paper, could not, however, have taken place without the work of a host of ancillaries, responsible for what in the language of the Comintern were called "technical" tasks. They worked beside the platform and in the wings. "My days are spent in the conference hall, at the little table directly beneath the speakers' platform", Kramer writes. "I hardly had time for a cup of tea or a bite to eat, or to exchange a word or two with the many people I knew"[29].

These administrative, secretarial, and linguistic roles were chiefly if not almost exclusively fulfilled by women, in accordance with the traditional and still prevalent sexual division of labour. Even Hilde Kramer, who in her 1920 questionnaire described her occupational background as "intellectual", had no input whatsoever into the political proceedings[30]. All this despite the fact that Communist organizations were committed to women's emancipation. As in the Second International, roles at every level, including the highest leadership, were in principle open to women members. In the years following the first world war, women's

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27 Riddell, *Workers of the World*, cit., p. 9.

28 Ivi, p. 8.

29 Kramer, *Rebellin*, cit., p. 98.

30 RGASPI 495/65a/8878, Anketa - Fragebogen - Enquête - Questionnaire (then still printed in four languages, though later in Russian only) of Hilde Kramer, n.d. [1920].

participation in political parties on an equal basis with men was more the exception than the rule. To that extent, the Communist organizations offered women what was still a novel opportunity for political, indeed public activity. Yet the gulf between possibility and actuality was wide, and this was equally true in Soviet Russia. The male gaze had not somehow been automatically abolished, as witnessed, for example, by Victor Serge's description in his memoir of M.N. Roy's companion Evelyn Trent as "a statuesque Anglo-Saxon woman who appeared to be naked beneath her flimsy dress"[31]. He omits to mention that she was an official delegate and the representative of British India on the congress's Colonial Commission[32].

To return to the "infrastructure" of the congress: according to Hilde Kramer, "technical preparations for the congress were very inadequate. Above all, we lacked interpreters and stenographers". She goes on: "There were only two interpreters for the speeches, a man whose name escapes me, and Angelica Balabanova [1878–1965], both fluent in French and German, the two languages of the congress"[33]. The man whose name Kramer forgot must have been Jules Humbert-Droz from Switzerland. In actual fact, any number of multilingual delegates must have acted as interpreters into different languages at meetings of the congress's special commissions. Most Soviet representatives, in any event, gave their speeches in one or other of the (initially) two official languages of the congress, whether the German that nearly all the Bolshevik leaders spoke, or French. Only after the forceful protest of the English-speaking delegates, who went so far as to boycott a whole day of proceedings, was interpretation into English provided. Interpretation was not simultaneous but sequential, bringing with it much delay. While it caused much stress and fatigue to polyglot delegates, interpreting also brought responsibility, and with it, power: they could indeed influence the course of debate. According to some delegates, Angelica Balabanova, who had left Russia in the 1890s to study in Brussels, Leipzig, Berlin, Rome, and Switzerland, was quite unscrupulous in exploiting her position. Her fanciful translations often went on significantly longer than the original

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31 Serge, *Memoirs*, cit., p. 124.

32 Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism*, cit., p. 27.

33 Kramer, *Rebellin*, cit., 93. Not known for her modesty, Angelica Balabanova nevertheless described herself, in her own memoirs, published in 1938, as "the only translator available for the Congress": Balabanoff, *My Life as a Rebel*, cit., p. 274 – the name is variously transliterated as Balabanoff and Balabanova.

speech[34]. Resolutions, motions and delegates' written position papers, on the other hand, were typed up in four languages – German, Russian, French, and English – by the secretarial staff. A shorthand record of debates was kept in German, French or Russian, as the case might be. As was noted in the 1921 edition of the proceedings, there were two shorthand writers for German (the Comintern's working language in the 1920s), one for French, and none for English[35]. The German-speaking shorthand writers were Hilde Kramer, who really only acted as a relief, and a widely travelled Russian woman named Evnina, who seems to have been fluent in all the congress languages. She had been seconded to the congress by her boss, Georgi Chicherin, people's commissar for foreign affairs[36].

Expectations ran high among those attending. Zinoviev (whom Hilde Kramer found pompous and who made an unfavourable impression on most of his contemporaries, especially women) [37] opened the proceedings, observing that this was a great historical event. The congress had to settle the most important questions facing the Communist International. For those present, the subject of their debates was no less than the political future of humanity, which would lose all meaning in the absence of a proletarian world revolution. Opinions however differed on how this was to be accomplished and what such a revolution should look like.

The Bolsheviks in this respect were well-prepared, and had divided the work up between themselves, in the manner of a general staff. Lenin, Trotsky, Radek, Bukharin, and Zinoviev each took responsibility for one major topic on which a position had to be formulated and a resolution adopted. The first thing to be done was to define the role and mode of operation of the Communist parties. Three texts were involved in this: the Statutes, the "Theses on the Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution" and the especially hotly debated

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34 Humbert-Droz, *Mon évolution*, cit., p. 365; Knüfken, *Von Kiel*, cit., p. 127.

35 Cited in Riddell, *Workers of the World*, cit., p. 61.

36 Kramer, *Rebellin*, cit., p. 94.

37 Ruth Fischer nevertheless credits him with a certain oratorical power of persuasion: R. Fischer, *Stalin und der deutsche Kommunismus*, vol. I [1950], Dietz Verlag, Berlin 1991, pp. 190-1. This must in fact have been so, as witnessed by Zinoviev's speech to the USPD party conference in Halle in October 1920, which was decisive in persuading the majority of the membership to transfer to the KPD, making the latter a mass party for the first time.

"Conditions for Entry into the Communist International"[38]. The chief point of contention with regard to this last was the admission of parties of the Second International that had expressed an interest, such as the German USPD – described by one delegate as a "party of government" – the French and Italian Socialist Parties, and also the Swiss and other social-democratic parties. For the Bolsheviks and their allies in other countries, these parties and their leaders were "opportunists" and traitors to the cause. It was in these, however, that the mass of workers were organized. The big social-democratic parties, for their part, were in two minds. Despite the reverses, the political situation in 1920 was still favourable to the Bolsheviks and the Third International. Did they not risk political isolation by not joining the new international? The USPD had after all sent four delegates to Moscow; the French Socialist Party two, and the Italians another two, one of them their long-serving leader and editor of *Avanti*, Giacinto Menotti Serrati (1872–1926). The only one of these parties to have formally pronounced in favour of joining the Third International was the Italian, and Serrati thus opposed the exclusion of party leaderships that had supported a political truce during the war, which would threaten a split in his party. For some, this simply meant that he was unwilling to break with reformism.

Indeed, this was precisely the point on which the Bolsheviks and indeed very many other delegates were inflexible. The Twenty-One Conditions finally adopted were to serve, in Zinoviev's words, as a "bulwark against centrism"[39]. The seventh thus declared point blank that "parties that wish to belong to the Communist International have the obligation of recognising the necessity of a complete break with reformism and 'centrist' politics" and that this break be effected "in the shortest possible time". The congress further required of aspirant member parties that they call a special congress as soon as possible to confirm adherence to the Conditions; that they adopt the principles of democratic centralism (freedom of discussion until the moment of decision, unconditional discipline thereafter, combined with a hierarchical and centralized deci-

[38] On this, see Report on the Statutes, with Discussion, of 4 August 1920, in Riddell, *Workers*, vol. II, cit., pp. 671-94, and the text of the Statutes themselves, ivi, pp. 694-9; *Role and Structure of the Communist Party*, in Riddell, *Workers*, vol. I, pp. 190-200, and the Discussion of 23–24 July 1920, ivi, pp. 141-210; *Theses on the Conditions for Admission*, ivi, vol. II, pp. 765-71, and Discussions of 29–30 July, ivi, vol. I, pp. 291-419, and 6 August 1920, ivi, vol. II, pp. 732-65.

[39] J. Degras (ed.), *The Communist International 1919-1943: Documents*, vol. I, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1956, p. 166.

sion-making structure) and accordingly agree to be bound by decisions of the world congresses and of the Executive Committee of the Communist International; ensure that at least two-thirds of the membership of their central committees and other important bodies consist of comrades who even before the Second Congress had supported joining the Communist International, and that those who rejected the Statutes and the Twenty-One Conditions be expelled from the party. The thirteenth condition further required Communist parties operating in conditions of legality to effect regular purges of the membership, to rid themselves of "petty-bourgeois elements". These provisions would later serve as tools for the exclusion of Stalin's opponents and critical and oppositional forces more generally. They certainly led to fierce debate at the congress. USPD delegates Crispien and Dittmann argued for longer discussions between their party and the new international, while the Italian Serrati, as we have seen, disagreed with the immediate expulsion of leading figures of the Second International. Serrati argued that the key criterion for admission should be the will to revolution. In that respect, the Russians were ahead and the workers of other countries should emulate them. However, the Congress ought not to be a schoolteacher giving out good and bad marks. His fellow Italian Amadeo Bordiga (1889–1970), the Dutchman David Wijnkoop (1876–1941), and even Switzerland's Humbert-Droz took a very different position, calling rather for the conditions to be made even more rigorous. In the end, the Conditions of Admission, which arrived at their final number only in the course of the debate, were adopted with only two votes against (these being Crispien and Dittmann of the USPD).

The Statutes likewise debated at the Congress laid down how the Communist International was to work.

> The new international association of workers is established for the purpose of organising common action between the workers of various countries who are striving towards a single aim: the overthrow of capitalism, *the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat* and *of the international Soviet Republic,* the complete abolition of classes and the realisation of socialism, *as the first step to communist society*[40].

How then was this to be done? One means to it was the adoption, in contrast to the two preceding internationals, of a highly centralized

[40] *Statutes*, in Riddell, *Workers*, cit., pp. 696-7.

organizational structure and the creation of a single, global Communist party, a world party of the revolution. This being so, individual Communist parties would only be sections of the new international association of workers, rather than self-subsistent organizations. With certain exceptions, contacts between individual Communist parties had to take place through the ECCI in Moscow, a centralization of communications that in practice strengthened the hand of the Russian party. For those involved at the time, however, it was essentially a matter of efficiency, the ECCI serving as a kind of switchboard mediating transnational solidarity and cooperation, as the preamble to the Statutes declared.

For the Communists, the revolutionary working class could only achieve victory through an unrelenting struggle against the bourgeoisie, what Lenin conceived of as a European or indeed international civil war[41]. This required of them a quasi-military discipline (Twelfth Condition), for repression by the class enemy was the normal and expectable context of political activity. To protect against this, it would be necessary, they decided, to establish parallel organizational structures, legal and illegal.

The congress had in addition to decide on two tactical questions, though the answers given to them would soon be turned into key principles of Communist analysis and activity[42]. The year 1920 had seen the prospects of imminent civil war (understood as a necessary stage on the path to socialist revolution) become uncertain, and it was necessary to adjust to a somewhat longer time-frame. If war there was to be, the self-appointed avant-garde had to rally the masses to the cause. Concretely, they faced a double problem: firstly, what was their attitude to be to parliamentary work? And secondly, how were they to relate to the trade unions, most of which were in social-democratic hands? Positions on these matters were to some extent diametrically opposed. Council communist and left communist groups, such as the small communist party (the "Altkommunisten") around Jakob (Joggi) Herzog (1892–1931) in Switzerland, or the larger Kommunistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands (KAPD) in Germany – emphatically rejected any participation by Communists in the "bourgeois" institution of parliament or in

41 For an extensive discussion see S. Pons, *The Global Revolution: A History of International Communism, 1917–1991*, translated by A. Cameron, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

42 Another major topic discussed by the congress was the theses on national and colonial questions. This is the content of chapter 2 of my book, *Reisende* and not treated here.

"reactionary" trade unions. Lenin, the cunning tactician, had however prepared the ground for the debate by the publication just before the congress of his *Left-Wing' Communism: An Infantile Disorder*. Bolstered by the Bolsheviks' political success, in this he had not only advocated the need for "strictest centralisation and iron discipline" but also taken a stand against what he took to be the politically immature radicalism that failed to recognize realities in its desire to skip the necessary intermediate stages on the path to the conquest of power. At the present time, it was impossible to renounce engagement in "bourgeois parliaments" and "reactionary" trade unions. Until the masses were ripe for revolution, it was the task of revolutionaries to fill these old forms with new content. However, although all delegates found a copy of Lenin's short, hastily translated essay in their hotel rooms, his arguments were fiercely contested at the Congress. As Charles Shipman observed ironically in his memoir: "If ultra-leftism was a disease, then a lot of the arriving delegates had caught it – myself included. We had never dreamed it was possible to be 'too left'"[43]. Alfred Rosmer, too, noted that this insistence on the tactical was something new[44]. On the question of parliamentarism, a majority of the British delegation rejected participation. And according to the Italian Amadeo Bordiga, the "bourgeois" institution of parliament no longer had any justification in the age of soviets, of workers' councils. Bukharin, who opened the debate, argued, like Lenin, for the propagandistic use of this political platform to educate the proletarian masses. Jules Humbert-Droz found himself convinced by Lenin's essay and the arguments of Bukharin, with whom he would soon become close friends, abandoning his anti-parliamentarist inclinations[45] and finally voting with the Bolsheviks.

Such pragmatism also won through in the matter of trades unions. John Reed was indeed appalled at the idea that a Communist might be involved in the American Federation of Labor (AFL), and his attitude was shared by others such as Jack Tanner (1889–1965), representing the British shop stewards' movement. It was Karl Radek, whom John Reed and Alfred Rosmer both thought lacked any trade union experience[46], who put the Bolshevik case. He argued in favour of participation in the

43 Shipman, *It Had to Be Revolution*, cit., p. 108.

44 Rosmer, *Moscow*, cit., pp. 44, 53.

45 Humbert-Droz, *Mon évolution*, cit., p. 369.

46 Broué, *Histoire*, cit., p. 174; J.-F. Fayet, *Karl Radek (1885–1939). Biographie politique*, Peter Lang, Bern 2004, p. 341.

existing trades unions as a means of drawing the mass of workers to the side of the Communists. That the Russian organizers of the congress were not able to simply impose their ideas is evident from the resolution finally adopted, which reflects a somewhat unbalanced compromise. While it alludes to factory committees, it sees the existing trades unions as considerably more important. It was agreed, too, to set up a committee to prepare for a congress of "red trades unions", a decision that by 1928 would have far-reaching consequences, with the establishment in Germany of the Revolutionäre Gewerkschaftsopposition (Revolutionary Union Opposition), marking a turn towards communist-aligned unions.

Revolutionaries of a New Type?

The Second Congress of 1920 thus laid down the pattern to which members of the Communist Party would be expected to conform and determined the political principles that individual Communist parties had to follow. The "Russian" party, with its immense revolutionary kudos, served as a model. While others had not advanced so far, or had failed in their revolutions, the Bolsheviks had won power. They had lessons to teach. As Victor Serge put it concisely in his memoirs: "The Russians led the dance, and their superiority was so obvious that this was quite legitimate"[47]. Hilde Kramer would justify the dominance of the "Russian comrades" in similar terms: "Despite my naivety, it was clear to me then that the congress was under not only the organizational but also the political control of the Russians, something I found entirely natural"[48]. Like most other delegates, Kramer was bewitched by the Bolsheviks, but she was by no means blind. Immediately after the closure of the congress, she wrote to her friend in Berlin:

> At the Congress one saw quite clearly what great figures hold the fate of this country in their hands. Lenin and Trotsky and several other great Russian revolutionaries represented the Russian Communist Party and outshone all other delegates. Only a decade ago they might have been minor authors in Switzerland, like many of the delegates, and now, as a result of the experience of revolution, as a result of struggle, of many years working to realize their ideas, they have become giants, with whom none of the revolutionary avant-garde who assembled here could remotely compare themselves[49].

47 Serge, *Memoirs*, cit., p. 124.

48 Kramer, *Rebellin*, cit., p. 102.

49 Ivi, pp. 138-9.

Behind this, however, was a great labour of persuasion. "The Russians seemed incapable of exhaustion by discussion", British delegate John T. Murphy (1888–1965) noted in his memoirs[50]. This had its effect on him too, as having arrived a revolutionary syndicalist, he left Moscow a Communist:

> My experience in Russia as well as the discussions had shown me the real meaning of the struggle for political power…It was this which led me to a complete revaluation of political parties. Instead of thinking that a Socialist Party was merely a propaganda organisation for the dissemination of Socialist views I now saw that a real Socialist Party would consist of revolutionary Socialists who regarded the party as the means whereby they would lead the working class in the fight for political power[51].

The Bolsheviks championed at the Second Congress what they believed the Civil War had taught them[52]. Their party discipline, inspired by the model of military command, had now to be adopted by the Comintern. In political practice, however, things were more complicated. When Congress found it difficult to agree on a principle, details were in many cases left to smaller party organs to determine. This could still lead to considerable conflict, for, despite the appeals to discipline, party members and individual sections could not just be directed from above. The whole history of the Comintern is thus a history of conflict, difference and dissidence, and the departure, indeed, not just of individuals but of whole parties. Not the least important evidence of this is the high number of delegates to the 1920 Congress who left the International over the following decade, while the number of victims of terror among them, previously noted, suggests that the extreme homogeneity of the 1930s, such as it was, was largely achieved through repression and physical annihilation. In Moscow in 1920, this was but a distant and unknown future.

The Second World Congress of the Comintern that had so urgently developed the organizational and political principles of world revolution had lasted twenty-five days. Unlike the founding congress of 1919, which had been able to get through its business in only four, it had called for extensive advance preparations, many ancillary commissions and numerous written submissions.

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50 Murphy, *New Horizons*, cit., p. 151

51 Ivi, p. 160.

52 A. Vatlin, *Die Komintern. Gründung, Programmatik, Akteure*, Dietz, Berlin 2009, p. 41.

While the work of the congress assumed that revolution was imminent, there were also signs of pragmatic adjustment to a changing political situation. The congress issued no call to armed uprising, but called on Communist parties to participate in parliaments and trades unions, a shift towards the "conquest of the masses" that heralds already the turn that would be formalized at the Third Congress.

For the present, however, it was a matter of closing up ranks, building a powerful organization and finding the best means of effective communication at the global level. The international revolutionary organization had to provide its members with guidelines for disciplined political activity. "The Comintern is not an organization in which it is enough to send postcards to one another", said Radek[53]. The first priority was the establishment of a network of professional revolutionaries with the requisite technical knowledge. The Bolsheviks and their allies were clear that if the revolutionary horizon had now receded, then the Comintern required a political and administrative apparatus if it were to fulfil its tasks. A revolution, one might say, would have to be professionally organized, and the Bolsheviks thus formed a body of functionaries that developed and issued political and technical quality standards[54].

For the Bolsheviks, organization was indispensable to the success of the undertaking. The professionalization and globalization of the revolution was not just a political-ideological programme, but was also the most important condition for the survival of Soviet Russia itself. That this would have to change with the Europe's return to political stability from 1924 on was neither inevitable nor foreseeable. It was a development that likewise transformed the relationship of Communist parties abroad to the Soviet Union. Once focus and platform for a worldwide internationalist project, the Soviet Union became the territorial basis for the political project of the Communist parties, the guarantor of their national existence and the legitimating exemplar of their worldview and their struggle. But before any of this happened, a select number of delegates to the Second Congress would travel on to the East, hoping in Baku to find new allies for the revolution.

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53 Cited in Fayet, *Radek*, cit., p. 356.

54 Y. Cohen, *Circulatory Localities: The Example of Stalinism in the 1930s*, in "Kritika", xi, 2010, 1, pp. 11-45: 43.