

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > On the Left (Europe) > History of the Left (Europe, out of France and Britain) > Paul Levi > **History of German Communism: Paul Levi in Perspective - The 1920s**

History of German Communism: Paul Levi in Perspective - The 1920s

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

Frédéric Cyr, *Paul Levi, rebelle devant les extrêmes*, Presses de l'Université Laval, Québec, 2013.

Paul Frölich, *Im radikalen Lager : Politische Autobiographie 1890-1921* (ed. Reiner Tosstorff), BasisDruck Verlag, Berlin, 2013.[1]

Contents

- [Levi's Life](#)
- [Interpretations](#)
- [Political Perspectives](#)
- [Leadership Style](#)
- [Luxemburg or Lenin?](#)
- [Ultra-Leftism](#)
- [Levi and Zetkin](#)

In the years after 1917 the Communist International attracted some remarkable revolutionaries - Alfred Rosmer, Boris Souvarine, Sylvia Pankhurst, Victor Serge, Heinrich Brandler, MN Roy and many more. As the Comintern was increasingly manipulated by first Zinoviev, then Stalin, they moved away in different directions and generally disappeared from both orthodox Communist and Cold War historiography.

It is only relatively recently that a new generation of historians, free from Cold War pressures, have begun to move beyond the classical triad of Lenin, Trotsky and Stalin, and to study the many other leaders and activists who made the Communist International what it was.[2]

The more we appreciate the complex interplay of individuals and strategies that made up the early years of the Comintern, the better we shall be able to understand a unique period of history. Paul Levi, who lived through those tumultuous years, summarised the historical significance of the Russian Revolution:

.... As an arousal, a call, as a magnet for the proletarian forces of the whole world, Soviet Russia

exerted a power greater than anything previous. By proclaiming in Russia and hence to the world “for the first time the final goals of socialism as the immediate programme of practical policy”, and, in this way, as the historical task demanded, basing its whole policy on the world-proletariat and its revolutionary arousal, by fearlessly choosing the steepest path in life without bending the knee, and with unshakeable resilience directing all thoughts to the victory of the proletariat, the Bolsheviks will remain unforgotten by the proletariat into the furthest future, they will “be imperishable and shine”. [L224]

Levi himself was one of those exceptional individuals who until recently was little known and often dismissed on the basis of second-hand judgments. However three recent books cast considerable light on Levi's complex role in the history of German Communism, and open up the debate about why the German revolution, which could have transformed the whole course of twentieth-century history, was stillborn.

Levi's Life

Paul Levi (1883-1930), a lawyer, was active in the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) before 1914 and was closely associated with Rosa Luxemburg. He opposed World War I, and on being discharged from the army, went to Switzerland, where he worked with Lenin. At the end of the war he was a founder-member of the new German Communist Party (KPD). He does not appear to have aspired to leadership, but after the murders of Luxemburg, Liebknecht and Jogisches, had it thrust upon him. His time as leader was a stormy period; Levi was responsible for excluding about half the party's membership at the October 1919 Heidelberg congress, but he could also claim some credit for the merger with a substantial section of the Independent Socialists (USPD), which took the KPD's membership to probably around 450,000,[3] and, equally important, he played a key role in promoting the “Open Letter” calling for joint action by workers' organisations, which effectively prefigured the Comintern's United Front strategy.

Levi resigned the leadership in February 1921. A few weeks later came the March Action, an insurrectionary general strike, called by the KPD with Comintern encouragement[4], but without mass support. It led to serious repression and a massive loss of members,[5] including many leading trade-union activists, and had a major impact on the Communist movement internationally. Levi published *Our Path: Against Putschism* – translated here into English in full for the first time – a vigorous denunciation of his own party's actions, for which he was promptly expelled from the KPD. He collected his followers, including some deputies and other leading figures, into the Communist Workgroup (KAG), which joined the remainder of the USPD which had not affiliated to the Comintern, and which in 1922 reunited with the SPD. Though he hoped briefly to return to the KPD on his own terms, he soon abandoned this possibility. Levi remained in the SPD for the rest of his life, continuing to advocate Marxist politics, though hopes of pulling the SPD to the left appeared vain. He was a deputy in the Reichstag and also continued to practise as a lawyer, in particular taking up the defence of press freedom against government repression. He died in what seems to have been a tragic accident in 1930.

Given his political trajectory, it is unsurprising that Levi was a controversial figure. When the Reichstag paid tribute to him after his death, both Nazi and KPD deputies walked out. Splits in revolutionary organisations are painful things. Those of us who have experienced them only in the microscopic world of the modern-day far left know that they can destroy friendships and leave a residue of bitterness that lasts for decades. In 1920-21 disputes about strategy were a matter of life and death – both for individuals and for the whole revolutionary project.

So it is little wonder that Levi felt great distress at seeing what looked like the wrecking of the party he had done so much to build. But it is also scarcely surprising that Levi's comrades felt that he had jumped ship when the party was facing its greatest difficulties and dangers.

Ninety years on there is little point in taking sides in such disputes. The high level of struggle in the period 1917-1923 meant that revolutionaries had to take incredibly difficult decisions, in which the whole future of the movement was at stake. They had little time to play with and little experience to draw on. So historians can identify in retrospect things that may have been impossible to grasp in the frenzied circumstances of the time.

Levi was undoubtedly a man of considerable talent. He was a powerful orator and a fluent writer who drew on an authentic capacity for Marxist analysis. He was also a man of considerable courage. Both in 1919, and later, when he was involved in highly public opposition to the Nazis, he unhesitatingly put his head on the line.

However, by all accounts Levi had a distinctly uncongenial style and personality. Two incorruptible revolutionaries who met him in 1920, Alfred Rosmer and Victor Serge, describe him in very unflattering terms. Victor Serge recalled:

I discovered a novel variety of insensitivity: Marxist insensitivity. Paul Levi, a leading figure in the German Communist Party, an athletic and self-confident figure, told me outright that "for a Marxist, the internal contradictions of the Russian Revolution were nothing to be surprised at". This was doubtless true except that he was using this general truth as a screen to shut away the sight of immediate fact, which has an importance all of its own.[6]

Alfred Rosmer met Levi in Berlin on his way to Russia. He found him

.... gloomy and fretful. His main aversion was the Communists who had opposed him at Heidelberg. He was obsessed with them, and the conflict took on the appearance of a personal quarrel. In his eyes the syndicalists were not politically reliable comrades.... We tried to get him to talk of other things, for the conversation was becoming wearisome. But it was impossible, he always came back to the terrible opposition; it was almost like a persecution mania.[7]

Rosa Leviné-Meyer, widow of Eugen Leviné, executed in Munich in 1919, was, even allowing for personal antagonism, scathing in her assessment of Levi's character and role, stating that:

His lordly manner, his haughty disregard for the intellectually inferior, frightened away a great number of people who could have been relied on to become the stalwarts of the revolution.[8]

There is no requirement that revolutionaries should be likeable people. A great many, past and present, patently have not been. But a party leader who makes such a bad impression may find it difficult to win support.

He could also be an ungenerous polemicist. Fernbach, with some justice, complains about Radek's "hatchet-job" on Levi, where he sneered at his "collection of vases". [L23] But Levi himself was capable of equally vitriolic prose. Thus he denounced the Munich Soviet Republic of 1919 as "a putsch staged by a handful of literati". [L48]. Certainly there were some grotesque aspects to the Munich rising.[9] But to scorn a revolutionary like Ernst Toller because he happened to be a writer was needlessly brutal.

Interpretations

The three books under review give different perspectives on Levi's role, his achievements and his limitations. David Fernbach has collected twenty-seven of Levi's articles, pamphlets, speeches and letters from 1918 to 1928. The book falls into four sections. The first covers Levi's time in the leadership of the KPD, and his thoughts on the Hungarian Revolution and the Munich Soviet Republic. The second focuses on the key turning-point of the March Action, and contains Levi's two pamphlets on the events. The third part covers developments in post-revolutionary Russia, and includes prefaces to Luxemburg's *The Russian Revolution* and Trotsky's *The Lessons of October*. The final part deals with Germany from 1921 to 1925, tracing setbacks for the left and the rise of right-wing violence.

Frédéric Cyr has written the first full biography of Paul Levi.[10] Though short by the standards of political biographies – 194 pages for the almost forty-seven eventful years of Levi's life – it is a carefully documented account, based on archival research in Russia and in various national and local collections in Germany and Russia, on a survey of Levi's writings and on the contemporary press.

Cyr describes Levi's early years and his activities as a lawyer. It was through this that he first encountered Rosa Luxemburg, and for a time became her lover. In 1914 he defended her in two court cases relating to antimilitarism. In the first she was found guilty for making a speech in which she declared: "If we're expected to take arms against our brothers from France or elsewhere, we shall proclaim: 'we refuse'." [C27]

Just a month before the outbreak of war she was again prosecuted for exposing the systematic brutality in the German army; In face of Levi's defence the prosecution collapsed and Luxemburg walked free. In the following weeks Luxemburg and Levi held a number of triumphant antimilitarist meetings – evidence that support for the war in Germany was far from unanimous.

After leaving the Communist Party Levi resumed his legal activities. In the later twenties he increasingly came into conflict with the Nazis. He successfully took action for defamation against Alfred Rosenberg, a leading Nazi, who had accused him of receiving money from an English spy during the First World War. And in 1926 he came face to face with Adolf Hitler himself, when he defended a Social Democrat from Saxony who had accused Hitler of receiving foreign finance. Levi concluded his defence by declaring ironically: "Hitler may not know much about the Talmud, but he certainly has a natural talent, which is generally attributed only to Jews, for matters of currency". [C176]

The publication of Paul Frölich's autobiography provides us with a remarkable document about the years of revolutionary upheaval in Germany following the First World War. Frölich wrote this autobiographical sketch in the late 1930s, at the request of the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam, but it was never published, and was long forgotten. The typescript was discovered in 2007; now Reiner Tosstorff has produced a scholarly edition, with annotations and a short essay recounting the main events of the rest of Frölich's life, as well as a sketch of his long-time companion and fellow-revolutionary Rosi Wolfstein.

Frölich, born into a Social Democratic family, was a party activist and journalist in the period before 1914. Associated with the Bremen group of "left radicals", he was involved with the founding of the Communist Party (KPD), and served on its leading bodies. In 1928 he was expelled from the KPD and the following year helped to found the Communist Opposition organisation the KPO, alongside many other veterans of the early years of the KPD. When the KPD split, he became a member of the SAP [Socialist Workers Party], of which Willy Brandt was a leading member. When Hitler came to power he was exiled in France, then the USA. He returned to West Germany in 1950, where he died in

1953. He never renounced his revolutionary commitment. He has probably been best remembered as the author of a biography of Rosa Luxemburg.[11]

The volume offers a treasure-house of insights and details about the history of the German working-class movement. As Tosstorff points out in his editorial appendix, Frölich's memoirs are "subjectively coloured". Frölich was writing from memory; like everyone else who lived through the turbulent and difficult period of the early twenties he had his own axe to grind, so his judgments cannot be taken as definitive. But they will surely contribute to an understanding of these crucial years. We can only regret that the story ends in 1921, so that we do not have Frölich's perspective on the failed opportunities of 1923.

Frölich begins with his childhood; some of his earliest memories are of distributing leaflets for the SPD. He describes both the poverty that led workers to turn to the SPD, and the powerful attraction of socialist ideas. In his youth the memory of the years of illegality before 1890 was strong, and the SPD still maintained a clandestine organisation. Frölich rapidly became a party activist and worked as a journalist. He gives us many pen portraits of known and unknown party activists, some affectionate, some malicious.

Frölich opposed the war from the outset; he spent some time at the front, and describes how revolutionary newspapers circulated among the troops. He attended the anti-war conference at Kienthal in Switzerland in 1916, where he had his first meeting with Lenin.

The revolutionary upsurge at the war's end led to the founding of the KPD. The Bremen group with which Frölich was connected came together with the Spartacus organisation to form the new party. The enthusiasm aroused by the spread of workers' and soldiers' councils, together with disgust at the way the old SPD leadership had betrayed in 1914, meant that ultra-left ideas were rife in the new organisation. According to Frölich at the time of the founding of the KPD even Paul Levi was opposed to participation in parliamentary elections, and only spoke (unconvincingly) in favour because persuaded to by Rosa Luxemburg. Frölich's recollections thus have much to tell us about the context in which Levi was active.

Political Perspectives

Some of the items collected by Fernbach help us to characterise Levi's understanding of the period he lived through. In 1921, at the time of the March Action, he was clearly right to argue that "the existing contradictions did not immediately lead to open confrontation". [L208] But by the autumn of 1922 he had gone much further and was already arguing that this was more than a temporary downturn; internationally, he claimed, "it is the bourgeoisies who have triumphed. Our brothers, for their part, have been beaten on all sides." [L296] Hence he did not believe that there was any possibility of taking power in 1923, a position he confirmed in 1925 with a sharp critique of Trotsky's Lessons of October. [L257-65][12]

Now it is certainly possible to argue in retrospect about the extent and limits of the revolutionary possibilities in 1923. But to those who lived through the period there were obvious signs of revolutionary potential: the French invasion of the Ruhr, the devastating impact of hyperinflation on everyday life, the struggle for influence on the streets between Nazis and Communists.[13] Yet Levi had no confidence in the left's ability to take advantage of the situation; although he remained an SPD parliamentarian, he devoted himself increasingly to legal activity in defence of civil liberties.

Levi took a similarly pessimistic line about developments in Russia. Although he believed that the 1917 insurrection and the establishment of soviet power were a genuine victory for the working

class, he considered that after the Kronstadt rebellion of March 1921 and the introduction of the New Economic Policy, there had been a “complete reversal” [L225] of Bolshevik policy, and already by late 1921 he was arguing that

.... the goal of the Bolsheviks in 1918 was to create conditions in which capitalism could no longer exist and in which it could no longer return to life, whereas, in 1921, it was to create conditions in which capitalism, as state-capitalism if possible and, if not, then as private capitalism of the common-and-garden kind, could make a return. [L227]

In 1921 he wrote an introduction to Rosa Luxemburg’s pamphlet on the Russian Revolution. His criticisms now went far further than Luxemburg’s: “What then is left of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’? Nothing. Nothing of its objective aspects, nothing of its subjective ones.” [L249]

He thus remained detached from the struggle of the Left Opposition. He refused to support Trotsky, believing that for too long he had “kept solidarity with the [Russian] government and responsibility for it”. [L274] Again, Levi may have made some valid points in the context of the long-term course of events, but in the short term his position implied an aloofness from the ongoing struggle.

Leadership Style

Frölich’s memoirs provide us with some useful indications about Levi’s style of leadership and the role he played in the KPD in 1919-1920. When Luxemburg and Liebknecht were murdered Leo Jogisches attempted to pull the party together until his own murder a couple of months later. Frölich’s view of Jogisches is generally positive; he notes his capacity for analysis, his attention to detail and the way he interrogated visiting comrades from the provinces in order to understand what was happening. He inspired activity without being directly involved; in Frölich’s words he “was a dictator who always remained in the shadows”. [F175] However, he believes that in the difficult situation following the deaths of Luxemburg and Liebknecht Jogisches actually willed his own death, and that he became a victim of counterrevolutionary repression because he did not take adequate precautions.

After Jogisches’ death Levi succeeded rather reluctantly to the leadership. Frölich’s view of Levi is negative, in contrast with his view of Jogisches, although he does not deny his real qualities – intelligence, judgment and courage. As he notes Levi could have played a valuable role in a collective leadership: “As long as he could look up to a stronger personality with absolute confidence, he was an extraordinarily strong political force. But as the top man he was a disappointment.” [F254] Frölich recounts various anecdotes that reveal Levi’s aloof style and his inability to relate to rank-and-file party members. Thus he tells how, when he and Levi were on their way to a meeting during the stormy days of early 1919, within sound of gunfire, they met a revolutionary sailors’ leader; Levi failed to engage in discussion with him, merely making some disdainful remarks. He then stopped off at a shop to buy a piece of silk.

Levi’s method, he tells us, was to “command without persuading”. He contrasted this sharply to Jogisches’ leadership style. “People were happy to submit to Leo, and we were ready to do the impossible when he demanded it. But we felt undervalued, neglected, treated as non-existent by Levi. He always stood on the far side of an abyss. He didn’t belong to us. We felt he was an aristocrat.” [F256]

After the death of Jogisches, the party leadership was in some ways like a family, and this sense of solidarity helped it to come through difficult situations. But, according to Frölich, “Levi did not belong to ‘the family’. He stood outside. His relations with the others were of a purely business-like

nature. A personal conversation with him was almost unknown. If it did happen, it was regarded as an unusual occurrence. ... If he had something against people, he treated them with studied brutality. As I've already mentioned, he scarcely ever gave a real explanation of tactical questions. He didn't feel the need to persuade, to win people over to his position." [F255]

Frölich was in Munich during the time of the short-lived Soviet Republic in the spring of 1919, and gives a vivid eye-witness account of events. He is highly critical of the role of Ernst Toller, whom he found to be stubborn, ambitious and difficult to work with, but he writes as one who shared the dangers of his comrades (because of his role in Munich Frölich had to work in illegality for some time afterwards). His perspective is miles removed from the supercilious comments made by Levi at a safe distance. (Apparently Eugen Leviné, who played a leading part on behalf of the KPD and paid for it with his life, insisted that Levi should not come to Munich.)

However, Frölich commends Levi's position during the Kapp putsch of 1920, where he condemned the KPD's initial passivity and abstentionism, and argued for the possibility of using the situation to develop the party's influence.

Levi's great achievement is generally reckoned to be the Halle Congress, where the KPD massively increased its membership by winning over the left wing of the USPD and creating a new merged party. Frölich takes a measured view of this. Although he arrived late and did not hear Zinoviev's speech, he believes Zinoviev was a superficial speaker. And he claims that Zinoviev's published account of his visit to Germany was "grotesque", presenting a "Germany which nobody else had seen, because it didn't exist". [F244]

And he has a low view of the USPD leadership, who he sees as "time-servers rather than pioneers". [F246] He claims that many of the USPD leading members went on to become loyal Stalinists, while most of the leading figures from Spartacus left the party.

Frölich notes a significant inconsistency in Levi's approach: "Here we encounter once more the remarkable contradiction in Levi's conduct: in relation to other parties [...] a very flexible procedure, that is ready to take into account the interests of the whole - but within his own party a putschist ultimatum, an insistence on an immediate decision, just as at the Heidelberg Congress". [F253-54] Frölich might well have added that Levi was always willing to make concessions to his right, but not to his left. (This of course was a notable feature of the Stalinist Popular Front - ready accommodation to forces to the right, but total intransigence towards "ultra-left" currents.)

On one point Frölich is clear - Levi had decided to break with the Communist International before the time of the March Action. "Even without the March Action it would have come to a split with him." [F259] The March Action gave Levi a convenient pretext, but his political course was already set.

On the March Action itself Frölich has a number of interesting observations. He describes vividly the chaos of the events. But he insists that the Russian leadership of the Comintern was not primarily responsible. "It is certainly true, and understandable, that the Russian comrades wanted an action that would take the pressure off them. But that is by no means to say that they wanted action that would turn out the way the March Action did." [F262] He gives a nuanced portrayal of Béla Kun (Comintern emissary in Germany in 1921), showing him in a more favourable light than many who knew him did, seeing him as selfless and able to arouse enthusiasm. But he insists that ultimately the responsibility for the March Action must lie with the German Communists and not with the Russians or the Comintern leadership. "In any case none of the then party leaders has the right to hide behind the Russians or Béla Kun. We all bear full responsibility for the Action." [F265]

There is much in Frölich's nuanced account of Levi's leadership that enriches our understanding of the period, but in essence he confirms what many others observed, that Levi's personality and his intolerance of ultra-leftism made him unfitted to deal with the challenges of the period.

Luxemburg or Lenin?

Fernbach has entitled his collection "In the Steps of Rosa Luxemburg", reflecting the way in which Levi frequently quoted her and defended her in polemics against Radek. In his Introduction (a revised and expanded version of his New Left Review article from 1999[14]), Fernbach counterposes "'Luxemburgist' and 'Leninist' traditions" [L11]. The inverted commas indicate caution, and his conclusion is also guarded and necessarily speculative:

The choices made by Levi in the 1920s cannot arbitrarily be attributed to a hypothetically surviving Rosa Luxemburg. But they certainly indicate the points where she would likewise have had to choose. It seems likely that she, too, would have broken with the "left communists" for the sake of union with the radical Independents. And it is hard to imagine that she, any more than Levi, would have accepted the Comintern's manipulation of proletarian militancy, and its counterpart in the Bolshevisation of the German Party. [L31]

It is very dubious whether there is any such coherent body of thought and political practice as "Luxemburgism", which can be contrasted to "Leninism". Luxemburg was undoubtedly a great revolutionary; her writings on revolutionary spontaneity and the dynamics of mass struggle are central to the Marxist tradition; her criticisms of Lenin, from both 1904 and 1918, are pertinent even if debatable. But there is one problem with a comparison between Lenin and Luxemburg; Luxemburg, through no fault of her own, died with clean hands. If she had survived and if the German workers had taken power, could a revolutionary government including Luxemburg have managed to do without coercion, censorship and terror? We can only speculate, yet Luxemburg is often used as a means of criticising Lenin.

Fernbach argues, quite reasonably, that Luxemburg (and Levi) would never have countenanced the Stalinist Third Period which denounced Social Democrats as "social fascists". . His attempt to blame the Third Period on "Leninism" is less credible:

And as the threat of fascism intensified, Spartakists would have had less difficulty than Leninists in joining hands with Social Democrats and liberals in a "historic compromise" that might well have averted the plunge into the abyss. [L32]

Luxemburg and Levi are thus made into forerunners of the Popular Front. While one might reasonably suppose that both Luxemburg and Lenin would have echoed Trotsky's call for a united front against fascism, it is hard to imagine either of them (or Levi) engaging in the cross-class alliances of the Popular Fronts of the 1930s.

For as Cyr points out, after Levi returned to the SPD he was firmly opposed to any kind of alliance with bourgeois parties. As he wrote, "the objective of a socialist party is not to 'influence' the plans of the capitalist state, but to abolish it totally, without compromise". [C141] When, in 1923, the SPD joined a coalition government, Levi was totally opposed: "We who from the start rejected the coalition see its failure not as the end, but rather the beginning of socialism." [C143] This seems to undermine Fernbach's claim that Levi would have supported an anti-fascist Popular Front.

In fact Levi's attitude to "Leninism" was rather more nuanced. He was scathing about what he called "a Lenin philology":

In every particular situation, the sentence from Lenin is quoted – by volume, chapter, section and paragraph – that fits the given situation, or, often, does not fit it. Instead of living criticism, we have the master has spoken. [L261][15]

The phenomenon will be familiar to many modern readers. But Levi was careful to make a distinction between Lenin, whom he always regarded with great respect, and “Leninism” (largely an invention of the period after Lenin’s death):

In actual fact, we can grant Lenin only one point – certainly no small one, and that already makes him a great man: that he recognised the particular conditions for seizing power in Russia, that he showed how to create new forms of state, and once again made the concept “dictatorship of the proletariat” not just a phrase but a reality again, even if only for a short time. But the generalisation of all this beyond Russia and into Leninism, the canonisation of tactical moves in a particular situation, is just as much a mistake as the canonisation of the tactical or strategic turns of a field-marshal. No, we must say it openly: Lenin remains, Leninism is over. [L268]

It is a formulation which could lead in more than one direction, but it clearly undermines Fernbach’s binary distinction of “Leninism” and “Luxemburgism”.

Cyr’s biography develops a radically different view of Levi’s relation to Lenin and Luxemburg. He directly confronts the view that Levi was in some sense the heir of Luxemburg. On the contrary, he maintains, Levi was initially very close to Lenin. When Levi went to Switzerland in 1916, Radek introduced him to Lenin, who hoped to use Levi to influence Luxemburg and her supporters.[16]

In October 1918, according to Cyr, “Levi remained the principal mediator between Spartacus and the Bolsheviks. He was preparing.... a new political platform copied from the Russian model aiming in the short term for a seizure of power in Germany.” [C58] Cyr believes he had a decisive influence on the Spartacist programme. He draws out in particular Levi’s role in persuading Luxemburg not to publish her criticism of the Russian Revolution, because that could have been an obstacle to the building of a revolutionary party in Germany. Levi visited her in jail and had a long argument with her; he himself later claimed that he was the only person who could have persuaded her.

Cyr is on rather weaker ground when he claims that Levi’s conception of the revolutionary party and his leadership style were essentially “Leninist”. Thus he tells us that when Levi assumed the party leadership, he was in a precarious situation. “To strengthen his position, he had recourse to radical means, worthy of the Bolshevik purges. He showed himself to be an incisive leader, whose leadership style was comparable to Lenin’s, that is, it was based on the ‘most strict centralisation’.” [C73]

Now Lenin undoubtedly believed in strong centralised leadership, but if that was all there was to Lenin, then it would be hard to explain how the Bolsheviks were able to take the leadership and carry through the October revolution successfully. After his return to Russia in 1917, Lenin insisted on the need to make “a patient, systematic, and persistent explanation”[17] of the new perspective outlined in the April Theses and ensure that the party membership was persuaded. Such patience was something of which Levi, by all accounts, was quite incapable. Repeatedly Cyr cites examples of Levi behaving in an authoritarian fashion and then claims that this is proof of his “Leninism”. Thus he tells us that in a speech at the Heidelberg Congress, “Levi advocated a very Leninist conception of the party which put the emphasis on centralisation and the need for a strong central committee.” [C78]

This treatment of Leninism is one of the main weaknesses of the book. Cyr has conscientiously studied the details of Levi’s development and gives a honest picture of Levi’s strengths and

weaknesses. But his knowledge of Lenin seems to be superficial and second-hand, and hence his attribution of a "Leninist" position to Levi is forced and inadequate.

On the March Action Cyr describes Levi's legitimate criticisms and his subsequent break with the KPD. But he challenges the argument advanced by Pierre Broué and Jean-François Fayet that the expulsion of Levi marked the point at the KPD was brought under Russian control. Against them he takes up the argument of the German historian Klaus-Michael Mallmann, who argues that Levi's conduct at Heidelberg was in fact "a very important precedent on which later Stalinist purges were based." [C81-82] However one may judge Levi's actions at Heidelberg, this seems a very unlikely analogy; the Stalinist terror, both in its methods and its sanctions, was utterly different to any bureaucratic manoeuvres Levi may have been guilty of.

On the basis of Cyr's account it is clear that Levi was neither a Leninist nor a Luxemburgist, though he may well have learnt from both of them. But he developed his own leadership style, which was radically different from either Lenin's or Luxemburg's, and had its own very visible defects.

Cyr's conclusion is even more dubious. He claims that Levi "contributed to undermining the chances of survival of the German republic". [C192] The argument is that by helping to found and build the KPD in opposition to the Social Democrats, he prepared the way for the KPD's refusal to unite with the SPD in opposing Hitler. "The schism which Levi contributed to creating between the Communists and Social Democrats was to prove fatal for the Weimar Republic." [C193] Such a conclusion shows that, for all his conscientious research, Cyr is totally out of sympathy with everything that Levi stood for.

In his appendix to Frölich's memoirs, Tosstorff reproduces a letter from Luxemburg to Zetkin, written just four days before her murder, in which she comments on the founding congress of the KPD and the debate about participation in elections: "Don't forget that a great many of the 'Spartacists' are a new generation, free from the idiotic traditions of the 'tried and trusted' party, and that must be accepted with its good and bad sides. We have all agreed not to make the matter a vital issue, and not to take it too seriously." [F304] In this respect Levi certainly did not follow in the steps of Rosa Luxemburg.

As Tosstorff points out, in the mid-twenties under the Fischer-Maslow leadership, Luxemburgism was denounced as a deviation in the KPD. Frölich defended Luxemburg "because he saw in her the unity of theoretical self-confidence with a sensitive empathy for the party rank-and-file, which he so often found missing in the KPD". [F340] He thus represented a rather different continuity with Luxemburg than that sometimes attributed to Levi.

Ultra-Leftism

But the most striking feature about Levi's political career was his consistent failure to deal with what, in the Marxist tradition, has often been termed "ultra-leftism". Ultra-leftism can be defined as a strategic perspective which overestimates the existing level of consciousness in the working class. Its most common manifestations include a refusal to participate in the electoral processes of parliamentary democracy, an unwillingness to work in the allegedly reformist trade unions, and a rejection of united front work with currents seen as being to the right of the revolutionary movement.

Ultra-leftism is a perennial phenomenon, especially problematic in periods of rising revolutionary struggle. Newly radicalised militants, with no experience of defeat and believing that everyone else has dispensed with the illusions that they themselves have just jettisoned, can be disruptive and

provocative, an obstacle to the involvement of broader layers of rather more cautious workers. Yet at the same time ultra-leftism is frequently, in Lenin's phrase, an "infantile disorder", a youthful phase in the development of a more mature and rounded revolutionary individual or movement.

For the Bolsheviks it had seemed important to win over at least a section of the ultra-lefts. Alfred Rosmer records that Bukharin told him that the Bolsheviks aimed to "work together" with anarchists if at all possible.[18] Victor Serge devoted a whole pamphlet to trying to persuade anarchists to align with the Russian Revolution, while not losing their distinctive viewpoint.[19] Levi's dealings with the ultra-left were much less successful. In particular three episodes can be noted.

As soon as the German Communist Party was founded, it faced a serious problem. A significant part of the membership were opposed to participation in parliamentary elections and to work within the existing trade unions. At the founding congress in December 1918 the majority rejected participation in elections; as a result the KPD failed to win some of the leading industrial militants which it needed if it was to become a serious force.[20]

This situation could not be allowed to continue. Time did not permit lengthy debates; if a substantial section of the USPD was to be won over, it would have to be done in months, not years. And without a merger with the USPD the KPD would have remained too small and marginal to have any chance of confronting the challenges of the period.

Many leaders would have attempted to divide the opposition, to use salami tactics, to draw some of the oppositionists towards the majority. Chris Harman thought that:

The party leadership would have done better to have pushed through its own policies at the congress and then taken on and removed the most irreconcilable opposition figures in the localities one at a time - especially since in the months that followed it became clear that different forms of impatience were driving the different oppositionists in completely different directions.[21]

However at the October 1919 congress at Heidelberg Levi pursued a position of confrontation, and lost nearly half the party membership.[22] Frölich gives a very negative account of the Heidelberg Congress. According to him twelve members of the Central Committee had a vote at the congress, and that it was only with these votes that there was a majority in favour of excluding the opposition.

In their detailed analysis of the congress, Marcel Bois and Florian Wilde examine allegations of undemocratic practices, and show that these can be explained, in part at least, by the difficulties of working in illegal conditions. The disputed questions were debated in at least some regional conferences. If Levi was intransigent, so were the leftists, who demanded the expulsion of any members who participated in bourgeois parliaments. The Levi leadership did try to build bridges in order to win back some of those excluded, and the debate continued for months after the congress, being reported in the party press. While Bois and Wilde believe that the actions of the Levi leadership were "from the point of view of inner-party democracy undoubtedly problematic", they conclude that the differences of principle were such that a split was inevitable.[23] The question remains as to whether the result could have been achieved in a better way.

Some of those excluded formed the KAPD (Communist Workers Party of Germany), which flowered briefly, but, despite the best efforts of the Comintern to win it back in whole or in part, disintegrated within a couple of years. Many good class fighters were lost to other parties or to inactivity.[24] It could be argued that its brief life justified Levi's determination to get rid of the ultra-lefts. Equally, however, it could be claimed that the KAPD's rapid fragmentation showed that the current was not homogeneous and that it might have been possible to divide it rather than excluding it en bloc.

Lenin, though not fully informed of the circumstances, made it clear that he thought the split unnecessary. The author of *Left Wing Communism, An Infantile Disorder* understood that ultra-leftism required a more subtle approach. In a letter to Levi, Zetkin and others, he wrote:

The only thing that seems incredible is this radio report that, with 25 votes against 18, you expelled the minority, which, they tell us, then set up a party of its own. I know very little about this breakaway opposition, for I have seen only a few issues of the Berlin Rote Fahne. My impression is that they are very gifted propagandists, inexperienced and young, like our own Left Communists ("Left" due to lack of experience and youth) of 1918. Given agreement on the basic issue (for Soviet rule, against bourgeois parliamentarism), unity, in my opinion, is possible and necessary, just as a split is necessary with the Kautskyites. If the split was inevitable, efforts should be made not to deepen it, but to approach the Executive Committee of the Third International for mediation and to make the "Lefts" formulate their differences in theses and in a pamphlet. Restoration of unity in the Communist Party of Germany is both possible and necessary from the international standpoint.[25]

In 1920 Levi attended the Second Congress of the Third International, at which he spoke on no less than seven occasions. The success of the October Revolution had attracted support around the world, including from many who belonged to the syndicalist tradition. Lenin, aware of the revolution's desperate need for allies, was anxious to minimise differences. Levi seemed insensitive to the situation. Speaking in what Alfred Rosmer[26] described as "his usual lofty manner", he argued that it was a waste of time to exchange views with anarchists. He claimed that "the majority of the Western European working class" had resolved the questions "decades ago", thus implying that no new problems had been posed by the World War and the Russian Revolution. He received a prompt rebuke from Lenin, who must have surprised many of his own comrades by stating that there was "really no difference" between the Bolshevik notion of the party and the syndicalist idea of the "organised minority".[27]

So when it came to the March Action, Levi's response was based on a well-established pattern of behaviour. Contrary to Lenin's claim that he had "lost his head",[28] Levi's head was pretty much where it had always been.

In essentials Levi was absolutely right about the March Action. It was a disaster for the KPD. In Zetkin's words it was a "falsely conceived, badly prepared, badly organised, and badly conducted Party action".[29] It undermined the whole united front strategy; whatever decisions the KPD and the International later took, the party could not revert to the situation that had existed at the beginning of 1921; its credibility with SPD members had been destroyed.[30] Indeed it can be argued that it was the fact of the March Action that fatally undermined the KPD's strategy in 1923; when the KPD attempted to win unity in action with the left of the SPD, SPD members must undoubtedly have remembered 1921 and wondered how far they could trust the KPD.

Nonetheless a number of criticisms can be made of Levi's pamphlet. Following the failure of the March Action there was a massive wave of repression. By the beginning of June 400 militants had been sentenced to a total of 1500 years hard labour and over 500 years jail. There were four death sentences and many more still awaiting trial.[31]

In her speech at the Third Congress of the Comintern, Zetkin declared that Levi had sought to serve the proletariat. She was interrupted by Radek, who claimed that Levi had assisted the public prosecutor. Whether or not Levi's pamphlet did in fact help the authorities in prosecuting Communists in the aftermath of the March Action, Radek's criticism was very plausible.[32]

Karl Liebknecht had his limitations, but he coined one wonderful phrase - "The main enemy is at home".[33] In the immediate aftermath of the March Action, the main enemy was the repressive

German state. But Levi seemed more concerned to pursue his dispute with the KPD leadership than to fight the state machine. "The white terror now raging must not be used as a cloak behind which those responsible can escape their political responsibility." [L120] As Lenin observed, he lacked a "feeling of oneness" with the Party.[34] Victor Serge probably reflected the feelings of many German militants when he wrote in a Comintern publication in 1923 that Levi had "betrayed, abandoned, tried to infiltrate, abused and insulted" the Communist Party.[35]

Secondly there was the question of the tone of the pamphlet. Lenin's criticisms of the pamphlet as recorded by Zetkin were apposite:

He did not criticise, but was one-sided, exaggerated, even malicious; he gave nothing to which the Party could usefully turn. He lacks the spirit of solidarity with the Party. And it is that which has made the rank and file comrades so angry, and made them deaf and blind to the great deal of truth in Levi's criticism, particularly to his correct political principles... [Leftists] have to thank Paul Levi that up to the present they have come out so well, much too well.[36] Paul Levi is his own worst enemy.

Zetkin noted: 'I had to admit the truth of that last remark.'[37]

And thirdly, while many of Levi's criticisms were valid, his description of the March Action as "the greatest Bakuninist putsch in history to date" [L148] is a less than adequate analysis.[38] The March Action, however misguided, involved many thousands of workers (as the subsequent repression proved). It is difficult to have precise figures, but Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten, who has examined party statistics, press reports and police files, estimates that there were over 200,000 workers on strike, plus unemployed and youth who took part in demonstrations: a small fraction of the organised working class and certainly far too few to achieve the aim of overthrowing the government, but too many for a "putsch".[39] A substantial proportion undoubtedly believed that they were engaging in the "final struggle", and joined battle with courage and enthusiasm. As David W Morgan notes, the USPD before the split "had been the party of aggressively dissatisfied factory workers and miners". They had joined the new United Communist Party "with a sense of liberation"; "they wanted action and they expected to have it in the new party".[40] There was also significant participation in the actions by the KAPD; the fact that they had been excluded from the KPD did not mean that they had disappeared from the working class. Ultra-leftism and voluntarism had real roots among a section of the working class. Comparison with Bakunin's adventures illuminated little.

Levi and Zetkin

But, Levi's advocates will ask, what else could he have done in the aftermath of the March Action? The answer is to be found, not in some abstract formulation, but in one of Levi's real life comrades. Clara Zetkin resigned with Levi from the Zentrale[41] over a disagreement about the Italian situation. She read the draft of *Our Path*, which she found "absolutely excellent" - but advised a rather more cautious wording.[42]

Before the Third Congress she had a long discussion with Lenin about the Levi case. It is clear that she approached Lenin without deference, as a companion in struggle, willing to stand up for her ideas but making clear that she accepted the framework of a shared project. Lenin basically agreed with her but gave her a lesson in tactics that illuminated the difference between him and Levi:

The Congress will utterly destroy the famous "theory of the offensive", will adopt the tactics which correspond to your ideas. But for that very reason it must also distribute some crumbs of consolation to the adherents of that theory... If the tactics to be decided upon by the Congress are agreed upon

as quickly as possible, and with no great friction, becoming the guiding principle for the activity of our Communist Parties, our dear leftists will go back not too mortified and not too embittered. We must also – and indeed first and before all – consider the feelings of the real revolutionary workers both within and outside the Party....

Well, we shan't deal roughly with the leftists, we shall put some balm on their wounds instead. Then they will soon be working happily and energetically with you in carrying out the policy of our International.[43]

At the Congress Zetkin made a substantial speech in support of Levi (it occupies twenty-three pages in the Congress record), which was greeted with "vigorous approval and applause". In her conclusion she made a sharp response to those who, like Radek, had argued that public criticism played into the hands of the Party's enemies:

For if we are prepared to accept as a criterion what our opponents make of the written or spoken utterances of us Communists, then we should never write a line, and never open our mouths, for our opponents will misrepresent everything...[44]

It is sometimes claimed that the Third Congress was guilty of a "cover-up" in dealing with the German crisis. This claim is not supported by an analysis of the Congress proceedings.[45] What is true is that there was not a head-on confrontation with the supporters of the "theory of the offensive"; such a confrontation would have meant a split in the top leadership of the International and would probably have damaged the organisation irreparably.

After the Congress Zetkin proposed yet another formulation to reintegrate Levi, suggesting that he might publish a journal in which he would examine the Third Congress critically and state that "he certainly believes the decision of the Congress to be wrong and illogical, but nevertheless, overlooking that, he will submit to it for the sake of the movement". Lenin described this as "an excellent suggestion", but rightly expressed scepticism as to whether Levi would go along with it.[46] In fact Levi proved too impatient to accept the deal.

Zetkin thus fought the same battle as Levi. But after some hesitation, she decided to stay in the party, where she remained till her death in 1933.[47] If Levi had acted like Zetkin, the KPD might have had a stronger leadership.[48]

Cyr's biography contains some items of unpublished correspondence between Levi and Clara Zetkin, who is often perceived as Levi's ally. Zetkin aligned herself quite clearly with Levi in condemning the politics behind the March Action, but she had very considerable reservations about Levi's response.

Thus when Levi sent a draft of *Our Path* to Zetkin, she replied:

I've read your pamphlet carefully, from beginning to end. It is quite simple excellent. But I have no doubt what the consequences will be; it will get you expelled from the party..... They've already prepared to burn you at the stake. It's up to you not to make the spark that will start the fire. So I earnestly beg you to put your soul on one side and to omit or alter the passages I have crossed out. [C114]

Levi took no notice.

In June 1921 Zetkin wrote to Levi from Moscow, where she was attending the Comintern Congress, to tell him that Lenin and Trotsky agreed with him on the March Action, that they had high regard for him, and that they wanted to keep the door open for him to return to the party leadership. Levi was unmoved; he wrote quite brutally to Mathilde Jacob:

Her [Zetkin's] plan is that I shall die in silence, so that she won't have to publicly disown me. For she knows what that would mean. But I won't let her get away without taking a position, for or against me. [C124-25]

As he implied, Zetkin too might risk expulsion. But on her return to Germany, Zetkin made quite clear that she had broken with Levi, and would not oppose his expulsion:

I consider that it was an illogical decision of the World Congress to have approved the main lines of Levi's politics and then to have expelled him for a formal breach of discipline. But as a member of the Communist Party and the Third International, I respect this decision, however inept and unjust it may be. I'm not taking this position as a result of my friendship for Paul Levi, but for the good of the Party. I regret that a person and a potential as unique and valuable as Levi should be excluded from the party. [C128]

The breach between them became even deeper when Levi published Luxemburg's 1918 articles critical of the Russian Revolution. Zetkin insisted that Luxemburg had not published her articles because her work was unfinished and she was in process of changing her mind about various points. She insisted that Levi was "willing to use Rosa Luxemburg's work for ends that have nothing to do with revolutionary criticism." [C135]

In Frölich's view there was a fundamental difference between Levi and Zetkin: "He wanted to smash the party to pieces, she wanted to steer it in the right direction". [F276]

But in the last resort the problem cannot be reduced to one of individuals. The KPD found itself still trying to build a revolutionary party in the context of a ripening revolutionary situation. As a result it lurched repeatedly between left and right.[49] That, rather than the mistakes of one individual or another, is the real tragedy of the failed German revolution.

Moreover, the Comintern lacked experienced cadre. Hence people like Béla Kun were given jobs they were clearly unfitted for. In Lenin's words: "We must not lose Levi. For his own sake and for our cause. We are not over-blessed with talent and must keep as much of what we have as we can." [50]

A better understanding of Levi's strengths and weaknesses, as provided by these books, is an valuable contribution to our appreciation of the complexities of the Comintern's development. The question of ultra-leftism, and how the Comintern responded to it, is an important one, which will continue to stimulate debate. Above all this will be because the questions of strategy and tactics debated in the Comintern still have their parallels today. Ultra-leftism in various guises and manifestations is still a real issue in the socialist movement. As Levi pointed out, we cannot resolve today's issues by a facile invocation of "Leninism", but a study of the Comintern's disputes and contradictions may help us confront our own future.

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NOTES

My thanks to Mike Jones, Ben Lewis and John Rose for comments on a first draft. I have learned a great deal from correspondence with Mike Jones, though he does not share my conclusions.

[1] All page references to the three books under review are given in brackets in the text, prefixed by L (Fernbach/Levi), C (Cyr) or F (Frölich).

[2] A valuable recent addition is Mario Kessler's fascinating study of Ruth Fischer: Kessler 2013.

[3] Precise membership figures are difficult to establish, especially in such a hectic period. Estimates range between 350,000 and 500,000. Angress 1963, pp. 72-3.

[4] For a discussion of the complex question of how far the March Action was inspired by Moscow and the Comintern, as against internal German factors, see for example the exchange of views at Riddell et al 2013a and 2013b.

[5] Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten, using the KPD's own figures, argues that the membership loss in 1921 was certainly one half of the total, and perhaps as high as two thirds. Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 323.

[6] Serge 2012, p. 121.

[7] Rosmer 1971, p. 29.

[8] Leviné-Meyer 1977, p. 15.

[9] Stressed by Grunberger 1973.

[10] Beradt 1969 drew on personal knowledge of Levi, but was unable to consult Russian archives.

[11] Frölich 1972.

[12] An earlier translation by Mike Jones of Levi's introduction to the German edition of Trotsky's book was published in *Revolutionary History* Vol. 5, No. 2 (1994).

[13] See Serge 2000.

[14] Fernbach 1999.

[15] *Our Path* contains several quotations from Lenin, and more from Marx. Levi was clearly forestalling any charges of unorthodoxy.

[16] In a letter to German Communists in August 1921 Lenin stated that when he first met him in 1916, "Levi was already a Bolshevik". Lenin, 1965b, p. 516.

[17] Lenin 1964, p. 23

[18] Rosmer 1971, p. 61. Precisely because the Bolshevik Party was far more homogeneous than the KPD, it could be more flexible in its alliances.

[19] Serge 1997.

[20] Broué 2005, pp. 213-25.

[21] Harman 1982, p. 153.

[22] He did so despite a letter from Radek, then in prison, which urged him to use persuasion, not discipline. Angress 1963, p. 43.

[23] Bois and Wilde 2007.

[24] Reichenbach 1994.

[25] Lenin 1965a, pp. 87-88.

[26] Rosmer 1971, p. 69.

[27] Riddell 1991, I 166-68. Of course Lenin knew very well that there were huge differences; he was "bending the stick" in response to Levi's dogmatism.

[28] Fernbach 2009, p. 104.

[29] Zetkin 1929, p. 24.

[30] Koch-Baumgarten 1986, pp. 319-21; Rogers 1994, p. 72.

[31] Broué 2005, p. 505; Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 316.

[32] Protokoll 1921, p. 298.

[33] Liebknecht 1915.

[34] Zetkin 1929, p. 27.

[35] Serge 2000, p. 46.

[36] Levi seemed to concede this with his rather rueful remark that his pamphlet “did not have the effect I had counted on”. [L168]

[37] Zetkin 1929, pp. 31-2.

[38] As Lenin pointed out rather vigorously in a letter to Zinoviev. He noted that a far more useful parallel would be the July Days of 1917, “an heroic offensive” but premature. This parallel illuminates the fact that the Bolsheviks had the coherent leadership and roots in the class to deal with such a situation – the German Communists did not. Lenin 1969, pp. 322-23.

[39] Koch-Baumgarten 1986, especially p. 228. Zinoviev’s claim at the Third Comintern Congress that half a million workers had fought was typical triumphalist exaggeration. Angress 1963, p. 179.

[40] Morgan 1975, p. 397.

[41] The leading body of the KPD, with 7-15 members, directly elected by party congress.

[42] Beradt 1969, p. 49.

[43] Zetkin 1929, pp. 27-28.

[44] Protokoll 1921, pp. 278-300.

[45] Protokoll 1921. Since this review was written John Riddell has published the proceedings of the Third Congress, together with supplementary documents; while there is much here to stimulate further debate, this volume largely confirms my argument. Riddell 2015.

[46] Zetkin 1929, pp. 38-39. Eight months later, in “Notes of a Publicist”, Lenin explained that he had defended Levi because he saw the dangers of leftism, but that he had been wrong to believe that Levi could be recuperated. Lenin 1965c, pp. 204-211.

[47] She did not join the KPO [German Communist Party Opposition] when it was formed in 1929, but maintained correspondence with its members. By 1929 she was increasingly critical of the Comintern, though she never made her opposition public. See Badia 1993, pp. 271-92, also material in Revolutionary History New Series No. 1.

[48] Zetkin tends to be remembered mainly for work on the “woman question”, when in fact her achievement was far broader. A forthcoming issue of Revolutionary History [New Series No. 1 2015] is devoted to Zetkin.

[49] Fernbach refers to Pierre Broué’s study of the German Revolution. [Broué 2005] There can be no doubt as to the value of this important work. But Broué’s enthusiasm for Levi may be somewhat suspect. Broué was not only an academic historian, but a political activist, a leading member of the Organisation communiste internationaliste [OCI]. This undoubtedly helped to enhance his understanding of revolutionary movements, but it may also have coloured his judgement. Broué published his book in 1971. In the aftermath of 1968 the OCI’s main rival was the Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire, which was strongly influenced by Guevarism, the Bakuninism of the twentieth century. Also the OCI faced political and physical hostility from other leftists, some with very dubious motives. Perhaps this helped to encourage Broué’s affection for Levi. See Présumey 2007, especially pp. 39-44, 47.

[50] Zetkin 1929, p. 33. Levi himself was aware of the fact that one of the great weaknesses of the Comintern was the shortage of competent cadre. "Russia is not in a position to send out its best forces. They have positions in Russia that are not replaceable." [L161]

P.S.

* "2015: Paul Levi in Perspective":

<http://grimanddim.org/historical-writings/2015-paul-levi-in-perspective/>