

SUPPLEMENT



Before, during and after March

Ben Lewis explores the multiple causes behind what was a badly calculated bid to artificially induce revolution in Weimar Germany

Heavens above, what is going on here! Genuine remorse, even if enforced, or nothing of the kind? Do you really know what you have done? The best action, the noblest and highest cause ... a cause that god just for once put in your hands, you have treated like muck in a pigsty

(Gerhart Hauptmann - cited by Paul Levi in his *Our path against putschism*)

This article, which is based on a talk I gave to the Online Communist Forum in March, represents a first attempt to revisit and reinterrogate the complex chain of events known as the 'March Action' or - more accurately - the 'March struggles' of 1921, which culminated in a failed attempt to bring about a general strike nationally and seize power by the Communist Party of Germany (KPD). However, looking back a hundred years on, things appear more like a 'Whodunnit'.

Given the convoluted story, I will begin with some contextual information and an attempt to reconstruct the most significant events. Following this, I will look at four overlapping factors:

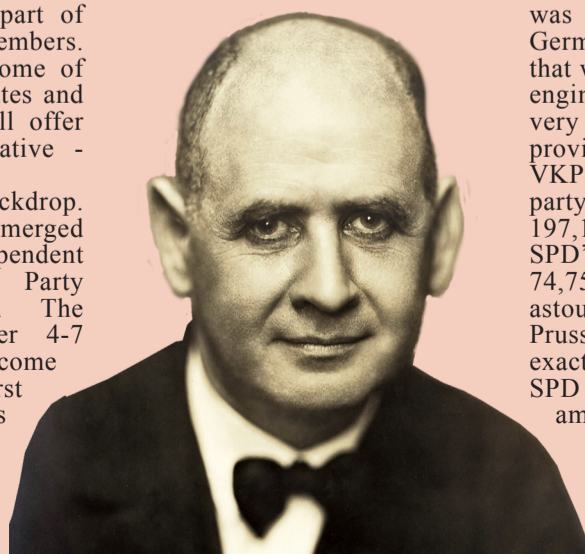
- police provocation initiated by German social democracy;
- developments within the KPD;
- the significance of the Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD);
- the role of the executive committee of the Communist International (ECCI) in general and some of its representatives in Germany in particular.

This will be followed by a discussion on the aftermath of the March Action - a time of harsh repression, anti-communist propaganda in the press and self-justification on the part of many leading KPD members. After taking a look at some of the major historical disputes and schools of thought, I will offer some - necessarily tentative - conclusions.

Let us start with the backdrop. The KPD had recently merged with the left of the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD). The unification in December 4-7 1920 saw communism become a mass force for the first time. At the time of its formation (New Year's Eve, 1918-19), the KPD was a marginal force, but the United Communist Party of Germany

Derailed train: sabotage was a widespread tactic employed in the KPD's March Action

Paul Levi: branded the March Action "the greatest Bakuninist putsch in history"



(VKPD) was a mass organisation with deep roots in the working class and a wide influence in German society. Its membership is estimated at around 500,000; it produced 40 regular publications.

It is perhaps of little surprise that the events of March 1921 were centred around the city of Halle in Saxony. Back then, in the Weimar Republic, Saxony was also part of the Free State of Prussia (which made up the bulk of Germany's population and territory). While Prussia was dominated by the SDP, Saxony was the 'beating red heart of German communism' - the region that was characterised by mining, engineering and a young and very radical working class. In the provincial elections of 1921, the VKPD emerged as the strongest party by some margin. It received 197,113 votes, compared to the SPD's 70,340 and the USPD's 74,754. These figures are quite astounding if we recall that in Prussia, and nationally too, the exact opposite was the case - the SPD remained the dominant party among the working class.

The post-World War I period in Germany was a time of great unrest. Moreover, the social question was undoubtedly

coloured by what might be called the national question: responding to the reparations crisis in Germany caused by the onerous terms of the 1919 Versailles treaty, French troops occupied the Ruhr, Düsseldorf and Duisburg; there were also border disputes with a redrawn Poland and the possibility of military conflict.

We also should recall that the events of March 1921 came just a year after the Kapp Putsch of March 1920 - an abortive seizure of power by some very rightwing generals, with whom the SPD had allied in the name of 'democracy' and 'stability'. It was the massive general strike by an armed working class - both social democratic and communist - that saw off this attempt to 'restore order'.

Role of chance

The March Action has been called "an insurrection without insurrectionaries, a general strike without strikers".¹ Both descriptions, as we will soon see, have some real purchase in describing what happened, but it is difficult to do justice to the sheer complexity of events with a catchy phrase or epithet: chance played an occasionally fateful role and there were a number of

unintended outcomes on both sides of the struggle.

In March 16 1921, Otto Hörsing - an SDP member and *Oberpräsident* (governor) in Saxony - announced that troops were to occupy the Halle-Merseburg region, which would become the focus of the March events. At the same time (March 16-17), an extraordinary crisis meeting of the KPD leadership was being held, during which the 'theory of the offensive' was discussed in some detail. The idea here was that the situation in Germany was ripe for revolutionary developments and that, even though still a minority, the KPD could 'speed them up' by initiating bold actions, or even provocations, to set that train in motion. However, beyond a general expectation that things would heat up, there was not much by way of concrete proposals as to how the party might exactly go onto the offensive. Nonetheless, these considerations aside, the KPD leadership was quickly made aware of Hörsing's police offensive in the Halle-Merseburg region and some saw it as an opportunity to put this 'new theory' to the test.

A meeting of the KPD regional leaders in central Germany was called, and there was a bit of pushback from some comrades. Was it really possible to use this as an occasion to go on the offensive, to imagine soon achieving state power? A compromise was reached. It was agreed to take steps to build a movement, to bring the workers out if they could - but in such a way that they would be able to wind things down if necessary.

On March 19, the so-called 'protection police' entered the region. They certainly were not 'bobbies on the beat': they were made up by armed units. The KPD's daily newspaper, *Die Rote Fahne*, issued a national appeal - ie, not just to its readers in and around Halle - which read:

Workers, do you already own a weapon? Or do you wish to stand aside when the great liberation struggle rises, which will lead the German proletariat to the side of the Russian heroes, to the side of the revolutionary proletariat of the whole world for the final decisive struggle for the victory of the world revolution... Workers, wake up! And wake those who are sleeping! Get hold of weapons! Death looms if you do not fight!

There was great pressure on local leaders to demonstrate how an attack could be the best form of defence of the Halle region. Things initially started well, as the KPD's call for strike action on March 22 was largely followed. Yet, in spite of the desire to escalate things, the leadership prudently thought that it would be unwise to go further until after the Easter weekend had passed. So what then?

This is where the history starts to get a bit blurred - there are many contradictory statements in the subsequent recollections of key players. Beyond doubt, on March-22, KPD leader Hugo Eberlein arrived in the area in order to drive things forward. He declared that the working class movement was seeing not just a provocation by the police in one particular area, but a decisive move on behalf of the counterrevolution nationally which would involve not just the police, but wider paramilitary forces. This was

either an exaggeration, a complete misreading of the situation, or both.

What is worse, pressure was exerted on KPD activists to 'prove' this reading of events. There were faked kidnappings of worker militants, arms depots were blown up, trains derailed and then - in order to create the impression of reprisals - the destruction of the workers' own strongholds, such as cooperative buildings. The idea was to give the impression of a national counterrevolution, against which the workers of Germany would rally - in the way they had responded to the Kapp Putsch a year before. While there were solidarity strikes in cities such as Hamburg and Berlin, only some 3,000 were able and willing to take up arms. So there was nothing approaching the "final decisive struggle for the victory of the world revolution".

On March 23, using his constitutional powers, German president Friedrich Ebert of the SPD declared a state of emergency in several parts of the country, including in Hamburg. The army was not deployed, however. It was thought that such a move would only play into the hands of the insurrectionaries, as the influence of communists over workers might increase as a result. True to form, the SPD was engaged in the tricky balancing act of serving the wishes of German capital without unduly alienating its mass base.

The police forced occupying strikers out of the workplaces, often deploying extreme violence. Although defeat was looking increasingly probable, the KPD leadership did not concede until April 1, when strike action was officially called off.

One of the factors behind this delay by the leadership, of course, was the fact that the party was riven by factional rivalries and disputes. A complete cessation of action was regarded by the majority as playing into the hands of the oppositional faction around Paul Levi and Clara Zetkin. Their ideas and criticisms will be discussed below.

Causes

Then there was the SPD-led police force in Prussia. There had been consistent complaints from rightwing political opponents, the bourgeois press and leading industrialists, not least the powerful magnate, Hugo Stinnes, who claimed that the entire region was becoming 'ungovernable'. Several high-profile stunts, such as raids on factories, searching for rifles and ammunition, had been staged by the police, but without much in the way of tangible results. So the police authorities in Prussia were under great pressure to pull off something they could present as success.

What about the leftist splinter, the KAPD? On March 13 it was behind a failed bomb plot on the Victory Column in Berlin. The police claimed to have traced those responsible to an address in central Germany, although this could have been just a convenient discovery. But it does not really matter whether this was true, because what came next provided the much needed excuse: the authorities had caught wind of the Communist International sending emissaries to Berlin - there was a threat of communist revolution, incited by Moscow!

That was when the tide started to turn.

Conducted under the pretext of 'law and order' and the prevention of looting, etc, the police mobilisation was obviously directed against the KPD in central Germany. But what about the SPD? Around 70,000 had voted for it in the Halle-Merseburg region and it is interesting to note how they responded. They were clearly not particularly happy with the actions of the SPD administration in Prussia, but neither were they particularly happy with the revolutionary left. This fact cannot be separated from the internal political differences playing out in the KPD, not least in its parliamentary fraction.

Two who played a prominent role here were Clara Zetkin and Paul Frölich, as well as the joint leader of the party, Paul Levi. As we have seen, the KPD had gone from a minority grouplet to a mass party within just under three years, and this was in no small part thanks to the leadership of Paul Levi, who managed to steer the organisation away from revolutionary posturing (the parliamentary and even trade-union boycotts advocated by the expelled KPD members who formed the KAPD, for instance) towards a serious approach to those still under the influence of social democracy.

Levi was also instrumental in the formulation of the 'open letter' of January 1921. Based on the experience of the struggles of Stuttgart metalworkers in particular, this letter called on the party to organise alongside social democratic and non-communist workers in general in the unions, for union rights, better working conditions and so on, to strengthen the united organisation of the working class. This successful tactic fed into and informed Comintern's united front policy, adopted at its Third Congress later in the year.

However, a number of factors eventually led to the sidelining of Levi, along with Zetkin and others who supported this approach. Neither Zetkin nor Levi was particularly happy with the line adopted by Comintern towards the split in the Italian Socialist Party to form the Communist Party of Italy, in what was seen as an Italian version of USPD. Should the communists unite with and win over the centrists, or should they be done with the lot of them? As it turned out, the KPD leadership eventually decided, by two votes, that Comintern's approach - breaking with the lot of them in Italy - was correct.

Overlapping with this dispute was another over the question of whether Levi's leadership, to quote Radek, was "possibilist" and "quietist". There were misgivings about the orientation towards social democracy and the mass of workers who still voted SPD. As a result Levi and his co-thinkers were defeated and a new 'left' leadership around the idea of the 'theory of the offensive' emerged. This leadership's guiding ethos was to move away from united class action to more daring initiatives that could 'expose' the backwardness and treachery of social democracy. Given how unstable Weimar Germany was, they claimed, it was now incumbent upon the KPD to focus on its own actions and establish its own momentum in order to stamp its imprint on events.

So, whereas Levi's leadership was characterised by an 'anti-putschist' approach, following the disastrous 'January days' of 1919

when the (so-called) Spartacus uprising in Berlin was brutally suppressed, the new leadership under Heinrich Brandler, August Thalheimer, Paul Frölich and others saw the rapidly developing socio-political antagonisms as requiring a new approach.

I have already pointed out that actions were artificially created in order to give the impression of the heightening of tension and the necessity of revolution and an armed uprising. That is implicit in some of the arguments of the left within the party at this time. According to Thalheimer, the KPD must "create conflict, incite the security police and all counterrevolutionary elements. If we succeed in doing so, there will be clashes", but "these have never hindered our strength".² In other words, many things can be justified in an attempt to heighten the contradictions: even provoking paramilitary rightwing militias.

There were two variants of the 'theory of the offensive' adopted by the KPD leadership at this time. The first was about posing the question of power directly; the second, more guarded, approach (probably including that of Radek) was: 'We have to accept that the situation is so pregnant with possibilities that we do need a shift towards our own initiatives'.

Other factors

Another influence was the role played by the executive committee of Comintern (ECCI) and the "Turkestanis" (Levi's phrase), referring to Béla Kun and the other Comintern emissaries, who had been sent to Berlin in order to ensure that the 'correct' line on Italy was accepted and that fusion was achieved with the KAPD - something that Levi vehemently, and in my view correctly, opposed.

However, throughout this whole episode, actions were sometimes initiated by the KPD without the approval of the ECCI. Moreover, one of the emissaries, Abraham Guralski, was working unofficially behind the scenes with KAPD organisations and military units, as well as strike committees that circumvented the officially supported workers' councils. Interestingly, when the KPD leadership reported the fateful meeting in March, it did not let the membership know that representatives of the ECCI had been present.

I am not suggesting, as German social democracy did, that the March Action had been a 'Moscow plot', but it is worth reminding ourselves that developments in Russia were not irrelevant to how things unfolded in the west. There were reservations, for example, amongst the Bolsheviks about the New Economic Policy - a massive gamble, according to some - and many thought that it was necessary to speed things up internationally, particularly in Germany.

Guralski, along with Nikolai Bukharin, was very much in favour of manoeuvring workers into action, but there was certainly no monolithic approach within the ECCI on these questions. That said, in hindsight the role played by Kun and Guralski was disastrous and it was clearly a mistake entrusting them with leading roles in the German movement. Béla Kun, for instance, held a private meeting with Clara Zetkin, who was politically close to Levi and was against the 'new left' leadership. Afterwards, she informed the party that she would not agree to meet him alone again because of his 'rudeness' and

Béla Kun:
one of Comintern's
"Turkestanis"



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the unacceptable nature of his suggestions.

Responding to Zetkin's claims, Kun wrote the following to Lenin: "The old woman is suffering from senile dementia and is living proof that Lafargue did the right thing with his wife."³ That was a reference to Paul Lafargue and his wife, Laura Marx (Karl Marx's daughter): in old age both committed suicide when they felt they could no longer play any useful role in the struggle.

However, although Kun does not come across well in these and other such exchanges, this should not cause us to overlook the structural changes or the underlying tensions that produced the disastrous outcome in March 1921. There was a certain amount of 'cloak and dagger' in the way that both the ECCI and the KPD operated, and things got quite nasty. Some ECCI representatives in Germany actually welcomed Otto Hörsing's attack on protesting workers, viewing it as a stimulus for revolutionary action.

The final factor to consider is the role of the KAPD, whose leftism can be seen in a 1920 poster against standing or voting in bourgeois elections, since "parliament and its republic protect the capitalist shark and kill the working class". The KAPD's boycottism even extended to the trade union movement - it shunned the official unions and set up its own alternative: the General Workers' Union. Even though the split occurred after the leftists were expelled from the KPD in October 1919, through the influence of Paul Levi, the KAPD was nevertheless accepted by Comintern as one of the *legitimate* representatives of German communism - something that was later admitted to be a mistake.

But the KAPD was significant in two respects. First, it was a key organisation in pushing forward militant action, and, second, it played the role of a constant leftwing pressure group, influencing KPD members and the workers' movement as a whole. The KAPD saw the March events not as a defensive struggle, but as a struggle for power, and this influenced those in the KPD who felt that revolutionary horizons were coming into view. Crucial in this regard was the role played by Max Hoelz - an activist who initially made a name for himself during the Kapp putsch by helping to organise groups of workers against the counterrevolutionaries. His presence in Halle was therefore important in convincing others that the events amounted to a 'Kapp mark two'. In 1921 he was said to be close to the KAPD (although his membership is disputed) and in March he launched his 'Workers Fighter Troops', which organised bank robberies and attacks against the police. He was arrested for his role in this and sentenced to life imprisonment. In 1928 he escaped, and eventually died in the Soviet Union in 1933.

Looking back

Just under 200 were killed during the March Action, with thousands arrested and imprisoned. Although the exact figures are disputed, the KPD is said to have lost around a quarter of its membership - some 100,000 left the party.

The party was subject to a bitter witch-hunt and it established *die Rote Hilfe* - Red Aid - to provide assistance for those who had been arrested, imprisoned or required legal help. In the face of the

offensive by the bourgeois press, which often reprinted some of the politically fruitier resolutions we have mentioned above, the party felt it had to defend its honour, which produced a tendency to gloss over, or downplay, the mistakes that had been made. That said, there was a huge fallout within the communist movement internationally - not least at Comintern's Third Congress. Lenin later wrote to Zinoviev:

The final analysis of things shows that Levi was politically right in many ways. The thesis of Thalheimer and Béla Kun is politically totally false: phrases ... playing the radical leftist.

This is undoubtedly true. But I would say that the overall assessment of the March Action by Comintern was ambivalent. On the one hand, it was seen as a step forward - a welcome manifestation of the willingness of German workers to struggle and their courage in the face of enormous state repression. On the other hand, it was often seen as a problematic interpretation of the 'theory of the offensive', rather than seeing a problem with that theory itself.

What makes it worse is that the original leadership - the one which was in place in February, not least Levi himself - split away to form another group, which soon joined forces with the USPD and eventually ended up back in the SPD. Lenin, who had held Levi in high regard, was of the view that he had lost his head - but "He, at least, had something to lose; one can't even say that about the others."⁴

In private correspondence, Lenin offered Levi the chance to return to the fold in the interests of building a strong, united Communist Party. But that did not happen and there was a protracted dispute about Levi's role. In 1921 he published a pamphlet - in many ways very useful - called *Our path - against putschism*. He subjected the 'theory of the offensive' to a contemptuous and scathing critique, describing the aborted March uprising as "the greatest Bakuninist putsch in history". Levi quoted Marx and Engels on revolution and uprisings, and the need to win a majority to the cause, and even cheekily appended to it an earlier piece by Karl Radek criticising Austrian communists for their approach to the Vienna uprising of 1919. He also revisited Rosa Luxemburg's writings on the Russian Revolution, and that was when things started to get messy, as some of her initial concerns about the unfolding revolution - written from prison and without access to reliable source material - were spun in a way that created a largely artificial gulf between (so-called) 'Luxemburgism' and 'Leninism' that continues to blight both leftwing and academic thought today.

According to the April 2 1921 edition of *Die Rote Fahne*, "We have called off this battle, but the whole situation cries out for a new struggle." In other words, 'Hopefully, next time we'll do it properly!' This is symptomatic, I think, of the fact that the lessons of the March Action were not taken on board. The KPD's subsequent political landscape was shaped by the constant pulls between, on the one hand,

leftwing voluntarism and, on the other hand, opportunism - all at the expense of political consistency and strategic patience.

The factional struggle against Levi and his supporters perhaps prevented a more serious discussion. Paul Frölich, who wrote a useful biography of Rosa Luxemburg, said it was necessary to "drive forward the masses" to "provoke escalation", while in Bavaria the KPD had to ensure that "conflicts erupt between government and the far-right Freikorps" in order to provide an opportunity and take advantage of it.

When I first read Frölich's memoirs, entitled *In the radical camp*, I was very impressed. But now, looking at what he wrote on the March Action, I must admit I am less than convinced.⁵ It actually represents a dishonest justification of his own role and it is far too soft on Béla Kun and too harsh on Levi. He points out all the things Levi did wrong, but fails to mention what partially justified his behaviour: a prototype for other subsequent explanations of these events by KPD writers.

Similarly, he fails to discuss the KAPD - which is remarkable, given its centrality to what occurred and the fact that emissaries from the ECCI were sent to try and unite the two communist organisations. He talks instead about "objective conditions", which he claims were not favourable. But, as we have seen, it was precisely the "objective conditions" that were so central to the 'theory of the offensive'.

Then there was Otto Kilian, who is less well known. He wrote the preface to the KPD's pamphlet, *White terror in central Germany: the truth about the March struggles*, published in November 1921, which we are reproducing as an appendix to this article. It gives a flavour of how the KPD responded to the political challenges it faced post-March 1921. Here too there is clear evidence of self-justification. The pamphlet itself is a stenographic report of the Prussian state parliament, commissioned in October, which the KPD decided to reproduce to convey the horror of what Hörsing's forces had unleashed.

The March Action was nothing to do with a communist attempt to take power, he writes, or the call for proletarian revolution: it was all a provocation by the social democrats. As I have pointed out, however, while Hörsing's move was indeed an obvious provocation, it also represented a kind of social democratic trap that the KPD walked into - sadly not for the first time, nor the last. Kilian highlights the genuine barbarity, but this ends up being used as a way of glossing over the KPD's own failings - for example, his claim that the accusation that communists had attempted to invoke armed struggle was "groundless".

Conclusions

To conclude, the March Action provided a revealing couple of weeks in German politics and working class politics more generally.

While these events are far less discussed today, what is particularly striking is how they were later instrumentalised.

A n t i - c o m m u n i s t

thinkers and historians in West Germany, for instance, tended to take the view that the inadequacies of the KPD in those days resulted directly from the line coming from Moscow, fed to it via Comintern emissaries. I hope to have shown that this was not the case: the situation was far more convoluted than that. There were differences amongst both the KPD leadership and Comintern, and between these bodies and the members of the party on the ground. As for the 'official communist' German Democratic Republic, it generally followed in the footsteps of the likes of Kilian: ie, this was no putsch, but a heroic *defensive* struggle that should be celebrated as part of the working class calendar.

Then there is the outstanding Trotskyist historian, Pierre Broué. What is striking about his substantial book, *The German revolution 1917-1923*, is that it contains a great deal of detail about the aftermath of March 1921, but a lot less on the events themselves. I think this is partly a matter of insufficient source material, so it is difficult to reliably reconstruct these events in their entirety. Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten - whose book, *Der Aufstand der Avantgarde. Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921*, I read as part of the preparation for the talk upon which this article is based - is far more nuanced on the events themselves, but I find three key weaknesses in her account:

■ These events are seen as sealing the KPD's total political and organisational dependence on Comintern.

■ We have a rather tired cold-war narrative about the "hypercentralisation of Bolshevism", which just cannot apply to "western" societies.

■ The claim that the young and impoverished workforce in central Germany ensured that there was "no material basis for a reformist-oriented politics".

A fully-rounded assessment of the source material from these events - including the police records once held in the former GDR - is long overdue, and this article has necessarily produced more questions than it has answered.

In my view, March 1921 reveals a number of foundational problems with the KPD:

■ the lack of a nationally coordinated strategy;

■ the view that bold and daring action could - regardless of the balance of political forces - potentially force a revolution;

■ the fact that - long before the Stalinist instrumentalisation of the party - there were, as we have seen, worrying steps in that direction, with an increasingly militarised, but faction-ridden, 'vanguard' that felt it could act as a substitute for the masses, and in which secret meetings and the withholding of information were seen as unproblematic.

In the last analysis, it is here that the twists, turns and decline of what was theoretically and organisationally the most important revolutionary organisation in central Europe are to be found - not merely in the strengths, shortcomings, whims and quirks of that party's leading personalities and writings ●

Notes

1. Such as, for example, S Koch *Baumgarten Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921* Cologne 1987, p83.
2. Cited in *ibid* p26.
3. Cf Hermann Weber, Jakov Drabkin, Bernhard H. Bayerlein and Gleb Albert (eds) *Deutschland, Russland, Komintern Vol. 2: Dokumente (1918-1943)* Berlin 2014, p155.
4. CFL Trotsky *What next? Vital questions for the German proletariat* New York 1932, p103.
5. The section of Frölich's memoirs concerning the events of March 1921 has recently been reprinted in English by *Jacobin* magazine: jacobinmag.com/2021/03/march-action-tragedy-german-communism-history.

Clara Zetkin:
hardly suffering from
"senile dementia"



APPENDIX

Letting the facts speak for themselves

Otto Kilian, preface to 'White terror in central Germany: the truth about the March battles - stenographic report of the proceedings of the Prussian state parliament's investigative committee over October 27-28 1921' (translator: Ben Lewis)

When, in March, the battles between the green police [nickname for paramilitary police formations known as the 'security police'] and the revolutionary workers broke out in central Germany, the bourgeois world was quick to denounce them as a 'communist putsch', as a 'Communist Party crime'. An enormous flood of lies and slander rolled through the German press in accordance with the orders and wishes of the capitalists and their government.

The communists had been put down by force of arms - some of their leaders had been murdered, thousands had been thrown into prison. The communist press in the combat zone had been suppressed in order to deprive the persecuted party of the possibility of defending itself against the great lie of the 'communist blood guilt'. The gagging of the revolutionary proletariat and its publications during the state of siege was at the same time intended to give the social democratic parties an opportunity to make political deals. Those who unleashed the struggles did so in the most calculated fashion. In the most ingenious manner, they prepared the police siege of the central German industrial area in advance, and then set it in motion.

The claim that the Mansfeld workers would accept being placed under police supervision without further ado, that the green police's invasion would have no consequences, was a daring swindle. From the outset, the responsible authorities, especially the Prussian government, expected resistance from the workers. For it was precisely this resistance that they were interested in. They had Hörsing [SPD president of Saxony] occupy the Mansfeld region in order to provoke a struggle from the revolutionary workers. They wanted to create an opportunity to crush the communist movement. In thinking up and organising the 'coal affair' (against Mansfeld) and the 'spring expedition' (against the Leuna factory), they proceeded solely from the shameful idea of deploying masses of armed men to challenge the fighting vanguard of the German revolution and to subject it to a bloodletting. This view, which has been expressed by the Communist Party and its publications ever since March 17 - the day of the publication of Hörsing's first proclamation to the people - has been unequivocally confirmed by the political evidence gathered by the Prussian state parliament's committee of inquiry.

The fairy tale first used by Hörsing to deceive the entire working class - namely that the police action was directed against thieves and property seizures - had already been destroyed by [SPD Prussian minister of the interior Carl] Severing's confession in the article he wrote for *Ekkerhard*. The proceedings of the committee, in particular the questioning of the two Social Democratic government men and the political and police officials of Berlin, Magdeburg and Merseburg, put the matter to rest. The picture that presents itself to the objective observer at the close of the political evidence that has in the meantime been collected makes it clear that there can no longer be any doubt about the plans, intentions, resolutions and preparations of the organisers of the police offensive during Easter week. The big lie of the 'communist putsch' has been destroyed just as thoroughly



Arrested communists

as the fairy tale of the 'action against criminality' has been.

Let the facts speak for themselves. Severing wrote a polemic in *Ekkerhard* against the rightwing parties which accused him of negligence and indulgence towards the 'communist plans for a putsch'. He wrote that the purpose of the police operation against central Germany had been to "unleash a premature communist uprising that was already in preparation in order to put it down by force of arms and thus to be able to banish the communist danger". The ministerial director, Abegg - one of Severing's officials - testified that "the preparation and execution of the police operation against central Germany was exclusively the responsibility of the political advisors of the ministry of the interior". The commissioner for public order, Weismann, reproduced a conversation with Severing, in which the latter admitted that he had "unleashed the uprising with political intentions in order to get the opportunity to put it down". The same witness took part in a conference in which Hörsing concluded by saying that "the police action would now begin with the occupation of the endangered districts and factories". Police major Folte, generalissimo of Severing and Hörsing's forces, complained bitterly to the committee of inquiry that he had not been given any knowledge of the economic and political conditions of the district when the order was given, and that he had also not been sufficiently informed about the mood of the population. "The only thing" he had been given as a document, he said, was a list with the "names of the communist leaders". From this, it follows unequivocally that the police attack on the central German proletariat was not about dealing with criminality, but a politically provocative attack aimed at destroying the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat and thus the proletarian revolution.

Provocation

It was prepared long in advance - not by the communists, but by their opponents. As early as February 12 and 23, at the request of the big industrialists, the government organs addressed the action. On March 13 it was discussed in detail and agreed upon in Magdeburg, with the agreement even of representatives of the USPD [Independent Social Democratic Party].

On March 11, in line with the decision of the conference held the day before, the supreme president of Saxony, Hörsing, demanded that the Prussian government "occupy the industrial area of the administrative district of Merseburg with Schutzpolizei [state-level 'protection police']", as was admitted in the official green book *The March unrest of 1921 and the Prussian protection police*

(Kameradschaft Verlagsgesellschaft, Berlin). Not only was the operation against Mansfeld planned from the outset, but the one against the Leuna works too. Moreover, according to the green book, police troops were also made available to "nip insurrectionary movements in the bud". Hörsing's claim that he had expected the police action to be conducted peacefully has thus been officially characterised as a lie and, however one looks at the matter, there is only one way of interpreting the motives behind the police operation: *political provocation*.

This automatically shows talk of the 'Moscow diktat', of the 'German communists' decision on March 17', to be a brazen swindle. The fact that Hörsing's police action of March 18 was already fixed on March 13 also shows perfectly clearly and unequivocally the real character of the struggles that broke out between the revolutionary workers of Mansfeld and the police: this was a defensive struggle of the workers, who felt that their freedom, their existence and the gains that they still enjoyed in the Ebert Republic were under threat. Accordingly, as a truly revolutionary party, the KPD (at the time the VKPD), of course had to support this defensive struggle of revolutionary proletarians - despite the unfavourable situation - and make it its own.

On March 19, the Halle-Merseburg district leadership of the party drew the workers' attention to the imminent dangers and on March 24 called for a general strike in central Germany in support of the Mansfeld workers' struggle. Because of their significance, in the appendix to this pamphlet we reproduce these calls, as well as Hörsing's appeals. A glance at the content of the revolutionary appeals shows the groundlessness of the accusation that the communists invoked armed struggle. This did not even happen in Eisleben, where bloody battles nevertheless spontaneously broke out among the mass of the workers, who were outraged by the provocation [Eisleben was the centre of Max Hoelz's political operations].

By showing the talk of the 'communist Easter putsch' to be a brazen hoax, much of the mountain of lies and slander piled up against the communist movement has simultaneously been cleared out of the way. The counterrevolutionary newspapers' lies about an organised and armed 'Red Army' in central Germany has been characterised by the testimony of imperial disarmament commissar, Peters, as what it really was: the machinations of informers. And the question of which side committed crimes in the March battles has been dealt with equally unequivocally by the cross-examination of eye-witnesses to the countless atrocities committed by members of the protection police

against captured workers.

Human language is unable to characterise the vulgarities, brutalities and atrocities carried out by members of Prussia's armed forces on defenceless captured workers. The brutal atrocities perpetrated by officers and temporary volunteers of the protection police who had been sent to central Germany by the Social Democrats in order to restore order (which in reality had not been disturbed at all) and to enforce law and order could not have been conducted any more viciously even by the executioners of the 'Okhrana' in the prisons of tsarist Russia. And, in more recent times, such atrocities can only be found in the White Terror of [general Miklós] Horthy's Christian Hungary. Countless 'murders' can be proved to have been committed, some of them following the terrible maltreatment of the victims. Summary executions have been conducted. The shootings of those people 'while escaping arrest' have been shown to be vicious, premeditated murders by assassins. One worker had a revolver "pressed into his hand", with which he was forced to shoot himself. A second, who refused to go along with this, had his skull sliced in two. The 'Düsseldorf Watch' made martyrs of the prisoners in the Leuna silo day and night. The officers took great pleasure in doing so. And the bestiality did not even stop at the dead. Although it seems almost unbelievable, it is a fact, as testified by a bourgeois doctor before the investigating committee, that after being shot a member of the protective police cut open the torso of the worker, Poblenz, in Schraplau and tore out his intestines. Hörsing expressed his gratitude for this barbarity.

Capitalist society, on behalf of which these murderers 'moved' into central Germany with the other police officers; the rightwing socialists, whose confidants in the government offices ordered this provocation; the social democratic parties that supported or approved of this criminal enterprise against the 'revolutionary heart of Germany', that opposed from the outset the economic defensive measures proposed by the communists in order to bring about the withdrawal of the mass deployment of the police; the SPD and the USPD that organised strike-breaking in favour of Hörsing and of capital - all of them have incurred an immense guilt. The Prussian state parliament's investigative commission, which was supposed to produce a great indictment of the communists and their crime, has become a tribunal at which the opponents and saboteurs of the proletarian struggle have been found guilty.

The hearings caused a tremendous stir. Eye and ear witnesses, men and women, spoke and recalled their experiences. As far as possible, the communist representatives on the committee had deliberately overlooked all witnesses with communist views and only suggested bourgeois or social democratic witnesses to present evidence. The more powerful and forceful their testimonies, the less likely they were to be objected to as untrustworthy or partisan. Even the government representative was convinced of this at the meeting on October 28, when he declared that the testimonies of the witnesses would absolutely and without further ado oblige the judicial authorities to initiate investigative and criminal proceedings against the

guilty parties.

The effect that these testimonies had before the committee, the shock and horror that they caused, will certainly also be felt among the public. But they will arouse the deepest disgust and the wildest indignation among the proletarians of all parties. The disgraceful picture of the deeds of the bourgeois state's police force that has emerged from the proceedings of the committee of enquiry will not only arouse in them the will for revolutionary revenge, not only the highest zeal for the support and liberation of the victims, but also the political realisation and the will to fight for the overthrow of the bourgeois world and the 'capitalist' mode of production, which must make use of such cruel methods for the oppression of the proletariat in order to preserve it.

Friedrich Engels, when he still called himself a 'communist',¹ once wrote along these lines:

The more the class struggles advance in a country and the more bourgeois society approaches its collapse, the more severely it will use the state's means of power against the proletariat in order to preserve itself.

The Germany of the bourgeoisie, in the administration of which former social democrats participate - at this time with particular zeal as leaders of the Stinnes coalition - proves the correctness of this characterisation of the brutal class state. Ever since the foundations of capitalist rule have been shaken by war, collapse and revolution, it has ruthlessly used the most brutal means against the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat in order to suppress it: lies and slander, informants, provocations, warfare, common crime up to and including murder, and the incarceration of innocent people through a political justice based on vengeance. If we look back at the history of the German revolution from [Gustav] Noske to Hörsing, we see bankrupt German capitalism's use of these means appearing clearly and systematically. But the truth does break through. In spite of all the suppression and persecution, it has also prevailed against the lies about the March Action. May this publication reveal the truth to the German proletariat as a whole.

The testimonies are reproduced according to shorthand notes taken during the negotiations. Unfortunately, some gaps in the transcript were caused by the fact that the witnesses sometimes spoke most unclearly and their voices were drowned out by the noise of the parliamentary hustle and bustle. As a result, it was sometimes only possible to summarise what was said. But this does not apply to the most important statements that were made. The reader will certainly be able to find these important passages without any difficulty. In order to save space, deletions have only been made in passages that were of secondary importance or that contained superfluous repetitions ●

Notes

1. I can only assume that this is a response to some polemical attacks from social democracy along the lines of 'Engels was a social democrat' and/or the claim that 'In the 1890s Engels wrote that the time for street battles was over', etc. If it is such a response, then unfortunately it is not a very good one: I am unable to find the quote Kilian cites in German or English, and he seems to take as good coin the notion that at some point Engels stopped referring to himself as a communist.