Chapter 6

The Moscow Connection: The KPD and the Comintern

Introduction

The German communists’ original connection with the Bolsheviks in Moscow was emotional in nature; they regarded them with admiration as having shown the way they should follow, the path of revolution. The decisions made by the KPD in its early years were not affected by financial inducements or bureaucratic ties. As Dietrich Geyer has pointed out, ‘the Bolsheviks did not have to enforce their dominance over the KPD; it resulted from the unquestioned authority of the Russian Party and its leading personalities’.  

1 Geyer 1976, p. 17.

The early KPD leaders, in particular Paul Levi, looked to the Bolsheviks, particularly Lenin and Radek, for advice and also moral support against the syndicalists and ultra-leftists within the Party who rejected parliamentary activity and considered that the German Revolution, far from having been defeated by mid-1919, was still on the upsurge. For their part, the Bolsheviks were very ready to give advice, though at that stage it was not always accepted. At the end of 1919 there was open disagreement, almost on a basis of equality, between Lenin and August Thalheimer on the way to attract the masses of workers still in the USPD towards communism. In this case, the Communist International actually accepted the German communist’s view.2 After 1921, however, the atmosphere changed in several ways. Moscow began to send instructions rather than advice to the KPD, and the Russian Bolsheviks tended to adopt a single political line, which had to be implemented by the Party, rather than, as previously, sending individual pieces of advice which might vary from person to person.

The emotional bond with the Bolsheviks remained strong throughout the Weimar Republic, but other forms of connection came to be more decisive. There was naturally a degree of financial dependence (6.4), although this was not as complete as has sometimes been suggested, because considerable amounts of money were raised from party members. Perhaps more significant was the bureaucratic connection, which began with the setting up of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), the body responsible for enforcing the directives of the headquarters of the Communist

International in Moscow. In theory the ECCI represented the whole worldwide communist movement, but in practice the dominant position was held by the Russian Communist Party (6.1). As time went on, the ECCI intervened more and more in the affairs of the German Party (as indeed those of all the other communist parties), and its interventions covered not just policy but personnel. This increase in centralised control from Moscow is evident in several of the documents printed here. It would be fair to say that after about 1928 the KPD’s general policy in the most important strategic and tactical questions was determined outside Germany. No initiative could be taken by the Party without the agreement of the ECCI, and the ECCI’s line was determined by the Russian delegation. This was true both positively, in the case of the decision to outbid the German nationalism of the Nazis which resulted in the August 1930 Programme, and negatively, in the case of Stalin’s intervention to deter the KPD leaders from moving towards some degree of cooperation with the Social Democrats in the summer of 1931.

The Party’s basic objectives also changed in the later period. Until roughly 1924 the main aim of the KPD was to achieve a socialist revolution in Germany. This remained the objective even after it was clear that the ‘German October’ of 1923 had failed. The immediate reaction to failure was to find scapegoats, within the Party, certainly, but also outside. The Social Democrats, always viewed with suspicion, now started to be described as ‘Fascists’. ‘Social Democracy is objectively the moderate wing of Fascism’, wrote Stalin in September 1924. ‘Fascism and Social Democracy are not antipodes, they are twins’. He also appeared to maintain that the German Revolution was not over: ‘It is false to say that the decisive battles have already occurred, that the proletariat has suffered a defeat and that the revolution has been postponed for an indefinite period. The decisive battles in the West still lie ahead’.3 Trotsky, as so often, found an appropriate analogy for this attitude: ‘On descending the stairs a different type of movement is required from when ascending; but in 1924 those in charge of the Comintern kept on repeating that the stairs led upwards. They maintained the course towards armed insurrection verbally after the revolution had already turned its back on us’.4

In 1925, however, it had to be conceded by the Comintern that the revolutionary period had ended. The Party’s aims from now on were to stay in existence and recruit more supporters, and, more importantly, to defend the only socialist revolution, the one that had taken place in the Soviet Union, in other words to defend the Soviet Union and promote its foreign policy. As Stalin put

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