

# The 'German October' of 1923: A Failed Bid for Workers' Power

Sunday 5 December 2021, by [RIDDELL John](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2021).

**The text that follows will be included in a new collection, *Lenin's Comintern Revisited*, scheduled for publication in 2022.**

## Contents

- [Foreign Occupation of the Ruhr](#)
- [Social Catastrophe in Germany](#)
- [The KPD Joins the Saxony \(...\)](#)
- [Uprising in Hamburg](#)
- [Communist Responses to October](#)
- [United Front Policy Abandoned](#)
- [Notes](#)

**By John Riddell:** On 11 January 1923, France and Belgium sent their armies to occupy the Ruhr region, the industrial heartland of Germany. The invaders' stated goal was to extract the reparations payments imposed on Germany in the 1919 Versailles treaty that ended World War I.

The French-Belgian occupation pushed Germany into a political and economic crisis that deepened as the year progressed, propelling the German working class toward revolutionary action.

In October 1923, the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) launched an insurrectionary bid for power – an attempt to repeat the Bolshevik victory of October 1917 that became known to historians as the “German October.” The failure of this attempt led to widespread dismay in the KPD, an outcome that helped tip the Comintern as a whole into a process of retreat and decline.[1]

## Foreign Occupation of the Ruhr

The German government denounced the January 1923 French-Belgian occupation as foreign aggression. It called on the German population to oppose the invaders through passive resistance and non-cooperation. Incidents multiplied in the Ruhr region and nearby, including many protests and strikes against the occupation. The French and Belgian forces responded with arrests and shootings, which ultimately killed about 130 residents. The invaders' brutality provoked mass indignation, to which the German nationalist far right sought to give expression by gathering weapons and preparing for armed resistance. German fascism began to emerge as a violent and threatening movement with significant mass support.

The workers' movement divided in its response in a manner reminiscent of its reaction to the outbreak of the World War in 1914. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) supported the government's passive resistance policy. The Communist Party (KPD), by contrast, refused to be dragged into what it regarded as another capitulation to the German bourgeoisie, similar to the SPD's support for war

credits in August 1914. Applying the [united-front decisions of the Comintern's Fourth Congress](#) (see Chapter 16), the KPD rejected any support to bourgeois forces and called for working-class unity in struggle for a workers' government.

A leftist faction within the KPD, headed by Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow, resisted application of the Fourth Congress policies. In response, Karl Radek, responsible in the Comintern's Moscow centre for relations with the German party, urged it to stand by the Fourth Congress decisions:

You should oppose with all your strength the liquidation of transitional demands and of united-front policy. I'm confident that all of us here agree on this point.[2]

An opportunity to apply this policy arose in the state of Saxony, a major centre of industry and worker radicalism in south-east Germany. Since early 1923, the left-leaning Saxony wing of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) had governed the state thanks to the support of Communist deputies in the state assembly. The KPD's stance in Saxony was opposed, however, by the Fischer-Maslow forces. Their faction, strongly anchored in industrial heartlands of Berlin and the North Sea shore, was alienated from the KPD leadership and its united-front politics, to the point where the party was close to a split.

This danger was headed off by a conference in Moscow in early May, attended by representatives of both KPD factions and Zinoviev, Radek, Bukharin, and Trotsky for the Communist Party of Russia. The Moscow encounter achieved unanimity around a compromise agreement that won acceptance from both wings of the KPD. The Moscow Comintern leadership and both wings of the German party agreed that the country was headed toward revolution. However, as historian Pierre Broué notes, "No one posed the conquest of power in Germany as an immediate task." [3]

## **Social Catastrophe in Germany**

When the Comintern's enlarged Executive Committee met in conference June 12-23, the advancing social breakdown in Germany and the German party crisis were not on the agenda. However, the ECCI plenum did hold the Comintern's first full discussion on fascism, introduced by a masterful report by Clara Zetkin.[4] The discussion concluded with an appeal by Radek to radical nationalists in Germany to make common cause with "the great toiling German people" as a "member of the family of peoples fighting for emancipation." [5] Following the plenum, the KPD for a time organized meetings and debates in the spirit of Radek's report, including confrontations with fascist spokesmen, without achieving decisive results.

Comintern historian Mike Taber notes that these initiatives "involved no violation of Communist principle and fulfilled a political need." However, "the real and significant danger of political adaptation to rightist and fascist forces cannot be ignored," and some Communists did take that road. In addition, Taber states, the most effective way for the working class to win over those attracted to fascism "is not primarily through political appeals ... but rather by showing the proletariat's absolute determination to take power ... and resolve capitalism's social crisis." [6]

As the ECCI deliberated in Moscow, Germany was sinking deeper into a social catastrophe that historian Pierre Broué termed "the deepest which any advanced capitalists country had ever experienced." The working population was rendered destitute; the petty bourgeoisie was utterly ruined. During the first nine months of 1923, the German mark lost 99.99% of its value. "The only privileges which survived were those of the owners of capital and the means of production," Broué notes. [7]

As trade union structures crumbled, workers organized new instruments of struggle: factory

committees, anti-inflation “control committees,” and self-defense units – the “proletarian hundreds.” A wave of strikes swept the country, organized through factory-based committees more than through trade unions. As resistance mounted, working-class activists were touched by a spirit wave of revolutionary hope. Meanwhile, support for the KPD began to approach, in some contexts, a majority of politically active workers.[8]

Three weeks after the ECCI plenum closed, the KPD newspaper (*Die rote Fahne*) called for a day of anti-fascist demonstrations on July 29. The approaching actions were swiftly banned by government authorities. Should the KPD defy the ban? Uncertain, the party’s central leadership appealed to the ECCI in Moscow for advice. As it happened, most Russian Communist leaders were away on holiday. A consultation of Soviet politburo members by mail showed that Zinoviev and Bukharin favored forging ahead, Trotsky declined to express a view, and Stalin – making his debut as an active Comintern leader – was strongly for a temporary retreat.[9]

Stalin outlined his thinking in a private memorandum, dated August 7. He stressed the absence in Germany of the issues that made possible the October 1917 achievement of Soviet power in Russia:

“(a) (P)eace; (b) land to the peasants; (c) support of the overwhelming majority of the working class; and (d) support of the peasantry. The German Communists have none of that today.... In my opinion we should hold the Germans back and not spur them on.” (Bayerlein et al., *Deutscher Oktober*, pp. 99-100.)

Radek conveyed the outcome of this consultation by telegraph: “The presidium of the Comintern advises the abandonment of street demonstrations on July 29.... We fear a trap.” The KPD accepted the advice from Moscow. On the appointed day, sizable rallies were held across Germany in a manner that avoided street confrontations.[10] Although the outcome was positive, the referral of this eminently tactical decision to Moscow reflected a lack of self-confidence on the part of the German leadership and a troubling trend toward referring major tactical issues for decision in the Soviet capital.

The curve of workers’ struggles continued to mount in August and September. KPD membership and support was growing rapidly, especially among youth. The only electoral test of KPD support during the crisis took place in the conservative region of Mecklenburg-Strelitz, where the Communist Party had no base. The KPD received about one-fifth of the total vote – a significant gain.[11]

In early August, a swelling wave of walkouts bordering on a general strike forced the resignation of the German government of Wilhelm Cuno. It was replaced by a new coalition, headed by Gustav Stresemann, which now included the SPD. The change of regime was seen by many on the left as a victory of sorts, but it brought workers only more sacrifice and hunger, while the SPD’s participation increased the authority of the Berlin regime.[12]

As the social and political crisis deepened, the KPD’s chairman and central leader, Heinrich Brandler, left for consultations in Moscow, arriving in mid-August. The locus of decision-making now shifted decisively to the Russian Communist Party’s leading body. As Russian historian F.I. Firsov has noted, “The most important issues were discussed in the VKP [Communist Party of Russia] politburo and in its commissions, and then the VKP delegation would inform the ECCI of decisions taken and that latter would approve them.”[13]

On August 15, Zinoviev presented the Russian Communist Party (VKP) Politburo with theses warning that the situation in Germany was rapidly nearing a revolutionary climax. The Politburo met eight days later. Radek, Zinoviev, and Trotsky pressed for bold action by the KPD; Stalin voiced a note of scepticism regarding the revolutionary potential in Germany. On August 22, a commission was

struck off to coordinate preparations by the Russian party, made up of Zinoviev, Trotsky, Stalin, Radek, Chicherin, and Georgy Piatakov. Leaders of both KPD factions were summoned to Moscow; they arrived at the end of August.[14]

## **The KPD Joins the Saxony Government**

The joint Moscow gathering developed an innovative plan for a bid for power, drawing on the Fourth Comintern Congress policies regarding the united front. The congress resolution on tactics specified that, in certain circumstances, a workers' government supported by a mobilized workers movement could serve as a transitional step toward workers' rule. The Moscow plan applied this concept to the situation in Saxony, whose SPD government was dependent on the KPD Communist Party for its legislative majority. The meeting proposed that the KPD take up a standing invitation to join the SPD-led state government. The KPD was then to utilize this position in government to prepare nationwide resistance to the attack by Germany's national government that would inevitably follow.

The merit of the plan lay in seeking to win a credibly broad social basis for a bid for workers' rule, one that utilized the Weimar republic's constitutional structures even as it prepared to step beyond them. The plan enabled the revolutionary forces to take a defensive posture, forcing the national government, if it wished to oust the socialist coalition, to break with Weimar constitutionality and call in the army.[15]

On about October 10, parallel with these efforts, the KPD entered into negotiations in Berlin with representatives of the SPD and the trade unions with the goal of forming a joint national action committee.[16]

On the same day, the KPD set into proposal of the Moscow conference, conveyed nine days earlier by Zinoviev, to delegate three leaders to serve in the SPD-led government in Saxony. Nine days later, the national government invoked its emergency powers to remove the SPD-KPD Saxony government. It sent in the Reichswehr – the German army – to impose its decision in Saxony, remove the state government, and disperse the local “proletarian hundreds.”

No wave of mass protests rose up to protest these actions. Nor did the Berlin negotiations open a road for coordinated action. As for the workers' militias, they were strong in number but mostly untrained and unarmed.

On October 21, delegates of factory committees from across the state of Saxony gathered in a hastily convened conference in Chemnitz to decide on a response. Historian E.H. Carr records the outcome:

[T]he Saxon social-democrats had no stomach for a civil war against the Reichswehr, and the Saxon communists no faith in their capacity to act alone. The proposal for a general strike was politely buried by a resolution to set up a commission to examine the proposal.”[17]

The factory delegates rejected a KPD proposal for a general strike to protest the army occupation; no other proposal was made. The Saxony SPD-KPD government fell without mass resistance.

## **Uprising in Hamburg**

Armed resistance did break out in the port city of Hamburg, but as the result of a misunderstanding, with tragic results. The episode is well summarized in a report to Comintern President Grigorii Zinoviev by the Russian Communist Grigorii Roze-Skoblevisky (Shklovsky) on October 27.

An order to launch an armed uprising was brought to the Hamburg Communists on 22 October by a

party leader, Hermann Remmele, who had been present in the state of Saxony when the workers movement learned of an impending attack by units of the German army. Remmele reported that risings were being organized across the country in support of the Saxony workers and instructed the Hamburg party leaders to send party militias immediately into battle. (source to Bayerlein)[18]

Remmele's message was in fact untrue. The Communist Party did make such a proposal to a workers' conference in Saxony, but it was not presented until after Remmele's departure – and it was then rejected. No word reached the Hamburg comrades of this change of plans. Communist leaders in Hamburg raised objections to Remmele's instructions, but Remmele overruled them, invoking his authority as a representative of the central party leadership.

The massive port of Hamburg was then in the grip of a strike wave. The local KPD was trying to slow down the pace of this movement to avoid its isolation. To carry out Remmele's instructions, the Communists had to reverse course and convert these stoppages into a generalized city-wide strike and uprising. Monday October 23 was spent in feverish preparations.

On Tuesday several hundred party activists took to the streets without weapons or even leaflets. They occupied more than a dozen police stations, seized weapons, secured these buildings against attack, and set up barricades at many points across the city. Local police and some nearby military detachments quickly rallied and put down the rising. At the end of the day the Communist forces retreated and dispersed. During the day's fighting about 100 persons were killed, a majority of them non-combatants.

In only one city district, Barmbek, did residents seek to assist the rebels by supplying food or helping build the barricades. Organizationally the Communist military structure performed well, displaying, in Shklovsky's words, miracles of bravery, steadfastness, discipline, and selflessness. But the Communists militias fought alone, mustering only a tiny fraction of its 14,000 members in the city. The rebellion did not extend beyond the city of Hamburg and its environs.

The clearing away of the now deserted Hamburg barricades marked the end of the KPD's October 1923 bid for power. A few days later, on November 9-9, the German fascists attempted a putsch in Munich, which was quickly quashed. The Stresemann regime moved to restabilize the currency, and the social crisis ebbed.

For the Communist forces, "the 'German fiasco' constituted a decisive retreat of historic significance," comments Broué, "but at first, it passed unnoticed." [19] Nonetheless, the outcome was dismaying: no resistance to the army takeover in Saxony; the Hamburg revolt quickly subdued by locally available repressive forces..

An apt summary of these events, later published by the ECCI, is included in E.H. Carr's account of these events:

#The technical preparations, the mobilization of the party apparatus for the struggle for power, the equipment and moral discipline of the [proletarian] hundreds were on a low level. The too brief and over-hurried technical preparations yielded in practice nothing; in the technical sense it mobilized the party membership for action, but failed to reach the great proletarian masses.[20]

Carr adds his own verdict: "No Russian schooling could at short notice have made the military detachments of the KPD a match for the disciplined forces of the Reichswehr." [21]

## **Communist Responses to October Setback**

Zinoviev, the leading architect of the bid for power in Germany, minimized the defeat, terming it only an episode. Initially, he accepted that the KPD's October retreat had been necessary. The German working class, Zinoviev stated, now faced "a period of painful white terror, full of sacrifices for the proletariat." A KPD Central Committee plenum, held November 3-4, stressed the severity of the defeat, placing blame on the SPD left wing in Saxony and asserting that the events marked the victory of fascism in the form of what they termed a military dictatorship.

In fact German capitalists had responded entirely through the mechanism of the Weimar republic, which weathered the 1923 crisis without a political breakdown. Germany's bourgeois democracy, created by revolution only five years earlier, proved to have more legitimacy and staying power than had been imagined by the Communist leaders in either Moscow or Berlin.

Even before the October events, the Stresemann regime had begun strong measures to stabilize Germany's currency and economy, while banning the Communist party and press. The capitalist rulers emerged with increased confidence, while the workers' movement was burdened by the impact of defeat and destroyed hopes.

The KPD's central leaders, Brandler and Thalheimer, blamed the defeat on unfavourable objective conditions, asserting that the masses had been no longer willing to fight. Clara Zetkin stressed the limitations of the united-front tactical policy applied in Saxony, terming it "the result of a compromise between party leaders of two opposed tendencies, not the crown of a unified mass movement." [22]

Ruth Fischer of the KPD's leftist faction declared that the German party should have given battle even at the risk of defeat. The Fischer-Maslow faction, now backed by Zinoviev, blamed the Brandler party leadership and the alliance with the Saxony SPD left. [23] In this fashion the Comintern's united-front policy, developed over two years of intensive discussion and experience, fell into disrepute. Joint initiatives with reformist-led formations were now rejected; the formula "united front from above not below," approved at the Fifth Comintern congress of 1924, signified in reality no united front at all.

Leon Trotsky contended that responsibility for the October setback rested not only with the KPD leadership but with the Comintern leadership, which had reacted to the German crisis only after several months of business as usual. Trotsky later analyzed the defeat as "a classic example of a missed revolutionary situation," identifying with a statement by an unnamed German delegate at the Comintern's 1924 world congress:

There is not a single class-conscious worker in Germany who is unaware that the party should have engaged in a battle and not have shunned it. The leaders of the [KPD] forgot about the independent role of the party. [24]

The course of this discussion soon became entangled with a dispute within in the Russian Communist Party leadership. On November 8, Trotsky had published a call for struggle against bureaucratism in party and state. Trotsky's challenge found support in a joint statement by Radek, Piatakov, and other Russian Communist leaders published in *Pravda* on November 25. ("[Declaration of the 46](#)") A broad discussion of bureaucratism and party renewal opened up in the Russian party press and among its members.

About three weeks later, Radek told a meeting of Communist activists in Moscow that Trotsky's views enjoyed support among leaders of the Comintern's most important sections outside the Soviet

Union – specifically in Germany, France, and Poland. Trotsky's leading opponents, Zinoviev and Stalin, took Radek's comment as a warning that the debate in Germany over the October setback could wield influence in the Russian party. Pierre Broué comments, "This was the point when the 'German question' moved to the centre of the battle in the Russian party." [25]

On January 12, 1924, Zinoviev wrote the KPD leadership accusing them of responsibility for the October defeat, particularly in their application of united-front policy. The KPD's entry into the Saxony government was intended only as a "military-political maneuver," he stated, "You turned it into a political bloc with the Left Social Democrats, which tied your hands .... into a banal parliamentary coalition."

By contrast, Trotsky, writing in *Pravda* 28-29 December, criticized the KPD's entire course from May 1923 onwards, a period during which it was "unable to free itself .... from the automatism of the preceding policy ... and to put forward squarely in its agitation, action, organization and tactics the problem of taking power." [26]

Stalin did not state his view for the record during this period. However, in a marginal comment on an unpublished manuscript by Zinoviev, he mocked the view, which he ascribed to Radek, that the SPD leadership represented anything more than "mere camouflage" for the military high command. [27]

## **United Front Policy Abandoned**

On January 15, Stalin delivered a lengthy and slashing attack on Radek's conduct in the German crisis before the Russian CP Central Committee. The discussion concluded by censuring the conduct of Radek, Trotsky, and Piatakov in submitting theses to the ECCI without approval of the Russian party, thus effectively cutting short Radek's role in the Comintern leadership. [28] In addition, on this occasion, the concept of "Trotskyism" made its appearance, defined as a "particularly dangerous deviation from Leninism." [29]

Brandler was removed from his KPD leadership post that month and transferred to administrative assignments in Soviet Russia. The KPD leadership was now assumed by Fischer and Arkadi Maslow, who had consistently criticized the Comintern's policy on seeking united in action with Social Democratic forces. Indeed, the united-front policy as a whole fell victim to the October defeat. Historian Franz Borkenau comments that Zinoviev "had always been sceptical and hesitant as to the value of the united-front tactics ... he now returned to his old attitude." [30] At the January 1924 ECCI plenum, Zinoviev held that the KPD's united front policy, through excess confidence in the left SPD, contributed to the October defeat.

German historian Bernhard Bayerlein aptly summarizes the overall impact of the January 1924 ECCI plenum:

#The ECCI balance sheet elevated the ideologically driven viewpoint of Zinoviev and, to a degree, of Stalin to an official interpretation of the 'German October' that has endured in large measure to the present. Absent from this appraisal is any criticism of the Russian politburo or the Comintern. All shortcomings and errors were ascribed exclusively to the Brandler [KPD] leadership. The discussion was fundamentally transformed. From this point on the leading layers of the Social Democracy were branded as a faction of German fascism in socialist disguise, while the left-wing Social Democrats were branded as their most dangerous representatives. [31]

In June-July 1924, the Comintern's fifth world congress codified this doctrine by its call for a Communist "united front from below," without agreements with other working-class currents, which



in effect amounted to no united front at all (see Chapter 21).

During the two decades that followed, Comintern united-front policy was subjected to many disruptive mutations. Its January 1924 ECCI plenum, however, stands out as the outstanding turning point in Comintern history. Chapter 21 of this work will consider the ensuing process of disorientation and decline.

## John Riddell

### Notes

[1]. Among the major English-language accounts of the Communist response to the 1923 crisis are:

- Angress, Werner T., *Stillborn Revolution; The Communist Bid for Power in Germany, 1921-1923*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963.
- Bayerlein, Bernhard, "The Abortive 'German October' 1923," in Kevin McDermott and John Morison, eds., *Politics and Society Under the Bolsheviks*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999, pp. 251-62.
- Borkenau, Franz, [\*World Communism: A History of the Communist International\*](#), Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963.
- Broué, Pierre, *The German Revolution*, London: Merlin, 2006.
- Carr, Edward Hallett, *A History of Soviet Russia: The Interregnum: 1923-1924*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1969.
- Fischer, Ruth. *Stalin and German Communism: A Study in the Origins of the State Party*. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 1982.
- Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977.

[2]. Bernhard H. Bayerlein, Leonid G. Babichenko, Fridrich I. Firsov, and Aleksandr Vatlin, eds., *Deutscher Oktober 1923: Ein Revolutionsplan und sein Scheitern*, Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2003, p. 102.

[3]. Pierre Broué, *German Revolution*, p 731.

[4]. Clara Zetkin, *Fighting Fascism: How to Struggle and How to Win*, ed. Mike Taber and John Riddell, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018, pp. 23-66.

[5]. Mike Taber, ed., *The Communist Movement at a Crossroads: Plenums of the Communist International's Executive Committee, 1922-1923*, Leiden/Chicago: Brill/Haymarket Books, 2018, p. 618 (quotation); pp. 24-7, 613-18 (discussion).

[6]. Taber, *Communist Movement*, pp. 26-7.

[7]. Broué, *German Revolution*, p. 709.

[8]. Broué, *German Revolution*, p. 734, 719.

[9]. For an English translation of Stalin's memo, see Broué, *German Revolution*, p. 740-1. For the German text, see Bayerlein, *Deutscher Oktober*, p. 99-100. The Russian original has not been located. Trotsky made the text widely known in his biography, *Stalin*, and in his 1927 analysis, [\*The Third International after Lenin\*](#). Broué contends that the presently available text is not Stalin's original but his reconstruction of his memo after the fact.



- [10]. Broué, *German Revolution*, pp. 737–41.
- [11]. Broué, *German Revolution*, p. 715.
- [12]. Borkenau, *World Communism*, p. 245.
- [13]. McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern: A History*, pp. 44–5.
- [14]. Bayerlein, *Deutscher Oktober*, p. 131. Bayerlein’s collection contains detailed German-language minutes of the decisive Politburo meeting.
- [15]. The concept of using a defensive posture as the launching pad for revolutionary action was later explained in detail by pioneer U.S. Communist leader James P. Cannon in his article on “Defensive Formulations and the Organization of Action,” [reposted on this blog](#).
- [16]. Broué, *German Revolution*, p. 805.
- [17]. E.H. Carr, *The Interregnum 1923–1924*, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1969, pp. 229–30.
- [18]. Bayerlein, *Deutscher Oktober*.
- [19]. Broué, *German Revolution*, p. 817.
- [20]. Carr, *The Interregnum*, p. 220.
- [21]. Ibid.
- [22]. Carr, *The Interregnum*, p. 216, quoting from Zetkin’s remarks at a KPD convention in 1924.
- [23]. McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, pp. 44–45.
- [24]. Trotsky, *The Third International after Lenin*, New York: Pioneer, 1936, pp. 92–3.
- [25]. Broué, *German Revolution*, pp. 820–21.
- [26]. Broué, *German Revolution*, p. 822.
- [27]. Bayerlein, *Deutscher Oktober*, p. 393. The manuscript containing Stalin’s comment formed part of a product of discussion among the “troika,” Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Stalin, who organized opposition to Trotsky in the Russian CP leadership.
- [28]. Bayerlein, *Deutscher Oktober*, pp. 443–50.
- [29]. McDermott and Agnew, *World Communism*, p. 45
- [30]. Borkenau, *World Communism*, p. 255.
- [31]. Bayerlein, *Deutscher Oktober*, p. 456.

December 1, 2021

---

---

**P.S.**

- John Riddell's blog. December 1, 2021 :  
<https://johnriddell.com/2021/12/01/the-german-october-of-1923-a-failed-bid-for-workers-power/>