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Fifth World Congress of the Communist International

The German October and the Path to Workers' Power:

Reply to Grigorii Zinoviev and Ruth Fischer

24 June 1924

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Clara Zetkin delivered this speech on 24 June 1924, at the 11th session of the Fifth Comintern Congress, during the discussion of Grigorii Zinoviev's opening address to the Congress, "Report on the Work of the Executive Committee."

This English translation of Clara Zetkin's speech is taken from *International Press Correspondence* No. 47 (23 July 1924) pp. 485–8. It has been lightly edited after comparison with the German-language version printed in *Internationale Presse-Korrespondenz* No. 85 (1924) pp. 1066–70.¹

Clara Zetkin: We are now engaged in weighing and reviewing the road already traversed because we wish to outline the path for the next courageous advance. We are all united in the conviction and the desire that we must speed the course of the revolution. In this respect the central points are the October [1923] retreat of the German Communist Party and the tactics of the united front, two subjects of international importance.

We have listened to the statement of the majority representatives of the German Communist Party [Ruth Fischer] about the October

defeat and its causes.² We were entertained to a grotesque misrepresentation of the past, and to a heavenly glorification of the present. It was asserted that the October defeat was the inevitable outcome of the petty-bourgeois, opportunistic policy pursued by the Communist Party since 1921, which was calculated to liquidate the role of the Communist Party as an independent and leading revolutionary class party of the proletariat, and thus to deprive it of its right to exist.

There are several facts which give the lie to this assertion. We are told here about Brandlerism and Radekism, regardless of the fact that until quite recently [Karl] Radek was one of the most ardent champions of the left wing. [Heinrich] Brandler, who is reproached with having pursued his policy quite consciously and systematically since 1921, did not get back to Berlin until the autumn of 1922. Yet another fact should be pointed out: the policy of the former Central Committee was endorsed by the [Comintern] Executive until the October [1923] defeat. Therefore, if the German Party is indeed guilty of any sin, the Executive is equally guilty, because it has not acted with the utmost vigor against the opportunist policy.

It was asserted that Comrade Brandler had deliberately chosen Saxony as the battle ground for the application of the tactics of the united front which was to culminate in the “workers’ government,” for the reason that the Communist masses in that country were already contaminated with opportunism. The fact of the matter is that comrade Brandler did attach supreme importance to the development of the situation in Saxony, yet it was not because he considered the Communist masses contaminated with social-democracy, but rather because he erroneously imagined the social-democratic masses to be so impregnated with our influence that they would join us in the fight.³

There was yet another important reason for choosing Saxony as the battle ground. It was the talk of the town that the *fascisti* in Berlin were going to restore the monarchy on the ninth of November. The only way to frustrate this plan was to retard the *fascisti* march from the South in Saxony and Thuringia. If the events in Saxony did not bring about the proletarian revolution, they have at least contributed

to the fact that the fascist attempt on the ninth of November resulted in nothing else but the Hitler farce at Munich.⁴

The majority representatives seem to share the view of comrade Zinoviev that the October retreat was due to a wrong application of the tactics of the united front to a parliamentary comedy of workers' government. To my mind, the October defeat was due to a number of causes, which should prompt us to criticize severely the attitude of the Party prior to October.

Thanks to the [French-Belgian] occupation of the Ruhr, the situation was doubtlessly extremely revolutionary from an objective point of view, and it already began to grow even subjectively revolutionary.⁵ All of a sudden, so to speak, hundreds of hot springs bubbled forth from the ground that was rent by an outburst of volcanic forces. It was the task of the Party to merge these waters into one strong stream, and to set to this stream its course and its goal. In other words, the fight was to be waged for the conquest of power.

This did not happen. The Party did not take timely cognizance of the revolutionary situation, nor did it take advantage of the situation with sufficient consistency and vigor. And by far the larger part of the blame rests upon the leadership of the German Communist Party, because it should have led the way instead of waiting to be driven into activity by the masses.

It was the duty of the Party to connect up the common everyday demands of the proletariat to the demand for the conquest of power and to the idea of a civil war, not abstractly, but by utilizing and intensifying the movement for ameliorating the misery of the people. The Party failed to utilize all the opportunities for action in parliament, in the municipal councils, at public meetings and demonstrations, so as to transform every cry for bread, clothing, or education into the cry: Down with the capitalist dictatorship!

The Party failed to concentrate and to permeate the factory councils and to organize them into points of support for mass action. Neither did it infuse the breath of life into the militant organs of the united front, by making the proletarian hundreds active and by giving them a definite aim, to serve as the defense corps of the workers in their daily struggles.⁶

How are these mistakes to be explained? The Party was convinced that the fight for the conquest of power would be inaugurated by an all-encompassing effort, in which all the forces would come together simultaneously. It considered the partial fights and the partial demands merely as the premature dissipation of the energy of the masses. It did not consider the fight for partial demands as a means of recruiting, mobilizing, and educating the proletariat for the mass fight for power. This wrong view is indeed a fatal Social-Democratic legacy.

When the Party at last saw the full meaning of the revolutionary situation, it made a belated effort to rally the mass organizations and to equip them militarily and technically for the armed rising. Of course, military and organizational preparation are both necessary things. But they alone do not suffice. They must go hand in hand with tireless and consistent education of the masses to the necessity and inevitability of the armed fight. It was Napoleon who said that 80 percent of the guarantees of victory are of a moral nature.⁷ This is twice, tenfold true of civil war. On the outbreak of the revolutionary fight, the masses will have to take into consideration the military and technical preparedness of the counter-revolution. The deficiency must be made good by moral factors: political insight, militant courage, self-sacrifice, etc. The military and technical preparations will partly be effected in the actual course of the struggle. The most essential postulate for the start of the fight is for everyone to be convinced that the fight must be fought, and that he must take part in it. This conviction begets the desire to find one's own weapons, and it is quite possible that this desire will render every stick in the house, every hammer in the factory and even every bare fist, a mighty weapon wherewith to fight the enemy.

The Party has done little or nothing to imbue the large masses with the desire and consciousness of the necessity of the armed fight. By its policies and political activities it failed to get into innermost touch with the masses that are to be engaged in the fight, either in the whole of Germany nor even in Saxony, where the fight was to flare up.

Under these circumstances the common "workers' government" of Communists and Social-Democrats was indeed a huge mistake. The only sense in a workers' government was if it would be formed as the crowning effect of a tremendous mass movement, backed by the political organs of proletarian power outside of parliament, by the workers' councils and by their congress, and above all, by an armed working class.

The very reverse was done. The workers' government was to be the starting point of a mass movement and of the arming of the proletariat. Under these circumstances it was inevitable that some mistakes should be committed in the application of the tactics of the united front. And so it happened. The feverish hunt for arms had the effect of frustrating the very revolutionary policy which was to arouse and to rally the masses and to get them to use the weapons in the fight. The net result was no weapons and no men. Brandler had to admit subsequently at the Chemnitz Conference that the Communist Party was fighting while the masses were not ready to fight. And it was this sad state of affairs that urged him to refrain from appealing for a fight.⁸

It was asserted here that the retreat did not express the revolutionary sentiment which existed among the masses. Nothing of the kind. Of course, the Party, the leadership as well as the membership, was inspired by a strong and honest desire to fight. Nevertheless, the bare fact was that the masses were not prepared to fight. Because the Party failed to make proper use of the spontaneous revolutionary outburst of the masses, it was allowed to flicker out uselessly.

The same thing happened at the time of the Cuno strike. The Cuno strike demonstrated a certain level of maturity of the movement of the masses, but it revealed also the great lack of political preparation for the revolt, for the capture of power. How otherwise was it possible that the masses allowed themselves to be lulled by the Social-Democratic cum bourgeois hotch-potch of the Stresemann-Solmann-Hilferding government?⁹

Then came the Emergency Powers Act, the dispatching of Reichswehr troops to Saxony, the proscription of the Communist Party, and the

fascist dictatorship.¹⁰ Yet the masses remained dumb. No message came from the masses to indicate their revolutionary readiness and willingness to fight.

But you will tell me, comrades: what about Hamburg? Well, Hamburg is a very strong argument in support of my view. All the sincere admiration which I felt for the couple of hundred brave souls who fought like lions at Hamburg could not make me oblivious of the mortifying fact that these fights were not accompanied by any action of solidarity either from the ranks of our Party or from the ranks of the proletariat of Hamburg. A few hundred were allowed to fight unaided.¹¹

Thälmann: Because they had no arms.

Zetkin: I am aware of that, Comrade Thälmann, but what the devil became of the resolve to requisition arms by force? Under those circumstances not only the Party members but the whole of the Hamburg proletariat should have been inspired by the call to arms that was once made by [Georg] Hervegh:

Tear the crosses out of the ground,
Turn the crosses into swords!¹²

I noticed no resolve of this kind. And where was this spontaneous action of solidarity, even in one industrial district of Germany? The militant revolutionary resolve of the Party proved an illusion.

We were told here by our friend Rwal that in October every Party member and every worker was ready to fight.¹³ I was glad to hear that statement because I felt in it the expression of the desire and aspiration of a truly revolutionary temperament. But I would be content even if some of the comrades, if one out of fifty workers would be resolved to fighting for the conquest of power. Aroused and prepared by our propaganda and education, the masses would then follow us into the fight with the impetus of an elemental force.

You tell me, comrades, that this was prevented by the Party issuing the call for the retreat. I beg to differ. If in the midst of a truly revolutionary situation, if the Party and the masses are imbued with the true revolutionary spirit then I follow the commandment: Obey God more than men,¹⁴ then I snap the fingers at discipline in regard

to a party leadership that is opportunist and cowardly, and is an obstacle to the revolution. In November 1918 we saw revolutionary determination at work in Germany, without any slogan from the [SPD] party leadership, and even in spite of the leadership. It is a historic fact that the Social Democratic leaders have stopped at nothing to prevent the revolution.

Under the circumstances of October 1923 Brandler not only did the necessary and inevitable thing, but also rendered great service to the Party when he did not take up the fight. Without this evasion the Party would have been smashed, and the flower of the proletariat in Saxony and Thuringia murdered. It would be in contradiction to historical truth to send Brandler as the scapegoat into the wilderness.

The guilt rests upon the Party as a whole, it must now overcome its errors in the spirit of comradeship, and it is the purpose of my remarks to contribute towards the formation of a united party, which will stand on the firm grounds of clear policy, and which will be qualified to pass an examination of revolutionary leadership in a revolutionary situation.

We now come to the second part of the statement, to the heavenly glorification of the present.

When listening to the story of the consolidation of the Party, of its increased activity, of its growing influence over the masses, and of its ever-increasing resolve to fight, I am tempted to exclaim: "I hear the message but alas: I lack the faith."¹⁵ Faith cannot be gained by fine words, but by deeds. In my estimation the Party is still in the throes of a severe crisis of development, and it is not yet fully capable of action. I am going to substantiate my statement by a few facts.

The Party emerged from the underground into the open,¹⁶ yet there was no forceful campaign to indicate to the masses that the Communist Party was no longer an outlawed party, but a strong and militant party. The slogan of such a campaign should have been "set the class-war prisoners free." The May Day celebration, which should have been a stronger demonstration against reaction than ever before, was a tame affair in Berlin and in the rest of Germany with but few exceptions. It is characteristic that the Central Committee had discussed for a long time whether a uniform May Day

celebration should be organized or whether it should be left to every district to arrange its own celebration to suit the local circumstances.

One more fact. The raid of the Berlin police on the Russian Trade Delegation should have been made the object of a forceful campaign.¹⁷ The masses should have been aroused to a vigorous fight against French imperialism, against world imperialism and also against the German bourgeoisie which was prepared to sell Germany to international imperialism as an article of merchandise. The national question should have been put by us and utilized from our revolutionary standpoint as a means for the conquest of power by the proletariat. This calls for a vigorous campaign in favor of the most far-reaching alliance with Soviet Russia. To this end it was necessary to take advantage of the fact that the large, small and middle bourgeoisie are equally interested in such an alliance. Yet no campaign was started, and the Party contented itself with a few good demonstrations.

The elections have shown a very welcome growth of the Communist Party, but it is overshadowed by the fact that six million votes were polled by the Social-Democrats and some proletarian votes were given to the *fascisti*.¹⁸ I hail with delight the demonstration made by our faction at the opening of the Reichstag, nevertheless, I regret to see the absence of contact with the masses. There were no mass demonstrations to lend weight to the demonstration in the Reichstag. Then came the actions at Halle and Fürstenwalde.¹⁹ They were necessary, and equally necessary was their protection by armed workers. I do not put down as a mortal sin to the Party leadership that these demonstrations were organized extremely badly. The knack of organizing such actions must be acquired. Above all, it was essential to establish close contact with the masses, and to carry out effective political preparations. This was entirely missing. In the District of Halle-Merseburg we polled 186,000 votes, while the Social Democrats got 110,000. Where were our electors, and what about the united front from below? It speaks volumes of our state of contact with the masses, that the railway workers did not make a single attempt to prevent the transportation of the fascist hordes to Halle.

Yet another point about the activity of the Party. Only in Upper Silesia have the masses shown great militancy, and the Party displayed great activity. As a result of the passivity of the Party, or at least of insufficient activity, the proletarian masses were again landed into the lap of the Amsterdam leaders. The Party gave them slogans, which differed in little or nothing from those of the trade union. The Party failed to give political leadership to the tremendous economic struggles. Its influence on the masses is spent, and its contact with the masses has become loosened as was shown by the elections of the factory councils and trade union delegates. We have sustained appreciable losses. This was confirmed by the consolidation of the Social Democracy and was further confirmed by the election results, and certified in the [USPD-SPD] party conference, where the "left" opposition made an ignominious surrender.²⁰ The surrender betrayed not only the weakness of the opposition leaders, but also the slight influence of our party on the Social-Democratic workers.

All these facts lead me to the conclusion: the Party has not yet consolidated its forces and its activity to rally the masses to action by our propaganda and education, to unchain the activity of the masses, and to get the masses into the conquest of power. No doubt the October defeat was partly to blame for this, as well as the economic situation, the exodus from the trade unions (for which, by the way, the Party is partly to blame) the wholesale victimization of comrades, and so on. But there were doubtless some other causes too. For instance, the inadequate organizational shaping of the Party and its insufficient theoretical schooling, and the faltering, vacillating policy of the Central Committee, which has manifested itself particularly in its attitude on the trade union question. I will only recall the hesitant attitude of the Party leadership towards the Workers' Congress, the weak action for gaining admission into the trade unions and for capturing them.²¹

Comrades, I regard it as essential that you should be clear as to what errors and weaknesses are to be overcome, so that the Party may become really consolidated and in the highest degree capable of action. The Party will never overcome these errors if you declare that every successful act is due solely to your own work and that every

weakness is a heritage of the old Central Committee. If you do so you are saying in one and the same breath that you are both impotent and almighty.

Greater tasks are facing our party than ever before. We must be prepared for them. It is very possible that the world situation will very rapidly become acute. An acute situation may arise with extreme rapidity in Germany since the reparations agreement and the basis of the experts' report is working in this direction.²² We must exert greater energies than ever in order to win over the masses and to fling them into the fight under our leadership.

The Party has begun to arm for the forthcoming struggles by its agreement with the Communist parties of the neighboring countries. I welcome this. But we must not forget in our international mobilization that imperialism must be defeated by the proletariat in their own country. Therefore the proletarian masses in Germany must be mobilized. I have so far heard nothing of the concrete slogans and measures that this necessitates.

Moreover the proletariat must find allies in order to overthrow the domination of the capitalist class. What is our attitude towards the national question, the peasant question, and towards the question of the petty-bourgeoisie? Where are the practical concrete deductions from our policy?

The present situation lends increased importance to our attitude towards the proletarian united front. It is certainly one of the most important duties of the World Congress to reach complete clarity on the subject of the united front, a tactic the culminating point of which is the workers' and peasants' government. Neither the report of Comrade Zinoviev nor the discussions have dealt with sufficient clarity with the question as to how the united front is to be concretely carried into effect. Comrade Zinoviev spoke, in the manner of a Bible or Gospel commentary, of how the resolution of the Fourth Congress is to be understood. I frankly declare that it has not been explained how the united front is to be put into effect. In this respect I agree with Luther: "They should let the Word stand."²³

The resolutions of the World Congress must be regarded as authoritative without explanations or comments. When they no

longer suffice, they must be changed. We need unambiguous texts. If we permit explanations written by Zinoviev independently, or by Zinoviev misled by Radek, and are content with his opinion as to how resolutions are to be understood, then we must recognize the right of other comrades to interpret in their own way the resolutions of the World Congress. This must not be, in spite of our great respect for the chairman of the Communist International. It will lead in practice to the breakdown of unity, the breakdown of party discipline. We must clearly understand that the united front must be a union for life or death of all proletarians who are rebels against the capitalist profit system and the bourgeois state, a firm revolutionary fighting brotherhood under the leadership of the Communist Party.

Two preliminary conditions are necessary for such a united front. Firstly, that the Communist Party must be a firmly consolidated, disciplined, centralized unit with unshakable principles and convictions. It must never conceal its true character. In its actions it must never allow itself to be bound by considerations of other parties. It must always act with extreme firmness and independence as the revolutionary leader of the masses. The second condition for the united front is that we must be capable of improving our contact with the masses and their daily struggles for the daily needs of the proletariat and the producers in general.

I cannot accept the statement of Comrade Zinoviev on the question of the workers' and peasants' government to the effect that the workers' and peasants' government was only a pseudonym, a synonym, or some other "nym" for the dictatorship of the proletariat. In Russia this may perhaps have been true, but in countries with an advanced capitalist development it is not true. In these countries the workers' and peasants' government is the political expression of a definite historical situation, as Engels foresaw: in other words, a state of affairs in which the bourgeoisie can no longer maintain power, but in which the proletariat is still not sufficiently mature and united to set up its dictatorship. Large sections of the proletariat still believe that they can exercise their power within the old forms; they are still bound by illusions as to parliamentarism and bourgeois democracy.

The workers' government can come only as the expression of a revolutionary mass movement. This is also true even if a parliament is its godmother. The workers will expect that it should conduct a revolutionary labor policy. This is impossible without dictatorial attacks of the most severe character upon capitalist economy and private property. It is, therefore, obvious that a workers' government can never maintain itself by the strength of parliament. It must base itself on the support of the organs of power of the revolutionary workers outside parliament: the soviet congress and the arming of the proletariat. The period of real revolutionary workers' governments cannot last long. As Comrade Treint said, the workers' government is the dictatorship [of the proletariat] in process of formation.²⁴ In many countries of western Europe, the fight for the possession of power will develop immediately into the fight for the establishment of the proletarian dictatorship. In other countries it will perhaps have to pass through the workers' government stage.

I do not think that the pacifist-democratic wave, regarding the importance of which the opportunists are so eloquent, is very powerful or can last very long. Basing myself on this conviction I am of the opinion that every atom of power the proletariat can win must be exploited to the full. The world domination of the bourgeoisie has been shattered to its depths. It no longer maintains itself by the strength of its legal and illegal instruments of power but by the opportunist, reformist contamination of the workers. The ideas of the Social Democrats cripple and deaden the faith of the workers in their own revolutionary strength and degrade them to body guards of the bourgeoisie. Therefore the Communist International must regard it as its first duty to root out every trace of reformist opportunist tendencies.

We must also be perfectly clear that such tendencies are not merely an inheritance of the past but that they continually arise out of the present situations. They are based on the desire of unenlightened workers to escape from the hell of poverty as quickly and as "cheaply" as possible. From the foregoing it is clear that reformist labor parties will continue to exist but that the Communist parties must distinguish themselves from them in theory and practice with the greatest possible clarity. This brings to the fore the question of

the complete independence of the Communist parties as the leading revolutionary class parties of the proletariat.

On the other hand, the same situation, the hesitating progress of the revolution, gives rise to another danger, a danger from the Left. It is the danger of the point of view which leads to putschism; in other words, the conviction that the Party must undertake revolutionary, decisive, actions without the masses and for the masses, that mass action can be replaced by party action. I have noted this point of view running as an undertone to the assertions that the German Communist Party in October should have attacked in the fight for power even though the masses stood passively on one side. It was a veiled resurrection of the [Theory of the] Offensive and the March Action.²⁵

If we want to discover what should be our correct attitude both to the other workers' parties and to the awakened and inspired masses, we must acquaint ourselves with the teachings of the history of the Russian Revolution. We must learn what the Russian Communist Party has to say regarding the importance of discipline, centralization, the whole organization of the Party, and its attitude and its relations to the masses. Our attitude to the masses must be such that the Party should become the planning and leading brain, the organized backbone and the passionate forward-driving heart of the masses; the life of the Party must become the life of the masses. Masses and party as active subjective factors of the revolution, belong together.

For this purpose the Communist parties must become steadily Bolshevized. They must become permeated with the attitude and adopt the practice of what in my opinion is the organizational and political superiority of Bolshevism. It is the principle that a revolutionary party cannot tolerate merely [dues] paying members, that every member must be an active working, fighting member, fulfilling definite party duties. We must fill every member, every working man, and every working woman, with the conviction that although their will and their deeds may be but a drop, nevertheless, it may be the drop which will fill the cup of the revolutionary will-to-act to overflowing.

If we succeed in working and fighting in this manner, the revolutionary wave will again well up from the depths of objective forces, and to it will unite itself the will of the masses under the leadership of the Communist Party, tense for the fight, driving the wave of revolution forward with irresistible power, so that it swallows up bourgeois society. Let us exert every effort to make the wonderful, proud slogan of the Young Soviet Pioneers a reality in our party: "Always ready." (*Applause.*)

1. The most complete record of the Fifth Comintern Congress was published in 1925 in German and Russian editions. A PDF of the German-language *Protokoll. Fünfter Kongress der Kommunistischen Internationale* is available from HathiTrust at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/umn.31951002092658e>.

Beginning during the Congress, summaries of reports and discussion were serialized in issues of *International Press Correspondence* (*Inprecorr*) in English, French, German, and Russian. PDFs of the English edition are available at Marxist Internet Archive (marxists.org); see [International Press Correspondence](#).

An abridged collection based on the *Inprecorr* articles was published in English and French. The English-language *Fifth Congress of the Communist International: Abridged Report of the Meetings held at Moscow June 17th to July 8th, 1924*, is available from HathiTrust at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b000973221>. A slightly different summary of the proceedings was also serialized in the *Bulletin*, published daily during the Congress by the Comintern Press Bureau.

Zinoviev's opening "Report on the Work of the Executive Committee" appears to be the only speech that was not summarized in the *Inprecorr* serialization of the Congress. *Inprecorr* No. 41 (16 July 1924) contains a complete English translation of Zinoviev's Report as published in the German-language *Protokoll*. The *Inprecorr* summary of Clara Zetkin's speech to the Congress is about half the length of the *Protokoll* version, which is found on pp. 320–30.

2. Ruth Fischer had been a leader of the KPD left-wing minority. At the April 1924 Congress of the KPD in Frankfurt, her faction won the majority. She spoke in the 7th Session of the Fifth World Congress. (*Protokoll* pp. 191–209; *Inprecorr* No. 42 pp. 421–4.)

3. At the time, Heinrich Brandler, a leader of the right-wing faction, was KPD chairman. In August 1923, a Comintern commission including Grigorii Zinoviev and Karl Radek, the Comintern leader responsible for relations with the KPD, met in Moscow with leaders of both KPD factions. Recognizing that Germany was approaching a revolutionary crisis, they came up with a plan for a bid for power based on the Fourth World Congress policies regarding the united front and the formation of a workers' government as a transitional step toward workers' rule.

The plan hinged on the situation in Saxony, governed by left-wing forces within the SPD who were dependent on KPD support for their parliamentary majority. The KPD would take up a standing invitation to join SPD-led state governments in Saxony and neighboring Thuringia, and utilize this position in government to prepare nationwide resistance to the inevitable attack on these state governments by Germany's Federal government. This plan was implemented in October under Comintern guidance.

For the resolutions of the Fourth World Congress on the tactics of the united front and the workers' government, see: [On the Tactics of the Comintern - Fourth Congress of the Communist International - Resolutions 1922 \(marxists.org\)](#).

For a discussion of the broader political implications of the events of 1923, see John Riddell, "[The 'German October' of 1923: A Failed Bid for Workers' Power](#)" and "[The Origins of United Front Policy](#)."

4. Adolf Hitler planned to use Munich, the capital of the southern state of Bavaria, as the base for an early-November march on Berlin in collaboration with ministers heading up the newly-installed right-wing government of Bavaria. The march on Berlin, which would pass through Saxony or Thuringia, was to emulate Benito Mussolini's

successful 1922 march on Rome that had led to the Fascist coup d'état in Italy. However, after a falling-out with his Bavarian government allies, Hitler's forces were reduced to marching on the Munich beer hall where government ministers were meeting. Hitler's forces were routed and he was arrested.

5. On 11 January 1923, French and Belgian forces occupied the Ruhr industrial heartland of Germany to extract reparations payments that had been imposed on Germany following World War I. As protests and strikes against this occupation multiplied, French and Belgian forces responded with arrests and shootings in which 130 residents were killed. The German government called for passive resistance and non-cooperation with the occupying forces. The nationalist far right began preparing for armed resistance. The worker's movement was divided: the SPD supported the government's call for passive resistance; the KPD, seeking to use the Fourth Comintern Congress tactic of a united front, called for working-class unity and a struggle for a workers' government. Within the KPD, however, the leftist faction, led by Ruth Fischer, opposed the call for a united front and a workers' government.

6. The proletarian hundreds were workers' militias for self-defense first organized in February 1923 on the initiative of the factory-council movement in Central Germany. The KPD sought to build them into a national united-front movement that could also be utilized in the fight for revolutionary power. By May 1923 tens of thousands of workers were enrolled in their ranks. The SPD-led government of Saxony had even allocated funding and promised arms, though these never materialized. Throughout 1923, the Federal government sought to weaken these formations. On 13 October, a formal order was issued dissolving them, although this was initially defied. The proletarian hundreds played an important role in the failed October uprising. (See Clara Zetkin, *Fighting Fascism: How to Struggle and How to Win*, p. 120; Pierre Broué, *The German Revolution 1917-1923*, pp. 799-815.)

7. This is a paraphrase of Napoleon's observation: "In war, moral factors account for three quarters of the whole; relative material

strength accounts for only one quarter.” (“Observations sur les affaires d'Espagne,” 27 August 1808, *Correspondance de Napoléon Ier*, Tome XVII. Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1865, p. 549)

8. The 21-22 October Chemnitz Conference of factory councils had been called earlier in preparation for a national conference of factory councils. The KPD decided, in accordance with the plan worked out at the August Moscow meeting, to use the Chemnitz Conference to launch a general strike in opposition to government and military plans to invade Saxony and overthrow the SPD/KPD government there. Brandler made the motion at the conference, but there was little support for it. Under these circumstances, the KPD, with the agreement of Comintern leaders on the scene, cancelled their plans for a coordinated national uprising. (Broué, *German Revolution*, pp. 805-9; Werner T. Angress, *Stillborn Revolution: The Communist bid for power in Germany, 1921-1923*, pp. 440-2.)

9. In early August 1923, 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 Grand Coalition government, headed by Gustav Stresemann, which now included the SPD. Stresemann, from the German Peoples Party (DVP) was Chancellor, Wilhelm Sollmann from the SPD right wing, was Interior Minister, and Rudolf Hilferding, from the SPD left wing, was Finance Minister. Sollmann and Hilferding resigned in October 1923, as the Federal government prepared to overthrow the SPD/KPD government of Saxony.

10. The Stresemann government brought inflation under control and arranged a temporary solution to the problem of reparations payments. It also began to institute measures that would undermine organizations of working-class struggle. On 13 October, the German parliament passed an emergency powers enabling act, which the government then used to begin removal of the SPD/KPD government in Saxony. It sent in the Reichswehr – the German army – to force through its decisions. On 23 November 1923, following the failed October uprising, the KPD was declared illegal and its press banned

throughout Germany. At the KPD Central Committee meeting on 3-4 November, a resolution written by Radek and Brandler had been adopted describing the October defeat as “the victory of fascism over bourgeois democracy.” (Broué, *German Revolution*, pp. 817-18; Angress, *Stillborn Revolution*, p. 460, 472.)

11. Believing that the general strike in Saxony had begun, several hundred KPD activists in Hamburg, out of a total Party membership of 14,000, took to the streets without arms or even leaflets. They occupied more than a dozen police headquarters, seizing weapons and securing these buildings against attack while setting up barricades across the city. Although they received some local support, police and some nearby military detachments quickly rallied to put down the rising, forcing the Communists to retreat. About 100 people were killed, mostly non-combatants.

12. These are the first lines of the 1841 poem *Aufruf [Call]* by the 19th Century German revolutionary poet Georg Herwegh.

13. Rwal (Gustaw Reicher) was a Communist leader in Poland and Germany. In the mid-1920s, he was a leader of the KPD in Upper Silesia. He spoke during the Fifth Congress discussion in the 5th Session. (*Protokoll*, p. 139; *Inprecorr* No. 42 [1924] p. 417.)

14. This refers to a story in the Bible. When the Apostles were confronted by the high priest for preaching in the public square of Jerusalem after they were forbidden to, the Apostles replied, “We must obey God rather than men.” (*Acts* 5:27–5:29)

15. This is a well-known quotation from Goethe’s *Faust*.

16. The November 1923 order outlawing the KPD was rescinded on 1 March 1924.

17. In early May 1924, Berlin police raided the offices of the Russian Trade Delegation on the pretext of searching for a fugitive. The Stresemann government apologized, claiming the raid was a mistake. (*Daily Worker*, 7 May 1924; *New York Times*, 17 May 1924)

18. In the Reichstag elections of 4 May 1924, the SPD polled 6,008,905 votes, a slight decline from their total in the previous national election. The KPD received 3,693,280, six times their previous total, electing 62 representatives. The Nazi Party, though still banned after the Munich “Beer Hall Putsch” of the previous year, ran in the elections under the name National Socialist Freedom Movement and received 1,918,329 votes, electing 32 representatives.

19. German nationalists staged a national mobilization on 11 May 1924 in the Communist stronghold of Halle in Saxony. A KPD counterdemonstration, which had been denied a permit, was attacked by police and nationalists, killing 11 and injuring 30. Nearly 500 counterdemonstrators were arrested. KPD forces also organized a counterdemonstration in face of a smaller rightist mobilization in Fürstenwalde the following week. (*New York Times*, 12 May 1924; *Daily Worker*, 13 May 1924; *Vorwärts* 19 May 1924)

20. The “party conference” referred to was a reunification conference of the USPD and SPD held in Nuremberg in September 1922. Following the 1920 Halle Congress of the USPD, in which a majority voted to join the Comintern and unite with the KPD, the minority of the USPD that remained outside the Communist movement had insisted on their leftist opposition to SPD policies, and had maintained organizational and political independence. This stance came to an end with the USPD–SPD reunification conference of 1922.

21. In early 1924, dozens of Communist trade union leaders had been expelled from SPD-dominated unions. Thousands of rank-and-file communist workers were now outside the SPD-led unions, due in part to expulsions, high unemployment, and resignations by workers out of disgust. At the April 1924 Frankfurt Congress of the KPD, the newly-elected left-wing leadership proposed that, rather than fight to get these members and leaders readmitted, a Workers’ Congress would be called to organize workers who were now outside the trade unions into separate organizations. Solomon Lozovsky, head of the Red International of Labor Unions and a Comintern leader, strongly

objected, so the Workers' Congress was postponed to the end of June. When it finally took place, the police broke it up and arrested the participants. (Ben Fowkes, *Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic*, pp. 119-122; Hermann Weber, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus: Die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, pp. 68-70.)

22. At the time of Zetkin's speech, a proposal to resolve the ongoing crisis of German reparations payments by obtaining loans from U.S. banks was being developed by the Dawes Committee, chaired by American banker and politician Charles G. Dawes and composed of ten "experts" from four major European countries and the U.S. This plan was approved in August 1924.

23. Zetkin is quoting the line "Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn." This is a line from Martin Luther's hymn *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*. In addition to the implied meaning of this line, the hymn itself was often understood at the time to have revolutionary nationalist overtones.

24. Albert Treint, a French Communist Party representative, spoke in the 5th Session. (*Protokoll*, pp. 134-9; *Inprecorr* No. 42 (1924) p. 416.)

25. The March Action was a confrontational initiative of strikes and local uprisings launched in Germany in March 1921 by Communist forces responding to the intensification of the class struggle as well as threats of military action by French and Polish forces. This initiative was justified by the "Theory of the Offensive," which called on Communists to radicalize their slogans and initiate minority actions that could sweep more hesitant workers into action. For the discussion at the Third Comintern Congress of the March Action and the Theory of the Offensive, see: [The Comintern's Great Turn of 1920-21: Part 1 - John Riddell](#).