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Ernst Thälmann: The Making of a German Communist, 1886–1921

ABSTRACT

During the Cold War Ernst Thälmann was remembered in polar opposite ways in the divided Germany. In the East, he was presented as a paragon of the regime's official anti-fascism; in the West, he symbolised Moscow's domination of German communism and was dismissed as a local politician promoted above and beyond his competences. This article aims to historicise Thälmann by contextualising his political choices, from his early experiences as an unskilled worker in Hamburg's giant docks in the pre-war workers' movement, the frontline service in the First World War, participation in the November Revolution and, finally, his path to the KPD via the radical local USPD. In the mass-based early KPD, the article identifies Thälmann importance as a leader of a local form of ultra-militant communism and, initially at least, someone who believed his proletarian credential enabled him to challenge even Lenin – who tried to “moderate” party policy at the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921. If Thälmann ultimately became dependent on Stalin and Moscow, then this appraisal of his early political life shows how important specific local experiences were in shaping his worldview and political actions.

Keywords: *Ernst Thälmann, SPD, USPD, KPD, Hamburg, communism, Germany*

Introduction¹

How we remember Ernst Thälmann remains obscured by the long shadows cast by the Cold War. During the years of German division, those of us looking on from abroad were presented with polar opposite views of the longest serving leader of the German Communist Party (KPD) during the Weimar Republic. In East Germany Thälmann was a paragon of communist virtues, a *tabula rasa* on which to construct and re-construct

1 The author is grateful to Ben Fowkes and Gleb Albert for reading this article, making valuable suggestions and providing some additional literature. The funding which made possible the research for this article was thanks to the British Academy Grant SG47136.

the antifascist values of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) and to transmit this message throughout society.² In summary, these biographies held that Thälmann had opposed reformism in the pre-war workers' movement, condemned the First World War as an imperialist war, brought the masses in the Independent Socialist Party (USPD) to communism and, by eliminating opportunism, and forged a Leninist "party of a new type" in the largest communist movement outside Soviet Russia. Most controversially, he was credited with presciently realising the dangers of Hitler-fascism and trying to unite the working class against it before dying for his commitment to antifascism at the hands of Hitler's butchers' in Buchenwald concentration camp in 1944.³

While the SED mobilised the memory of Thälmann as a central feature of the state's legitimating antifascist narrative, the dominant view in West Germany dismissed him as Stalin's satrap, the Soviet dictator's yes-man who was no more than a local politician promoted beyond his abilities in turbulent times.⁴ He was Stalin's willing executor who acted to uproot the KPD from its German heritage, turning the party into the auxiliary troops of a foreign power and pursuing the devastating "social fascism" policy which divided the left during Hitler's rise to power. It was a fateful policy, which eased Nazism's "seizure of power" by undermining the Weimar Republic during the recurring crises of its final years.⁵ There is much truth in this. But the emphasis of explanation for the development of German communism is placed on exogenous factors; the movement's German roots in a diversity of local and regional conditions, by contrast, remain overshadowed.⁶

Recent literature continues to follow the main historiographical paths trodden during the Cold War. Former East German authors who remain committed to the values of

- 2 On the role of biography in East Germany, see Catherine Epstein: *The Politics of Biography: The Case of East German Old Communists*, in: *Daedalus* 128 (1999), pp. 1–30.
- 3 Günter Hortzschansky et al.: *Ernst Thälmann: Eine Biographie*, East Berlin 1979. Although this remained very much a *parteilich* biography, some of the more conspicuous falsifications in earlier studies were corrected, notably the sections concerning Thälmann's family origins and his father's politics. The earliest communist biography of Thälmann, which had a surprising enduring impact on how he was seen in East and West, was Willi Bredel: *Ernst Thälmann: Ein Beitrag zu einem Lebensbild*, East Berlin 1948. For a discussion of the role of East German biographies of Thälmann in the construction of the "Thälmann myth", see Russel Lemmon: *Hitler's Rival. Ernst Thälmann in Myth and Memory*, Kentucky 2013, especially pp. 277–310.
- 4 See, in particular, Hermann Weber: *Das Schwankende Thälmann-Bild*, in: Peter Montearth (ed.): *Ernst Thälmann: Mensch und Mythos*, Amsterdam 2000, pp. 7–16.
- 5 Hermann Weber: *Hauptfeind Sozialdemokratie: Strategie und Taktik der KPD 1929–1933*, Düsseldorf 1982.
- 6 On the local and regional influences on German communism, see Norman LaPorte: *Introduction: Local Communisms in a Global Movement*, in: *Twentieth Century Communism: A Journal of International History* 5 (2013), pp. 7–20.

the SED have continued the tradition of hagiography, saying little of substance beyond what was already published in the former German Democratic Republic – if at times allowing for some minor criticism.⁷ Other East Germans have abandoned Thälmann, now seeing him as a Stalinist, destroying rather than creating a radical variant of German socialism.⁸ The only biography of Thälmann so far published by a West German author is a journalistic account, which openly states its aim as countering any revision of how Thälmann is remembered as an enemy of Germany's first democracy.⁹ Yet, the majority of studies of Thälmann have not focussed on biography *per se*, but rather its political uses – the legend or myth constructed around Thälmann and, above all, its function in the former East Germany.¹⁰

What is missing is the history of this contentious figure: who was Ernst Thälmann and why did he chose to become a German Bolshevik? This article aims to make a contribution to finding the historical Thälmann by focusing on his political socialisation in the late imperial and early Weimar periods. The main argument is that the worldview Thälmann took into the KPD was shaped by his experience in the pre-war Hamburg docks and the labour movement, from his opposition to reformism to his belief in an intransigent commitment to political struggle as the only vehicle for change. During the German Revolution Thälmann rose to prominence in the Hamburg USPD as radicalism swept the local party and Moscow and the Communist International (Comintern) appeared to offer the prospect of a second – this time socialist – revolution. Especially in the early KPD, Thälmann knew how to deploy his credentials as a radical workman in the feuds over defining the role of a revolutionary movement in the unloved Weimar Republic.

7 Eberhard Czichon/Heinz Marohn (with Ralph Dobrawa): Thälmann: Ein Report, Berlin 2010. The most scholarly treatment, if still from a broadly Marxist-Leninist stance, is Ronald Sassning: Rückblick auf Ernst Thälmann: Der Umgang mit den KPD-Führer im Widerstreit der Meinung, Jena 2006

8 Klaus Kinner: Ernst Thälmann, Mythos und Realität, in: Peter Monteath (ed.): Ernst Thälmann: Mensch und Mythos, Amsterdam 2000, pp. 31–40; Klaus Kinner: Thälmann und der Stalinismus: Das Ende des eigenständigen deutschen Parteikommunismus 1928/1929, in: *ibid.*, pp. 59–80; see also Klaus Kinner: Geschichte des Kommunismus und Linkssozialismus: Der deutsche Kommunismus: Selbstverständnis und Realität, Vol. 1, Die Weimarer Zeit, Berlin 1999.

9 Armin Fuhrer: Ernst Thälmann. Soldat des Proletariats, Munich, 2011.

10 For two monograph length studies, see Lemmons: Hitler's Rival; René Börrnert: Wie Ernst Thälmann treu und kühn! Das Thälmann-Bild der SED im Erziehungsalltag der DDR, Bad Heilbrunn 2004.

Family Background and Formative Years

Ernst Thälmann was born in Hamburg on 14 April 1886 to Fritz Johannes Thälmann and Maria Magdalena Kohpeiss, who had migrated to the city from its rural environs and married two years previously; a sister, Frieda, was born a year later.¹¹ He was not the “son of the working class” as famously, and surprisingly enduringly, depicted in Willi Bredel’s 1948 hagiography.¹² Initially, after completing his military service in Potsdam as a guardsman, Thälmann’s father arrived in Hamburg and worked as a coachman (*Speditionskutscher*). After their marriage, the Thälmanns ran an inn in the docklands area near the Rödingsmarkt, where their customers were the denizens of the harbour and shipyards. For whatever reason, it was at this time they were brought before the district courts in March 1892, which sentenced them to two years imprisonment for handling stolen goods and debarred from working as innkeepers. Thälmann’s mother and father served 15 and 20 months of their sentences respectively, during which time Ernst and Frieda went into foster care with different families. After her imprisonment, Maria Thälmann earned a living selling fruit and vegetables at the local markets, while Johannes Thälmann worked for the railway’s parcel service. By the mid-1890s, they had set up another family business, which expanded from a small grocery shop in the city’s Eilbek district into a going concern in the Wandsbeker Chaussee, replete with horse and cart and employees beyond the family circle. In addition to selling fish and groceries, they delivered coal and undertook furniture removal work.¹³

Thälmann was aware that he enjoyed a relatively comfortable material existence, even although it came at the expense of hard physical work in the family business. From an early age, Thälmann got out of bed before dawn in order to help his father collect and deliver fruit and vegetables, to deliver coal and to assist in furniture removals.¹⁴ Accord-

- 11 Copies of the Thälmann family’s birth, death and marriage certificates and correspondence with archivists concerning genealogy are in, Thälmann-Gedenkstätte Hamburg, Thälmann-Akten, Vol. 2.
- 12 For the origins of the Thälmann myth during the middle years of the Weimar Republic, see Russel Lemmons: *Hitler’s Rival: Ernst Thälmann in Myth and Memory*, Kentucky 2013; René Börrnert: *Wie Ernst Thälmann treu und kühn! Das Thälmann-Bild der SED im Erziehungsalltag der DDR*, pp. 17–62.
- 13 For a useful summary of these events, see Eberhard Czichon/Heinz Marohn (with Ralph Dobrawa): *Thälmann: Ein Report*, p. 19. Although written from a Marxist-Leninist perspective close to that of the SED’s, the extensive documentary-based details are accurate. See also Armin Fuhrer: *Ernst Thälmann. Soldat des Proletariats*, p. 17.
- 14 For Ernst Thälmann’s memories of this see, *Gekürtzter Lebenslauf*, in: *Stiftung Archiv der Parteien und Massenorganisationen in der DDR in Bundesarchiv* [henceforth: SAPMO-BArch], *Nachlaß Ernst Thälmann NY 4003/1*, Bl. I, II. It was probably written in Moabit prison in 1934 and, according to East German sources, represented a form of prepa-

ing to the recollection of family friends, by early adolescence Thälmann suffered from rheumatism as a direct result of his labours.¹⁵ These obligations to the family business also damaged his schooling. Thälmann later recalled how he had entered the *Selekta*, a high achieving stream for pupil who could proceed to a *Gymnasium* education. Had his parents valued education more, he might have realised a youthful ambition to become a teacher or skilled craftsman.¹⁶ Instead, he left school in 1900 to work as a drayman in the family business.

For two years, Thälmann continued to work for his father. However, constant acrimony over being given pocket money rather than being paid the going rate for an adult employee in addition to the indignity of regular beatings, led Thälmann to leave home and enter the world of unskilled labour in the Hamburg docks. He even spent a short period in the Concordiahaus homeless shelter in St. Pauli and, subsequently, living with an acquaintance's mother. The experience of hunger and homelessness had a lasting effect on Thälmann. Firstly, he was touched by the generosity of the poor who had given him food and shelter for almost nothing in return; and, secondly, his acquaintance had worked for the Ernst Drucker Theater leaving Thälmann with a life-long appetite for theatre productions.¹⁷

Although Thälmann was lastingly reconciled with his father and did again work in the family business on a short-term basis, he had decided to turn his back on one possible life's path – waiting on his family inheritance. Another possible choice was a new life in America. After being discharged from military service early on health grounds, in the autumn of 1907 Thälmann worked as a stoker on board the freightliner *Amerika* and spent a short period as a rural labourer outside New York. Thälmann's autobiographical sketches in prison after 1933 record how he was impressed by the prevalence of advance technology – such as the metro system – and the high standard of living, but appeared disconcerted by the relative emancipation of women, which he described as “almost unnatural”.¹⁸ Rejecting emigration and the life as a seaman, he returned home to work in the Hamburg docks, largely as a coachman for breweries and laundries, and to resume his interrupted rise in the workers' movement. He could have had no idea how useful

ration for his defence in a “high treason” trial which the Nazis finally abandoned, see Horst Neumann's introduction to: Ernst Thälmann: Mein Lebenslauf bis zum Eintritt in die KPD, in: Beitrag zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung 1 (1975), pp. 86–88.

15 Nachlass Franz Uhrbock, in: SAPMO-BArch, SGY 30 EA 1400/1, Bl. 122.

16 Gekürzter Lebenslauf, Bl. 6–7.

17 *ibid.*, Bl. 1–2, 16; see also Regina Scheer: Ich bin kein weltflüchtiger Zigeuner: Legende und Wirklichkeit einer Jugend: Über die frühen Prägungen Ernst Thälmanns, in: Peter Montearth (ed.): Ernst Thälmann: Mensch und Mythos, Amsterdam 2000, pp. 49–50.

18 Gekürzter Lebenslauf, Bl. 23; see also Ronald Sassning: Rückblick auf Ernst Thälmann: Der Umgang mit den KPD-Führer im Wiederstreit der Meinung, pp. 22–24.

these credentials as a simple worker, who spoke in the local dialect and walked with the rolling gait of a sailor would be in his rise in the post-war communist party in which seeming proletarian authenticity became a valuable resource.¹⁹

Rise in the workers' movement

It was not Thälmann's family background which had disposed him towards left-wing activism. His father had been a member of "all sorts of bourgeois and military associations"²⁰; his mother was a life-long devout Lutheran who told her son that the poor would find their salvation through prayer.²¹ Instead, it was his experience as a casual worker in the docks that radicalised him, providing what he later described as a "first thorough lesson in the world-view of the system of capitalist exploitation and its methods".²² He joined the Hamburg SPD, aged 17, on 15 May 1903 and the coachman's section of the transport workers' union on 1 February 1904. According to police surveillance reports, only 215 of Hamburg's coachmen were SPD members as opposed to 3,000 who belonged to the transport workers' unions.²³ Yet few youths were organised in the union, which led to Thälmann's involvement in their recruitment.²⁴ His politicisation expressed itself in hyper-activism, devoting almost all of his evenings and free-time to party and union work. Before the outbreak of war in August 1914, Thälmann had risen in both party and union into positions local influence. After holding a variety of honorary offices, in 1914 he was elected chairman of his local party branch. In the German Transport Workers Union (DTV) he was elected deputy leader of the coachmen's local section in 1909 and, by 1914, headed the section in Hamburg; from 1912 he sat on the city-wide Trades Council (*Gewerkschaftskartell*) and represented Hamburg at *Reich* congresses.²⁵

Thälmann's rise in the workers' movement had taken place during the upswing of SPD and Free Trade Unions on the springtide of rapid urbanisation, industrial expansion and modernisation of the economy which accelerated from the end of the nineteenth century and increasingly integrated Hamburg within the *Kaiserreich*.²⁶ At this time the Hamburg

19 Thälmann's "seaman's gait" was the result of fallen arches, see Ronald Sassning: Rückblick auf Ernst Thälmann: Der Umgang mit den KPD-Führer im Widerstreit der Meinung, p. 23.

20 Gekürzter Lebenslauf, Bl. 7.

21 Ibid., Bl. 2.

22 Ibid, Bl. 5.

23 See the reports in, Staatsarchiv Hamburg [henceforth: StaH], 331-3/V 236 III.

24 Deutscher Transportarbeiter-Verband, Protokoll des 8 Verbandstages, Abgehalten von 9 bis 14 Juni 1912 in Breslau, Berlin 1912, S. 85-86; Gekürzter Lebenslauf, Bl. 19-21.

25 See the reports in StaH, 331-1/S 14 558; see also the Hamburg Echo 203, 1 September 1909; Gekürzter Lebenslauf, Bl. 10.

26 In 1904 the Hamburg SPD had 9,226 members; by 1913 the figure had reached 49,422. By 1903, in elections to the *Reichstag* the party polled just over 60 per cent over the vote. Between

SPD became a bastion of the national party, second in stature only to Berlin, and stood at the centre of a solidarity community anchoring it socially in a proliferation of subsidiary organisations, from youth organisations to singing and sports clubs.²⁷ According to Michael Rudloff's survey of continuities between the pre-war SPD and KPD, it was emersion in the party and the wider labour movement which could produce feelings of quasi-religious identity and a sense of mission.²⁸ In Thälmann's memory – however distorted – choosing socialism had been internalised as a moment of epiphany. He recalled, for example, a speaker at an event in Hamburg's central trade union premises beseeching his youthful audience of school leavers never to forget socialism's martyrs in the struggles that lay ahead of them, "to hold loyally and firmly to the blood-red banner" and never to forget that victory would be theirs. The singing of party songs, the standing ovations and the crowd itself resonated in Thälmann's mind as he left the meeting clutching party literature in his hand, somehow aware of the "new, vehement life" to come.²⁹

Thälmann's political socialisation was also shaped by the traditions of Hamburg's "red citadel" – the giant harbour and docklands, which employed some 30,000 workers by the turn of the twentieth century as rapid industrialisation fuelled exports and ship-building. The dockworkers' strike, from November 1896 to February 1897 was on a scale that made a national impact, not least as it ended in victory for a strategy of trade union militancy.³⁰ Thälmann subsequently stressed how the memory of the strike influenced

1900 and 1913, the membership of the Free Trade Unions had risen from 37,364 to 143,338. The city had also doubled in size between 1890 and 1910, reaching one million inhabitants and growing at an estimated 20,000 citizens per year, see Richard A. Comfort: *Revolutionary Hamburg: Labor Politics in the Early Weimar Republic*, Stanford 1966, pp. 25–26.

27 Stefan Berger: *The British Labour Party and German Social Democracy*, Oxford 1994, pp. 146, 150, 171.

28 Michael Rudloff: *Politische Säuberungen*, in: *Leipziger Hefte* 1 (1995), p. 6.

29 For details of how Thälmann's memory of the meeting trade union meeting rooms and songs were wrong, see Regina Scheer: *Ich bin kein weltflüchtiger Zigeuner: Legende und Wirklichkeit einer Jugend: Über die frühen Prägungen Ernst Thälmanns* p. 46; see also *Gekürzter Lebenslauf*, Bl. 5–7. In fact the *Gewerkschaftshaus* was not opened until 1906. For its role in the trade-union movement's ambitions and national politics, Elizabeth Domansky: *Der Zukunftsstaat am Besenbinderhof*, in: Arno Herzig/Dieter Langewiesche/Arnold Sywottek (eds.): *Arbeiter in Hamburg*, Hamburg 1983, pp. 373–384. On conversion narratives as common feature in communist autobiographies, see Norman LaPorte/Kevin Morgan: *Kings Among Their Subjects: Ernst Thälmann, Harry Pollitt and the Leadership Cult as Stalinization*, in: Norman LaPorte/Kevin Morgan/Matthew Worley (eds.): *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern: Perspectives on Stalinization 1917–1953*, Basingstoke 2008, p. 130.

30 The best study remains, Michael Grüttner: *Arbeitswelt an der Wasserkante: Sozialgeschichte der Hamburger Hafearbeiter 1886–1914*, Göttingen 1984; see also Eckart Klessmann: *Geschichte der Stadt Hamburg*, Hamburg 1981, pp. 480–86.

his politics.³¹ Political conflict in Hamburg also had a formative influence. The electoral rise of the Hamburg SPD, which was symbolised by August Bebel entering the *Reichstag* in 1890, was mirrored at local level. As an increasing number of wage earners were given citizen's rights, the SPD entered the *Bürgerschaft* (Hamburg Parliament), gaining 13 seats in 1904 and, thus, representation on its commissions. The Senate's revision of the franchise to limit the perceived threat from organised labour – known to workers' as the "suffrage robbery" – provoked the events of Red Wednesday when thousands of workers, notably those working in the docks, took to the streets in protest.³² Even if the regional party organisation of the SPD increasingly stood on the national party's right wing, the docklands represented another, altogether more militant milieu.³³

While there is no evidence that Thälmann had any organised, factional contact with the national leaders of the SPD's left, such as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht – or, indeed, the Hamburg Left around Heinrich Laufenberg and Fritz Wolffheim – his politics were those of the revolutionary fringe. And, from his earliest years as a local leader, Thälmann saw his role as representing this radicalism in the labour movement.³⁴ Thälmann's politics are made clear by positions he adopted in the major policy issues of the time. In the ongoing debate about the annual May Day celebrations, Thälmann vocally supported setting up a strike fund in order to maximise the numbers of workers coming onto the streets on the actual day in a show of strength, rather than the less confrontation approach of postponing events until the following Sunday.³⁵ He also supported the use of the general strike as an instrument of union strategy. As a speaker attending membership meetings year on year he opposed the "reformism" of the union's moderate pay commission in its negotiations with employers, demanding instead that strikes were led until total victory.³⁶ In turn, as a representative from the Hamburg docks, he felt empowered to lambast the "reformist" leadership for becoming no more than a "welfare

31 Gekürzter Lebenslauf, Bl. 11.

32 Richard Evans: "Red Wednesday" in Hamburg: Social Democrats, Police and *Lumpenproletariat* in the suffrage disturbances of 17 January 1906, in: Richard Evans: Rethinking German History: Nineteenth-Century Germany and the Origins of the Third Reich, London 1987, p. 253.

33 For the Hamburg SPD's programme of 1903, which remained in force until the outbreak of war, see Richard A. Comfort: Revolutionary Hamburg: Labor Politics in the Early Weimar Republic, pp. 26. The focus on electoral reform is explained in terms of integrating and extending an already significant middle-class vote.

34 Hermann Weber: Das Schwankende Thälmann-Bild, p. 8.

35 Sozialdemokratische Partei in Hamburg: Jahres-Bericht der Landesorganisation und der drei Sozialdemokratischen Vereine. Geschäftsjahr 1912/12, Hamburg 1912, pp. 12, 31.

36 For details, see the reports in StaH, PP V236–3, Vol. 2. The reports on Thälmann by the Senate's Political Police cover the period 1906 to 1914. See also, Hamburg Echo 76, 2 April 1910 and issue 136, 14 June 1910.

organisation". At the *Reich* Congress in Cologne in 1914, he stressed that, "If we [the DTV] want to remain an organisation of struggle, then we must not pay out too high a sum on benefit payment".³⁷ His union membership book records the frequency of his own participation in strikes, which he insisted were the only way to win lasting concessions.³⁸ Championing grass-root activism and the membership meeting as the only real barometer of the political climate was clearly rooted in the workers' movement's directional struggle between "reformism", which increasingly dominated the party and trade-union bureaucracy, and a more revolutionary radicalism which Thälmann believed he expressed.³⁹ It is this that explains his resolute hostility to the imposition of centrally-trained, salaried officials.

The reality of the pre-war Hamburg workers' movement many have been more complex than Thälmann was ready to concede in his *post facto* reduction of these events to a struggle against the bureaucratic domination of party and union by "bigwigs" (*Bonzen*) who had themselves become bourgeois;⁴⁰ but there can be no doubt that he had become a well-known local political activist representing a stronghold of the labour movement's intractable left wing.

War and Revolution

In an unpublished critique of the *Hamburg Echo's* stance on 4 August 1914, Thälmann lamented the collapse of internationalism in what he dismissed as an "imperialist war" of acquisition.⁴¹ It was these views that he took into party and union meetings in the thwarted hope of galvanising opposition to the labour movement's leadership.⁴² Despite this, however, Thälmann did not resist his own enlistment. On 15 January 1915, he reported to the Neubreisach garrison in Alsace with the reserve battalion of the Twenti-

37 Deutscher Transportarbeiter-Verband: Protokoll des 9 Verbandstages. Abgehalten von 7. bis 13. Juni 1914 in Köln, Berlin 1914, p. 103.

38 Thälmann's union membership book and strike-pay stamps recording his periods on strike are in, SAPMO-BARCH, NL 4001/4.

39 On Thälmann's support for membership meetings deciding policy, see Armin Fuhrer: Ernst Thälmann. Soldat des Proletariats, pp. 32–33.

40 Gekürzter Lebenslauf, Bl. 19–21.

41 Russian State Archives of Socio-Political History, Moscow [henceforth: RGASPI], F. 526, Op. 1, D. 17, Hamburger Echo zu Nov. 1914, Altona, 18 September 1914, Bl. 1–30.

42 See, for example, Hamburg Echo, 12 August 1913 and 30 September 1913. Interviews with Thälmann's friends and family about these events give a similar account, see Regina Scheer: Ich bin kein weltflüchtiger Zigeuner: Legende und Wirklichkeit einer Jugend: Über die frühen Prägungen Ernst Thälmanns, p. 51; Ronald Sassning: Rückblick auf Ernst Thälmann: Der Umgang mit den KPD-Führer im Widerstreit der Meinung, pp. 24, 29–31.

eth Lauenburg Infantry Regiment. After three months training Thälmann was sent into action, fighting in all of the major battles on the Western Front.⁴³

Thälmann's frequent, if short, entries in his trade union-issue diaries between 1916 and 1918 offer an insight into his experience of "total war".⁴⁴ His main military role as an artilleryman was the transportation of munitions and, from February 1917, looking after the regiment's horses, which included some duties as a dispatch rider. On 19 September 1916, an injury suffered at the Somme hospitalised him until 31 October. Other near misses and unspecified illness – notably a high fever in the autumn of 1917 – also punctuate the diary entries; as do poison-gas attacks and the deaths of his comrades-in-arms in combat. It was perhaps knowledge of his mortality which motivated the visits to church, which at times became regular. These accounts of the barbarism of the trenches sit uneasily on the pages of his diaries with the relative quiet between battles, in which he spent his free time playing cards, drinking (at times to excess), reading and writing to family and friends.⁴⁵

His regular visits home also bring out a relatively unknown side of Thälmann. The day before his call-up, he had married Rosa Koch, whom he had met in 1910 at the Frauenlob laundry in the docks.⁴⁶ The couple were well integrated into both sides of the family, with Thälmann's diary entries showing a particularly close relationship with his patriotic father and a liking for cinema and theatre.⁴⁷

What is more difficult to establish is when Thälmann's political opposition to the war recommenced. His appearance before a Courts Martial on 24 November 1916 was not, as the last official SED biography claimed, for organised anti-war activities at the front.⁴⁸ According to Thälmann's own account, he was sentenced to 14 days solitary confinement for "slander, insubordination, [and] two counts of disrespect".⁴⁹ Until January 1918, none of the names that appear in Thälmann's diaries are identifiably linked with the anti-war Left. At this point he met with Jakob Rieper in Hamburg's Trade Union headquarter during a period of leave.⁵⁰ On 19 July he met Rieper again, this time with

43 Thälmann's *Militärpaß* is in SAPMO-BArch, NL 4003/2; see also: *Gekürzter Lebenslauf*, Bl. 15.

44 Thälmann's *DTV Notizkalender* with regular short entries is in: *ibid.*, NL 4003/2.

45 *Ibid.*

46 Rosa Koch, the daughter of a cobbler, had moved to Hamburg from the countryside looking for work. After a spell as a domestic servant, she found a job ironing clothes at the Frauenlob laundry, see Hermann Weber/Andreas Herbst: *Deutsche Kommunisten: Biographisches Handbuch 1918 bis 1945*, Berlin 2004, p. 785.

47 SAPMO-BArch, NL 4003/2.

48 Günter Hortschansky et al.: *Ernst Thälmann: Eine Biographie*, pp. 43–57.

49 SAPMO-BArch, NL 4003/2, *Notizkalender* 1916, entry 24 November 1916. Thälmann's letters from prison to his wife note that the "insubordination" included talking walks at the front and going into local towns without authorisation, see *ibid.*, NL 4003/22, Bl. 76.

50 NL 4003/2, entry 20 January 1918.

another local USPD leader Alfred Henke, who had wider contacts with the Bremen Left Radicals.⁵¹ Even then, Thälmann returned to the front on 23 July, experiencing the Allies' decisive advance on the Western Front. He recorded being assigned to a "harassment squad" (*Störungstrupp*) operating during "murderous artillery fire from the enemy", which caused "untold terror" and loss of life on a scale he had never seen before.⁵² On 19 August, as the German army retreated, Thälmann received the Iron Cross (second class), which was issued *en masse* to the troops.⁵³ It was not until the armistice was announced that Thälmann abandoned the front with four of his comrades-in-arms and returned to Hamburg.⁵⁴

In the militaristic political culture of the mid 1920s, the ambiguity of Thälmann's war experience gave way to bravado, including private boasting about receiving the Iron Cross, the Hanseatic Cross and the stripe for wounded soldiers. He presented himself as someone who spent little time in the garrison as he was not "a malingerer, a scaredy cat [or] a coward".⁵⁵

Thälmann arrived in Hamburg from the front on 11 November 1918; the German Revolution had already reached the city six days earlier. According to his diary, he went straight home to his wife, who had recently moved into a two-room flat in the city's Eppendorf district. Over the next days and weeks he was fully reintegrated into family life.⁵⁶ A year later, his only child, Irma, was born.⁵⁷ According to Rosa Thälmann's recollection of these years, her husband suggested – and she took up – political activism as a counterbalance to feelings of marital isolation.⁵⁸ Initially, Thälmann was able to work with his father to earn a living, before being taken on as a public relief worker in the spring of 1919. However, it was Thälmann's political connections that got him a "good

51 NL 4003/2, entry 19 July 1918; for Henke's contact with the Bremen Left Radicals, see Hermann Weber/Andreas Herbst: *Deutsche Kommunisten: Biographisches Handbuch 1918 bis 1945*, p. 342.

52 NL 4003/2 entries for 30 and 31 July 1918.

53 For the reconstruction of these events by the authorities under the Third Reich, see also RGASPI, F. 526, O. 1, D. 58, Streng Vertraulich: *Der Oberreichsanwalt, Zweigstelle Berlin*, 17 December 1934, Bl. 2.

54 NL 4003/2 entry for 7 November 1918.

55 *Gekürzter Lebenslauf*, Bl. 27–28. For a positive view of Thälmann's bravado, see Ronald Sassning: *Rückblick auf Ernst Thälmann: Der Umgang mit den KPD-Führer im Widerstreit der Meinung*, pp. 24, 29–31, 33.

56 NL 4003/2 see the entries covered in Bl. 90–95.

57 For a discussion of Thälmann's family life, see Armin Fuhrer: *Ernst Thälmann. Soldat des Proletariats*, pp. 77f.

58 *Nachlaß Rosa Thälmann*, SGY 30, EA 0927, cited in: Armin Fuhrer: *Ernst Thälmann. Soldat des Proletariats*, pp. 61–62.

position” at the Labour Office, which had been set up during the November Revolution to mediate between labour and employers.⁵⁹

However, as always, Thälmann’s central preoccupation was politics: he joined the USPD and, from his first full day back in Hamburg, threw himself into a proliferation of meetings, including speaking at public assemblies, organising and participating in demonstrations, addressing soldiers’ mass meeting, including speaking at the barracks of his former regiment, and a variety of trade-union work.⁶⁰ He was elected honorary chairman of the Hamburg USPD on 11 May 1919, and subsequently re-elected until taking the equivalent position in the Hamburg KPD.⁶¹ Ultimately, Thälmann was now continuing the political activism which had been interrupted by the war.

During the initial wave of revolution in Hamburg, the *Mehrheits-SPD* (MSPD) and Free Trade Unions had lost control of a wide section of labour protest. Although the Hamburg SPD lost fewer members to the USPD than any other party district during the war years,⁶² street and factory-based radicalism in these weeks and months was now driven by workers outside the organisational fold of the old labour movement. The November Revolution had begun in the shipyards and the council movement had been primarily carried in the city’s large-scale industrial plants.⁶³ This was the social basis of the coalition of Left Radicals and the USPD which dominated the Presidium of the city’s Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council until early 1919. Notably, despite the ultra-radical, council communist reputation of Dr Heinrich Laufenberg, the chairman of the Presidium, compromises with the old order in the pre-war Senate were made from the beginning in order to keep the city running.⁶⁴ It was probably this that subsequently (and inac-

59 For his appointment and then dismissal in March 1921 for participation in the KPD’s so-called March Action, see the files in StAH, Arbeitsverwaltung, 356–8, Personalakten 76 (Ernst Thälmann), 1919–1921. On the role of the Labour Office, see Richard A. Comfort: *Revolutionary Hamburg: Labor Politics in the Early Weimar Republic*, p. 51. For Thälmann’s political connections, see Eberhard Czichon/Heinz Marohn (with Ralph Dobrawa): *Thälmann: Ein Report*, p. 68, note 176.

60 NL 4003/2 entry for December, Bl. 90–95.

61 Eberhard Czichon/Heinz Marohn (with Ralph Dobrawa): *Thälmann: Ein Report*, pp. 62, 74.

62 Richard Bünemann: *Hamburg in der deutschen Revolution*, PhD dissertation, Hamburg 1951q, p. 20. For a detailed discussion of the founding and wartime development of the USPD, see Volker Ullrich: *Die USPD in Hamburg und im Bezirke Wasserkannte 1917/18*, in: *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Hamburgische Geschichte* 79 (1993), pp. 133–62.

63 Richard A. Comfort: *Revolutionary Hamburg: Labor Politics in the Early Weimar Republic*, pp. 34–46.

64 Eberhard Kolb: *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik 1918–1919*, Düsseldorf 1962, pp. 149–150; Richard A. Comfort: *Revolutionary Hamburg: Labor Politics in the Early Weimar Republic*, p. 46–51.

curately) led Thälmann to distance himself from the Council's activities, dismissing the prospects of success of what he called a "watered-down" organisation.⁶⁵

The impact of war and revolution on the SPD had, however, spawned a spectrum of workers' radicalisms from syndicalism to social democracy, which during 1918/19 remained in flux and, especially among the radicals, without fixed party-political loyalties. On the left wing of the Hamburg USPD Laufenberg was not treated as a political rival, but rather as a political ally – the accepted symbol of opposition to the war and the old order which had now been challenged.⁶⁶ At a mass meeting on 11 January 1919, Thälmann had praised Laufenberg's role in upholding workers' unity, by which he meant support for the revolutionary left against the resurgent strength of the MSPD.⁶⁷ At the same meeting, another USPD speaker stressed that, "[t]he USPD wants no one to speak ill of comrade Laufenberg, but rather to take up the common struggle with him against the bourgeois reactionaries and their lackeys".⁶⁸ At the end of 1918, fellow Hamburg leftist Hermann Reich, who has attended the national Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Councils in Berlin as a member of the United Revolutionaries grouping, not only called for the USPD to leave the Council of People's Representatives in Berlin, but also to "go over to the Spartacist people" around Rosa Luxemburg.⁶⁹ Yet, amid this kaleidoscope of leftism, the patterns of Thälmann's political orientation was already evident. Although an ultra-radical, he remained committed to revolutionising workers from within existing mass-based labour organisations and participating in election campaigns as a tactic to win wider support on the streets and in the factories and shipyards. This contrasted with the quasi-syndicalist policies of the council communists around Laufenberg whose rejection all forms of parliamentarianism and traditional trade unionism dominated the KPD in Wasserkante until the split that led to the foundation of the Communist Workers' Party (KAPD) in April 1920.⁷⁰

In mid-December 1918, Thälmann was elected onto the Hamburg USPD's central election committee, and secured the last place on the party list in the elections to the National Assembly on 19 January 1919.⁷¹ By the June 1920 *Reichstag* elections, he stood

65 Gekürzter Lebenslauf, Bl. 3.

66 On the Laufenberg's statement of outright opposition to the First World War, see Eugen Prager: *Geschichte der USPD*, Berlin 1921, p. 28.

67 *Aus der Wahlbewegung*, in: *Hamburger Volkszeitung* [henceforth: HVZ] 12, 15 January 1919 (Beilage), p. 8.

68 *Ibid.*

69 *Zur Wahltaktik in Hamburg*, in: HVZ 41, 24 December 1918, p. 5. For a biographical sketch of Hermann Reich, see Hermann Weber/Andreas Herbst: *Deutsche Kommunisten: Biographisches Handbuch 1918 bis 1945*, pp. 594–595.

70 For a biographical sketch of Laufenberg, see *ibid.*, pp. 443–44.

71 *Zur Wahltaktik in Hamburg*, in: HVZ 39, 21 December 1918, S. 3; *Hamburg und Umgebung*, in: HVZ 12, 15 January 1919, p. 4.

second only to Hermann Reich who gained the USPD's only mandate.⁷² In municipal politics, he entered the *Bürgerschaft* in March 1919 and, especially in the period until 1924, presented himself as the voice of the docklands across a range of issues, from taxation and industrial relations, to transport, food provision, the unsatisfactory housing situation and rents.⁷³ During the national and local election campaigns of 1919 and 1920, Thälmann's stance was typical of the view on the party's left that the National Assembly "would be just as reactionary as the old Reichstag" and that only workers' councils could organise the revolution and force the "unity of the working class" against the wishes of the leaders of the MSPD.⁷⁴ Although the USPD remained divided on the issue of elections in Hamburg, Thälmann's position was generally endorsed by the party's revolutionary wing.⁷⁵ At an election rally on 2 May 1920 Thälmann made his position clear, informing his audience that:

We are going into parliament for the same reasons as into the trade unions. We intend to bring revolutionary spirit to the masses [...] We must say to the masses, the participation of our revolutionary fighters in the Reichstag can only succeed by remaining in touch with street actions.⁷⁶

From the winter of 1918 Thälmann also resumed his trade union roles. He was active at branch-level in the transport workers' union and in the city's Trades Council.⁷⁷ In 1919, Thälmann was elected by the transport workers' section in the docks to the *Reich* congress of the DTV in Stuttgart, where he represented the view of Hamburg's radi-

72 Die Koalition bedroht, in: HVZ 130, 7 June 1920, p. 1.

73 Curt Geyer, who arrived in Hamburg in early 1920 from Leipzig to work as a party editor, recalls priming Thälmann on the complexities of Hamburg's system of indirect taxation, see Curt Geyer: *Die revolutionäre Illusion: Zur Geschichte des linken Flügels der USPD*, Stuttgart 1976, p. 195.

74 See, for example, the campaign report in: *Zur Wahltaktik in Hamburg*, in: HVZ 41, 24 December 1918, p. 5.

75 The issue was frequently debated in the Hamburg press, see, for example, Wilhelm Herzog: *Sollen Revolutionäre ins Parlament gehen?*, in: HVZ 108, 10 May 1920, p. 3.

76 David Morgan: *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution: A History of the Independent Social Democratic Party, 1917–1922*, London 1975, p. 348; see also the reports by the Hamburg political police for 1920 in *Staatsarchiv Bremen* [henceforth: StaB], 4, 65–1585, which details similar speeches by Thälmann and the Hamburg USPD's left wing. Eugen Prager, a senior USPD journalist, also recalls the USPD radicals' use of parliament to serve "as a weapon in the struggle of the working class", see Eugen Prager: *Geschichte der USPD*, Berlin 1921, pp. 194–195.

77 NL 4003/2 entries during December, Bl. 90–95.

cal transport workers.⁷⁸ Thälmann's speech called for the decentralisation of the union's strike policy and opposed the appointment of salaried local officials by the head office in Berlin, which was a continuation of his pre-war politics. He also tried, unsuccessfully, to call a vote in support of workers' councils. In the context of the vast upsurge in union membership, which in large part reflected industrial workers entering the Free Trade Unions, Thälmann's aim was to infuse the DTV with the "spirit of class struggle". When he stated that, "In Hamburg too the Independents gain ground, but we do not want this [party-political] split to be carried into the trade unions" his meaning was clear – the unions were to be taken out of the hands of the moderates.⁷⁹ At the DTV national congress in 1922, now as a communist delegate from the docks, his focus was ending the union's support for the Central Working Agreement with the employers which, he claimed, was a continuation of the "civil peace" during the war.⁸⁰

Not only was Hamburg the stronghold of the USPD in the north German district of Wasserkante with some 30,000 members by the turn of 1920; it was also one of the local party organisations most resolutely oriented towards Moscow.⁸¹ In the election of delegates to the party congress, which convened in Leipzig in November 1919, those supporting joining the Comintern already took 75 per cent of the vote.⁸² Hamburg was one of the most extreme expressions of general political frustrations in the workers' movement at the limits of socialist-type reform; and this was especially notable in industrial areas – like Hamburg – in which the MSPD remained dominant politically. It was in these areas that a pro-Moscow stance was understood by radicals not only as support for a successful proletarian revolution, but also as a spur to "revolutionary action" in Germany.⁸³ As Curt Geyer recalled, it was in this milieu that Thälmann rose to dominate the local party and set its political direction,⁸⁴ eclipsing the original, wartime leaders – such as Ferdinand Kalweit, Paul Bergmann and the oppositional union activist, Paul Dittmann – who

78 For Thälmann's role at local meetings, see Eberhard Czichon/Heinz Marohn (with Ralph Dobrawa): *Thälmann: Ein Report*, pp. 69–71, citing newspaper coverage.

79 *Deutscher Transportarbeiter-Verband: Protokoll des 10 Verbandstages, Abgehalten zu Stuttgart vom 22. bis 27. Juni 1919*, Berlin 1919, p. 83.

80 *Deutscher Transportarbeiter-Verband: Protokoll des 11 Verbandstages, Abgehalten zu Berlin vom 3. bis 8. September 1922*, Berlin 1922, p. 114–115.

81 For an analysis of membership and electoral statistics, see Robert Wheeler: *USPD und Internationale: Sozialistischer Internationalismus in der Zeit der Revolution*, Frankfurt 1975, pp. 259.

82 *ibid.*, p. 155.

83 *ibid.*, pp. 158, 160–161.

84 Curt Geyer: *Die revolutionäre Illusion. Zur Geschichte des linken Flügels der USPD*, Stuttgart 1976, p. 195.

opposed membership of the Comintern.⁸⁵ Although Party Secretary Hermann Reich topped the list of delegates elected to the USPD's Leipzig Congress at the end of 1919 and was elected in June 1920 as Hamburg's sole *Reichstag* deputy, it was Thälmann who the left tried, unsuccessfully, to have elected to the party's national leadership.⁸⁶ Police reports from the summer of 1920 also detail how, despite the interventions of the central leadership in Berlin, Thälmann headed the Action Committee which mobilised party activists.⁸⁷

A number of factors combined by the autumn of 1919 to push the Hamburg USPD ever more into the party's radical, pro-Comintern wing, from the early loss of any real power in the workers' council to the harshness of social and economic conditions. But the key radicalising experience was the military suppression of workers' radicalism. In 1919, the MSPD *Reichswehr* Minister, Gustav Noske, opted to suppress localised experiments in council communism by deploying Free Corps contingents alongside the old imperial army as the strong arm of central government.⁸⁸ At the beginning of February, Noske deployed the Gerstenberg Free Corps against the radical Workers' and Soldiers Councils in Bremen, causing waves of anxiety in neighbouring Hamburg that it would suffer the same fate. Although this was initially avoided, riots of the burgeoning unemployed were followed by food riots which sparked further violent disorder. The streets were full of protestors expressing their dissatisfaction with the limits of socialist-type reforms. To restore order, the Senate used the newly created *Einwohnerwehr*, which had at its core the Bahrenfelder Free Corps, against the street protestors and, when this failed, asked for assistance from the Gerstenberg Division and the *Reichswehr*. After initial setbacks, Hamburg was brought under military rule, which lasted throughout the second half of 1919.

In the *Bürgerschaft* and at political meetings, Thälmann voiced support for the unemployed and the rioters, and demanded the withdrawal of government troops, which were harassing radicals throughout the city.⁸⁹ The situation led to acrimonious debates in

85 On the role of the founders of the USPD in Hamburg, see Volker Ullrich: *Die USPD in Hamburg und im Bezirke Wasserkannte 1917/18*, pp. 150, 153–154.

86 David Morgan: *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution: A History of the Independent Social Democratic Party*, p. 304

87 Polizei-Direktion, Parteipolitisches, 11 July 1920, in: StaB, 4, 65–1585; *ibid.*: Bericht, 26 July 1920.

88 For the events in Hamburg, the classic account in English remains, Richard A. Comfort: *Revolutionary Hamburg: Labor Politics in the Early Weimar Republic* pp. 53–54, 69–79. See also, David Morgan: *The Socialist Left and the German Revolution: A History of the Independent Social Democratic Party*, pp. 221–22; Eberhard Kolb: *Die Arbeiterräte in der deutschen Innenpolitik 1918–1919*, pp. 345–346.

89 See, for example, Bericht 166 [o.D, summer 1919], in: StaB, 4, 65–1582; *Stenographische Berichte über die Sitzungen der Bürgerschaft zu Hamburg* [henceforth: *Bürgerschaft*]: 25. Sitzung, 9 July 1919, p. 641.

which MSPD deputies made personal attacks on Thälmann for inciting the type of disorder that justified military rule and the imposition of a state of emergency.⁹⁰ Despite these differences, however, the Hamburg USPD – unlike the initial response of the Hamburg KPD – took part in the general strike against the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch in which Bahrenfelder Free Corps now tried to seize and exercise political power locally.⁹¹ Hermann Reich was authorised by the USPD's Hamburg leadership to enter discussions in order to pave the way for participation in an Executive Committee, which included two members each from the USPD, MSPD and the Democratic Party. The USPD leaders joining the cross-party committee, Ferdinand Kalweit and Paul Bergmann, who stood on the USPD's right wing and supported not only the general strike but its prompt ending and the return of the firearms supplied to workers' during the coup. The USPD's left wing, however, opted for co-operation with the KPD, with the unrealised aim of radicalising the strike movement.⁹² Pulled in opposite directions, the USPD fractured into rival camps. When Kalweit forwarded a motion of no confidence in the actions of Reich and Thälmann in the Bürgerschaft, demanding that both of them resign their mandates, they were supported by 11 of the party's 13 municipal councillors. However, Reich and Thälmann were able to win the support of the majority of party members at a series of meetings culminating in a conference of Hamburg's local party associations on 18 April. Against the national leadership's wishes, the conference votes by 69 votes to six to recall the 11 councillors backing Kalweit's motion, replacing them with representatives from the party's left.⁹³ The USPD left further consolidated its position by re-electing the editorial staff at the *Hamburger Volkszeitung*.⁹⁴

These highly acrimonious divisions were also evident at the membership meetings which discussed the Bolsheviks' "21 Conditions" of entry into the Comintern before the

90 Bürgerschaft, 26. Sitzung, 28 May 1920, p. 708.

91 For events in Hamburg, see Richard A. Comfort: *Revolutionary Hamburg: Labor Politics in the Early Weimar Republic*, pp. 80, 106–108.

92 Polizei-Direktion. Bericht, 13 April 1920, in: StaB, 4, 65–1585; Die Spaltung der Unabhängigen Hamburgs, in: Berliner Tagesblatt, 25 March 1920, in: StaB, 4, 65–1885; Polizei-Direktion Bericht, 17 March 1920, in: StaB 4, 65–1585; Bericht aus Hamburg vom 20. März 1920, in: *ibid*; Bericht vom 6. April 1920, in *ibid*: *Hamburger Parteiversammlung*; *Hamburger Volkszeitung* [henceforth: HVZ] Nr. 67, 19 March 1920 (appendix), p. 2.

93 The two party wings put their rival sides of events to Halle Congress, see USPD: Protokoll über die Verhandlungen des außerordentlichen Parteitagés in Halle vom 12. bis 17. Oktober 1920, Berlin, 50–51 (Thälmann), 58 (Kalweit); see also *Hamburger Parteiversammlung*, in: HVZ 67, 19 March 1920 (Beilage), p. 2; USP-Krise in Hamburg, in: *Vorwärts*, 8 July 1920, in: StaB, 4, 65–1585. For further details of these events, see Eberhard Czichon/Heinz Marohn (with Ralph Dobrawa): *Thälmann: Ein Report*, pp. 78–79.

94 Polizei-Direktion. Bericht, 13 April 1920, in: StaB 4, 65–1585; Die Spaltung der Unabhängigen Hamburgs, in: Berliner Tagesblatt, 25 March 1920, in: StaB, 4, 65–1885.

Halle Congress convened in September to make a decision. At these meetings opponents of Comintern membership were prevented from speaking and it became clear that the conditions – which rarely enthused activists – were being used as a means of ousting so-called opportunists from the leadership.⁹⁵ At the Congress, Thälmann used his attack on the role of Kalweit and Bergmann during the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch as part of his outspoken hostility to any parliamentary co-operation with the MSPD and for the purge of those who advocated this tactic. Thälmann already positioned himself on intransigent left of the future United Communist Party of Germany (VKPD), stating that: co-operation with the MSPD in Hamburg had only “held back the masses from struggle” and insisting “a socialist government can first come about as a result of successful revolutionary actions [...] A socialist government on the basis of parliament and coalition would immediately be compromised” – the party should only support revolutionary action and the dictatorship of the proletariat.⁹⁶

Thälmann’s hostility to public debate on policy issues was equally significant. At the Congress he insisted that recent coverage of political differences in the party press could only bring about “a certain mistrust” towards the party: “If in a revolutionary party revolution is the aim, it has to prepare the action of the masses; if complete clarity does not dominate in the individual party authorities then it is already paralysed in its activities”. Pointing to those who he identified as the weak link in the revolutionary chain, he announced how he looked forward to the party being cleansed of those refusing to accept Moscow’s conditions of membership of the communist movement.⁹⁷

Following the Halle Congress Thälmann was elected onto the advisory committee (*Beirat*) of the USPD (*Linke*)⁹⁸ and attended the *Reich* conference in Berlin on 1–2 September 1920, which brought together the party’s national leadership, representatives from the districts, newspaper editors and parliamentarians.⁹⁹ In Hamburg, he worked together with his KPD counterpart, and later party rival, Hugo Urbahns, in an Action Committee whose work culminated in a district congress on 13–14 November 1920 bringing together the KPD districts of North and North-West and the USPD districts of Wasserkante, Bremen and Schleswig-Holstein.¹⁰⁰ At the Unification Congress, which was held in Berlin in early December, Thälmann was voted onto the party’s Central Committee as one

95 Robert Wheeler: USPD und Internationale: Sozialistischer Internationalismus in der Zeit der Revolution, pp. 233–235.

96 Halle Congress, pp. 51–51.

97 Halle Congress, p. 51.

98 Halle Congress, p. 265.

99 Hartfried Krause: USPD: Zur Geschichte der Unabhängigen Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands, Frankfurt 1975, pp. 196–197.

100 SAPMO-BArch: RY 1 I/3/16/22, Bezirk Hamburg an die Zentrale der KPD, 6 November 1920.

of three delegates representing Wasserkante. The dominant figure in the new party in Hamburg was Hugo Urbahns, who took a seat on the KPD's narrower central leadership, the *Zentrale*, and held the post of district political secretary in Wasserkante.¹⁰¹ In early 1921, Thälmann was elected chairman of the Hamburg party organisation, which represented his powerbase, and was a member of the district leadership (*Bezirksleitung*). With some 40,000 members – 13,000 of them in Hamburg alone – Wasserkante was the VKPD's fourth largest district organisations, behind Halle-Merseburg, Lower Rhine and Berlin-Brandenburg.¹⁰² Thälmann was now part of a revolutionary party with significant regional influence.

The German Communist Party

Although the VKPD now had a mass membership, it had come at a time when the spontaneous mass-movement in the labour movement had abated. The disparity between the revolutionary enthusiasm of a majority of leaders and the absence of widespread workers' radicalism, however, brought with it an existential dilemma: should the party primarily orient itself towards the Bolshevik model of vanguard actions to spark the revolution; or should it adopt a form of "communist *realpolitik*" to consolidate its strength in a manner accounting for the "ebbing of the revolutionary tide" in Germany?¹⁰³ Thälmann, as a member of the *Zentralausschuß*, was committed to the former and insisted that he represented the views of his Hamburg district.

In January 1921, the newly elected chairman of the VKPD, Paul Levi, began a "united-front" policy, which set out to extend communist influence in the wider workers' movement by bringing about mobilisations for common objectives.¹⁰⁴ Consistently with this, Levi had opposed the Comintern's efforts to impose a split in the Italian Socialist Party as this risked narrowing the basis of the communist movement. Rather than being taken as advice given in good faith, Rakosi, the EKKI's (Executive Committee of the Communist International) emissary to the Italian Congress at Livorno, presented Levi's views as a challenge to Moscow's authority.¹⁰⁵ After the *Zentrale* voted for a compromise,

101 Ibid: RY 1 I/8–9, Vereinigungsparteitag der KPD, 4–7 December 1920, sheet 217.

102 See the Polizei-Direktion reports in StaB, 4, 65–1586. On the composition of the party leadership in Wasserkante and Hamburg, see Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten: *Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921*, Frankfurt 1986, pp. 192, note 97.

103 For a valuable summary of these developments, see Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten: *Einleitung*, in: Ossip Flechtheim: *Die KPD in der Weimarer Republik*, Hamburg 1986, pp. 29.

104 Offener Brief, in: *Rote Fahne* 11, 8 January 1921, p. 1.

105 Jean-Francois Fayet: Paul Levi and the Turning Point of 1921: Bolshevik Emissaries and International Discipline in the Time of Lenin, in: LaPorte/Morgan/Worley (eds.): *Bolshevism, Stalinism and the Comintern*, esp. p. 111.

Rakosi forced the issue by taking it to the *Zentralausschuß*, which voted in late February by 28 to 23 to adopt a resolution of loyalty to the Comintern. Levi, his co-chair and former USPD leader, Ernst Däumig, and three other leaders – Clara Zetkin, Heinrich Malzahn and Adolf Hoffmann – resigned in protest.¹⁰⁶ At his first meeting of the *Zentralausschuß* Thälmann made clear his support for the pro-Soviet left, which now took the leadership under Heinrich Brandler.¹⁰⁷

Not only was there a radical leftist majority in the German leadership, crucially a radical policy was adopted by the EKKI, which now focused its attentions on developments in Germany.¹⁰⁸ At the key meetings of the EKKI leadership in Moscow from 21 until 23 February, what became known as the “theory of the revolutionary offensive” had the support of the key players, not only Zinoviev and Bukharin, but also the Comintern’s emissaries Samuel Guralski, Bela Kun and Joseph Pogany who subsequently arrived in Germany and attended the decisive meetings of the *Zentrale* from 15–17 March in Berlin.¹⁰⁹ At these meetings, a commitment to revolutionary action permeated the thinking of the pro-Soviet left around Brandler, August Thalheimer and Ernst Meyer who became convinced that a vanguard action would not be a mere putsch, but would be understood as the signal for the masses to rise up, overthrow capitalism and forge an alliance with Soviet Russia. Brandler went as far as anticipating two million workers rising up under the communist banner.¹¹⁰ Although Thälmann was not a member of the *Zentrale*, he

106 SAPMO-BArch, RY 1 I/2/1/5; Protokoll des Zentralausschußes, 22–24 February 1921, Bl. 256.

107 *ibid.*, Bl. 236, 257.

108 Koch-Baumgarten attributed ultra-radicalism to a minority grouping within the leadership around Ernst Meyer, Paul Fröhlich and Hugo Eberlein (the chief of the newly founded secret military apparatus) and other key figures who pursued a policy formulated at closed-door meeting with the EKKI emissaries in Germany, see Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten: *Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921*, pp. 215–223. The protocols of *Zentrale* and *Zentralausschuß* meetings, however, show that there was an ultra-left majority.

109 Jean-François Fayet: *Paul Levi and the Turning Point of 1921: Bolshevik Emissaries and International Discipline in the Time of Lenin*, p. 115. For the role of Radek, who was in Germany at the time, see, Marie-Louise Goldbach: *Karl Radek und die deutsch-sowjetischen Beziehungen: Ein Beitrag zum Verhältnis von KPD und Komintern und zur Geschichte der deutsch-sowjetischen Beziehungen zwischen 1918–1923*, Hannover 1973, pp. 70–80. For up-to-date, detailed biographies of Radek, see Jean-François Fayet: *Karl Radek (1885–1939): Biographie Politique*, Bern 2004; Wolf-Dietrich Gutjahr: *Revolution muss sein: Karl Radek: Die Biographie*, Cologne 2012.

110 This permeated the statements of the Left at the *Zentrale* meeting on 17 March, see SAPMO-BArch: RY 1 I/2/1/6, Bl. 1–57. For the role of Meyer, see Florian Wilde: *Ernst Meyer (1887–1930) – Vergessene Führungsfigur des deutschen Kommunismus: Eine politische Biographie*, PhD Hamburg 2011, pp. 214–218. For a discussion of Brandler, which aims to qualify his ultra-radicalism, see Jens Becker: *Heinrich Brandler: Eine politische Biographie*,

shared the views expressed by Hugo Urbahns, who insisted that the party must overcome its fear of putschism in the conviction that a vanguard *Aktion* would “drawn in the masses around it”.¹¹¹ Urbahns had even called for those opposing revolutionary *Aktion* to be sent to the front in Soviet Russia as a “corrective” to their “passivity”. His statements were in the context of a wider debate which thought it possible that war would breakout along Germany’s borders.¹¹²

The *Zentrale’s* meeting on 17 March discussed the efficacy of a number of pretexts to launch the *Aktion*, including the *Entente’s* occupation of Düsseldorf and Duisburg, clashes in Upper Silesia between German and Polish nationalists and the activities of the Orgesch in Bavaria. However, these discussions were overtaken by events. News abruptly and entirely unexpectedly arrived of the beginnings of a policing action in Halle-Merseburg, led by the SPD governor, Otto Hörsing, which aimed to “restore order” in industrial relations and on the streets, including disarming radicals who had retained the weapons issued during the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch. Even although this was the foremost stronghold of German communism, local party official and the party’s trade union division warned against precipitous action.¹¹³ There were good reasons for this: the imminent four-day Easter break would close factories and the party had no existing plans in place to lead the uprising under these circumstances.¹¹⁴

In the event, what became known as the March Action proved to be a damp squib, failing to ignite the German revolution and not only repelling social democrats but also alienating wide sections of the party’s erstwhile supporters; even in Halle-Merseburg the initiative and most of the fighting was undertaken by Max Hoelz and the KAPD.¹¹⁵ Between the call for a nationwide general strike on 23 March (the day before Good Friday) and the final calling off of the uprising on 1 April, some 200,000 workers had been

Hamburg 2001, pp. 126–126, 131–139. See also, for example, Hans Hirschfeld/Hans Reichhardt (eds.): Ernst Reuter: Schriften. Reden, Berlin 1972, p. 472; Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten: *Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921*, *Aufstand*, p. 131.

111 SAPMO-BArch: RY 1 I/2/1/6, Bl. 33 (Urbahns).

112 *Ibid.*, Bl. 33.

113 SAPMO-BArch: RY 1 I/2/1/6, Bl. 3. For a classic pre-documentary account of these events based on contemporary accounts by the KPD, SPD and Prussian government committees, see Werner Angress: *Stillborn Revolution: The Communist Bid for Power in Germany, 1921–1923*, Princeton 1963, pp. 123–126.

114 On the lack of preparedness for the SPD’s policing action in the KPD leadership’s meetings, see Jens Becker: *Heinrich Brandler: Eine politische Biographie*, pp. 133–134.

115 The classic accounts of the March Action remain Werner Angress: *Stillborn Revolution: The Communist Bid for Power in Germany, 1921–1923*; Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten: *Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921*, esp. 157; see also, Stefan Weber: *Ein Kommunistischer Putsch?: Märzaktion in Mitteldeutschland*, Berlin 1991.

mobilised, with some 145 lives lost.¹¹⁶ However, the *Aktion* remained localised, with the epicentre in Prussia Saxony and aftershocks spreading out only to a few isolated localities, notably individual factories and coal mines in the Rhineland and the Ruhr, parts of Thuringia and Lausitz and, most prominently, in Hamburg; Berlin had witnessed only a limited number of demonstrators taking to the streets.¹¹⁷

In Hamburg a meeting of party officials met on 22 March to discuss how to respond to events in central Germany.¹¹⁸ The meetings showed serious divisions over tactics, which led to Wilhelm Reich, one of the party's leading figures, leaving the party in protest at the majority's decision to foment revolution.¹¹⁹ Thälmann showed no such reservations, subsequently insisting that it had not taken the arrival of couriers from Berlin to persuade him to act.¹²⁰ From as the middle of March, the Hamburg VKPD had been staging demonstrations in what amounted to shows of strength on the city's streets, some of which had led to clashes with police.¹²¹ On 23 March, the party then issued a call for a general strike in solidarity with the workers' in central Germany. That morning, Thälmann had headed a demonstration of the unemployed into the Blohm & Voss and Vulkan shipyards. The occupation failed to win the support of social-democratic workers

- 116 Heinrich August Winkler: *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1918–1924*, Berlin/Bonn 1985, p. 517.
- 117 Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten: *Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921*, pp. 193–215 (Hamburg), pp. 237–93 (Rhineland); Heinrich August Winkler: *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1918–1924*, pp. 517.
- 118 The most detailed account of events in Hamburg remains Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten: *Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921*, pp. 193–215. For a useful summary of Thälmann's role, citing relevant documentation, see Eberhard Czichon/Heinz Marohn (with Ralph Dobrawa): *Thälmann: Ein Report*, pp. 96.
- 119 *StaB*, 4, 65–1586: *Polizei-Direktion Hamburg*, [Bericht] Nr. 15, 22 April 1921. Hermann Reich subsequently joined Paul Levi's Communist Working Association, the KAG, see Weber/Herbst, pp. 594–95.
- 120 See the discussion on events in Hamburg in: *SAPMO-BArch*, RY 1 I/2/1/8, *Protokoll des Zentralausschuß-Sitzung*, 3, 4 and 5 Mai 1921, sheet 119. For the example of Meyer, who was sent to lead events in the Ruhr and, subsequently, East Prussia, see Florian Wilde: *Ernst Meyer (1887–1930) – Vergessene Führungsfigur des deutschen Kommunismus: Eine politische Biographie*, pp. 216. For Hugo Eberlein's role in central Germany, see Heinrich August Winkler: *Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1918–1924*, pp. 516–517.
- 121 *Tumulte in Hamburg*, in: *Vorwärts* 69 (Ausgabe B), 23 March 1921, p. 1; *Kommunistische Massenkundgebung in Hamburg*, in: *Die Rote Fahne* 126 (Abend-Ausgabe), 16 March 1921, p. 1

in the wharfs, which meant that the election of delegates onto an Action Committee and the hoisting of the red flag were purely party undertakings.¹²²

In response to these events, at 4pm on 23 March the SPD-led Hamburg Senate imposed a state of emergency; the following morning, Hamburg was the only locality outside of Prussian Saxony to have a federal state of emergency imposed by President Ebert. Armed police were then deployed to end the occupation of the shipyards and to disperse the communist rally scheduled for 5pm. This was done by cordoning off the Heiligengeistfeld and blockading the access roads to the harbour. In a manner similar to the state of emergency throughout much of 1920, however, order was secured at a cost. In clashes between the police and the VKPD's supporters in the occupied shipyards and at the rally in the Heiligengeistfeld, at least 19 demonstrators were shot dead, with hundreds more injured as riots in the St. Paul area rumbled on for several days.¹²³ Speaking in the *Bürgerschaft* Thälmann attacked the SPD for the fiasco, accusing them of violence in defence of the "dictatorship of capitalism" and having workers' "blood on their hands".¹²⁴

For Thälmann these events marked a personal turning point as well as a reaffirmation of this ultra-radicalism. Unable to account for his absence from work at the Labour Office during the March Action, to use his own words, he "lost the only good job" he had ever had.¹²⁵ It was at this point he became a salaried party official.¹²⁶

In the recriminations following the failure of the March Action to spearhead the German revolution, the supporters of the revolutionary offensive initially continued to hold an overwhelming majority in the national party leadership and in the largest district organisations. In April the critics of the March Action in Hamburg were expelled without permitting them any debate in the party press.¹²⁷ At the District Party Congress on

122 Werner Angress: *Stillborn Revolution: The Communist Bid for Power in Germany, 1921–1923*, pp. 154–156; Richard A. Comfort: *Revolutionary Hamburg: Labor Politics in the Early Weimar Republic*, pp. 114–115; Pierre Broué: *The German Revolution 1917–1923*, Chicago 2006, pp. 500–501. For the response of the SPD in Hamburg and in the *Reich*, see: Hamburg unter Ausnahmezustand!, in: *Vorwärts* 139, 24 March 1921, p. 1; Wehrt gegen den Putschisten!, in: *Vorwärts* 72, 25 March 1921, p. 1.

123 Richard A. Comfort: *Revolutionary Hamburg: Labor Politics in the Early Weimar Republic*, p. 115; Angelika Voß/Ursula Büttner/Hermann Weber: *Vom Hamburger Aufstand zur politischen Isolierung: Kommunistische Politik 1923–1933 in Hamburg und im Deutschen Reich*, Hamburg 1983, p. 23.

124 *Bürgerschaft*: 19. Sitzung, 30 March 1921, p. 587.

125 *Gekürzter Lebenslauf*, Bl. 8.

126 Klaus Kinner: *Geschichte des Kommunismus und Linkssozialismus: Der deutsche Kommunismus: Selbstverständnis und Realität*, Vol 1, *Die Weimarer Zeit*, p. 235.

127 Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten: *Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921*, p. 347.

16–17 April, Thälmann made clear his support for purging opportunists.¹²⁸ The majority on the *Zentrale* insisted that the *Aktion* had only failed in the same sense that the July Struggles of 1917 in St. Petersburg had failed and continuing the offensive policy was the correct path towards the German October.¹²⁹ On 15 April the *Zentrale* acted to expel Paul Levi for publishing a series of pamphlets publicly criticising not only the policy of the offensive, but also the role of the EKKI and its emissaries in trying to force the pace of the German revolution. Levi's expulsion was subsequently confirmed by the EKKI at the end of April, and endorsed by a vote of 38 to seven in the *Zentralausschuß* at the beginning of May, which included the official censure of eight prominent party leaders who supported the substance of Levi's criticisms.¹³⁰

At the May meeting of the Central Committee, Thälmann's views were typical of the party's radical left. Speaking against a report put forward by Levi's supporters on the devastating impact of the March Action – from the exodus of party members and mass arrests of officials to the collapse of work in the trade unions – Thälmann insisted that, “Out of the March Action in Hamburg we have gone forward strengthened”.¹³¹ Not only should Levi be expelled for acting against the party, but so too should his supporters “even if they take with them thousands of members”. German communism, in his view, should have no place for those “who were not prepared to fight”. Referring to events in Hamburg in March, he insisted that, “We kept discipline [...] If this had happened in all parts of Germany, the *Aktion* would have looked very different”.¹³²

This meeting of the *Zentralausschuß* elected Thälmann as one of three delegates from his district party organisation in Wasserkante to the Third World Congress of the

128 Eberhard Czichon/Heinz Marohn (with Ralph Dobrawa): Thälmann: Ein Report, pp. 102–103.

129 The *Zentrale* gave this particular statement at the Central Committee meeting of 3–5 May, see: Protokoll der Sitzung des Zentralausschusses vom 3., 4. und 5. Mai, in: SAPMO-BArch, RY 1/I 2/1/8, Bl. 127.

130 For a detailed evaluation of Levi's pamphlets, his criticisms of policy and the role of the EKKI and the German leadership's responses, see Pierre Broué: *The German Revolution 1917–1923*, pp. 509. For the *Zentrale's* telegram to the members of the Central Committee urging them to expel Levi, see: An die Mitglieder des Zentralausschusses [April 1921], in: SAPMO-BArch, RY 1/I 2/1/8, Bl. 436.

131 Levi's supporter were Däumig, Zetkin, Brass, Hoffmann, Curt Geyer (who, as the party's representative to the EKKI, had attended the meetings preceding the March Action in Moscow) and three members of the trade union division, Paul Neumann, Heinrich Malzahn and Paul Eckert. For the reports submitted by the Opposition, see: *Die Folgen der Märzaktion*, in: SAPMO-BArch, RY 1/I 2/1/8, Bl. 125–26; for Thälmann's statement, see *ibid.*, Bl. 142–44.

132 Protokoll der Sitzung des Zentralausschusses vom 3., 4. und 5. Mai, in: SAPMO-BArch, RY 1/I 2/1/8, Bl. 142, 347.

Comintern, which met in Moscow in the summer of 1921.¹³³ His subsequent recollections describe his excitement at witnessing the new Soviet Russia and meeting leading Bolsheviks who he regarded as the first workers' leaders who were "ready to fight for socialism".¹³⁴ The record of Thälmann's response to the change in the Comintern's general line at the Congress, however, also details his outspoken hostility to the Bolsheviks' moderation of the world movement's tactics.

Although Lenin was the principal architect of what became known as the united front policy, it fell to Trotsky to impose it at the Congress.¹³⁵ Following a compromise reached behind closed doors, Trotsky's report did not condemn the March Action as such, but did denounce the offensive policy at a time when the capitalist economy has stabilised sufficiently to obviate the prospect of immediate revolution in Western Europe. Instead, communists should now campaign – as Levi had done – to widen their support in the workers' movement.¹³⁶ Thälmann refuted Trotsky's theses; instead, he insisted that the March Action was an expression of the "revolutionary impatience of the masses" in a social and economic context showing no signs of stabilising.¹³⁷ When refusing any further concessions to the Left, Trotsky appeared to direct his comments to Thälmann personally.¹³⁸

Thälmann' was not alone in his hostility to the new line;¹³⁹ but he was the only delegate who refused to sign a Peace Treaty which the Bolsheviks presented to the VKPD outside of the formal sessions of the Congress. The Peace Treaty was, in effect, a declaration that the VKPD would appoint a leadership coalition including Zetkin and other

133 The other two delegates, in an overall delegation of 33, were Hugo Urbahns and Bernhard Karge, see SAPMO-BArch, RY 1/2/1/4, Sitzung des Zentralaussschußes [May 1921], Bl. 16.

134 Gekürzter Lebenslauf, Bl. 9.

135 Lenin and Trotsky won over Kamenev in the Russia Politburo, giving them a majority against Bukharin and Zinoviev, see Ben Fowkes: *Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republik*, London 1984, p. 74; for a wider discussion of developments in the Russian politburo and the views represented by other national communist parties, see Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten: *Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921*, pp. 369. The term "united front" was conspicuous by its absence in the Comintern's theses on tactics.

136 Protokoll des III Kongresses der Kommunistischen Internationale, Moskau vom 22 Juni bis 12 Juli 1921, Hamburg 1921, pp. 83, 87, 125, 504 f., 746. For the influence of Russian state and foreign policy on these developments leading to the Treaty of Rapallo (1922), see Klaus Kinner: *Geschichte des Kommunismus und Linkssozialismus: Der deutsche Kommunismus: Selbstverständnis und Realität*, Vol. 1, *Die Weimarer Zeit*, pp. 39–40, 47.

137 Protokoll des III Kongresses, pp. 633–638.

138 Protokoll des III Kongresses, p. 332.

139 Speaking for what had been the majority in the Central Committee, Fritz Heckert had defended the March Action and the "offensive policy" explicitly speaking against Lenin's statements, see Protokoll des III Kongresses, pp. 528–543.

rightists and to pursue a policy based on the tactics agreed in Moscow. While submitting to party discipline and strongly opposing discussion of these issues in the party press,¹⁴⁰ Thälmann continued to voice hostility to not only the renewed influence of the Right in Germany but their continued membership of the party.¹⁴¹ The remaining strength of leftist opinion in the VKPD was made clear when the party leadership met to discuss the implications of the Comintern's new line. At a meeting of the *Zentralausschuß* on 2–3 August, Ernst Meyer – who was already acting as *de facto* party leader – was unable to win a series of votes aiming to co-opt Zetkin onto the *Zentrale* in a move intended to limit controversy at the forthcoming party congress.¹⁴²

The strength of the Left Opposition at the Jena Congress (22–26 August) was such that Lenin, Radek and the EKKI felt it necessary to send official letters to be read out to the Congress reminding delegates of the terms of the Peace Treaty agreed in Moscow.¹⁴³ The pressure achieved its objective. The KPD announced a change of political line and a new leadership coalition to implement it – the so-called Centre grouping or *Meyer Zentrale* – which included many earlier champions of the revolutionary offensive and their former opponents who were now prepared to end criticism of the March Action and to break off all contacts with Paul Levi.¹⁴⁴

140 Protokoll des III Kongresses, p. 635–636.

141 SAPMO-BArch, RY 1/2/1/9: Sitzung des Zentralausschusses, 2–3. August 1921, sheets 99–101.

142 For the debate and resolution of the *Zentralausschuß* meeting, which aimed to build a majority for the Comintern's programme before the Jena Congress convened and their respective resolutions, see SAPMO-BArch, RY 1/1 2/1/9: Zentralausschuß-Sitzung vom 2.–3. August 1921, sheets 99–101 (Thälmann); 224 (majority); 225 (Right Opposition); 226–227 (Left Opposition). For the role of Meyer at this meeting and his precarious position, see Florian Wilde: Ernst Meyer (1887–1930) – Vergessene Führungsfigur des deutschen Kommunismus: Eine politische Biographie, p. 229.

143 Pierre Broué: The German Revolution 1917–1923, pp. 556–557.

144 Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten: Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921, pp. 390–391. After the Congress, the Right who had joined the new leadership continued to fragment, not least after revelations were published in the SPD's central organ, *Vorwärts*, concerning the Comintern's role in the March Action. This led to publicly stated calls for greater autonomy from the Comintern and reinvigorated contacts with Paul Levi and his newly founded Communist Working Union (KAG). For a summary of these developments see Heinrich August Winkler: Von der Revolution zur Stabilisierung: Arbeiter und Arbeiterbewegung in der Weimarer Republik 1918–1924, pp. 532–537; for more a more details discussion, see Hans Hirschfeld/Hans Reichhardt (eds.): Ernst Reuter: Schriften. Reden, pp. 475–476; Florian Wilde: Diskussionsfreiheit ist innerhalb unserer Partei absolut notwendig: Das Verhältnis des KPD-Vorsitzender Ernst Meyer zur innerparteilichen Demokratie 1921/22, in: Hermann Weber et al. (eds.): Jahrbuch für Historische Kommunismusforschung 2006, pp. 168–184.

The presence of the Left at the Congress, in particular from its strongholds in Berlin and Hamburg, ensured that Ernst Meyer's report on political tactics had to walk a fine line between endorsing Comintern policy and limiting criticism of his erstwhile comrades who continued to identify with the policy of revolutionary offensive.¹⁴⁵ It was Thälmann who forwarded the amendment to the political report in the name of the Left districts. His aim was to declare loyalty to the Comintern, but to reject Trotsky's criticisms of the March Action.¹⁴⁶ How Thälmann presented himself as the voice of the party's radical left districts is as instructive as what he actually said. In what was the first of many personal attacks on Trotsky – who the Left believed was the patron of the KPD's Right Opposition – Thälmann contrasted himself as a radical workman with a lofty "theoretician" who spoke in a manner "the masses could not understand". The conditions in Germany – not least, in his home district of Hamburg – were "very different" from those set out in Trotsky's broad-brush sketch of developments in global capitalism. Trotsky, according to Thälmann, had failed to understand the hostility of the "trade-union bureaucracy" to communism, and the burden of unemployment caused by the imposition of reparations under the Versailles Treaty. Thälmann's speech ended by demanding, "less theory" and "more feeling" and insisting that:

We will not get a feeling for the masses in propaganda and agitation, but rather when we take part in economic struggles [and] show ourselves as the German Communist Party which marches forward as the vanguard of the proletariat [...] We must support every struggle, up until the final struggle for political power.¹⁴⁷

The Left Opposition

According to Werner Scholem, who played a leading role in Berlin, from February 1921 a "geographical opposition" took shape and was centred on Berlin-Brandenburg, Hamburg and a number of smaller party organisations. The issues bringing this Left Opposition together were, in summary, the correct political strategy for a communist party, its relations with Social Democracy and the Weimar Republic.¹⁴⁸ Commenting on the

145 For Meyer's speech and its strongly leftist tones, see Florian Wilde: Ernst Meyer (1887–1930) – Vergessene Führungsfigur des deutschen Kommunismus: Eine politische Biographie, pp. 131–135.

146 SAPMO-BArch, RY 1/1/10: 2.[7] Parteitag der Vereinigten KPD, 22–26 August 1921, Volkshaus zu Jena, sheets 216 ff.; see also, Hans Hirschfeld/Hans Reichhardt (eds.): Ernst Reuter: Schriften. Reden, pp. 474–475.

147 Ibid., Bl. 222.

148 Werner Scholem: Skizze über die Entstehung der linken Opposition in der KPD, in: Die Internationale 2/3: 7, 28 March 1924, p. 122 f. I am grateful to Ralf Hoffrogge for this reference.

highpoint of the KPD's united front policy surrounding the assassination of Foreign Minister Walter Rathenau in June 1922, Scholem stated that the KPD had been turned into an appendage of the SPD and had allowed the membership to be drawn into the Social Democrats' struggle to defend the "bourgeois republic" against its enemies on the *völkisch* right. "The party", he wrote, "had failed to show the working masses that the democratic republic is an illusion [and] that the Democrats and Social Democrats are unable to fight the reaction".¹⁴⁹ As Klaus Kinner discusses in his analysis of the political perceptions of German Communists, the consolidation of Weimar by suppressing the radical left prevented significant section of the movement from becoming *Vernunftrepublikaner* and, instead, remained unable to see the "bourgeois republic" as progress on the recent imperial past.¹⁵⁰ Yet the implications of the united front policy amounted to such a demand – however momentary and contingent – on the KPD's relations with Weimar.¹⁵¹ This did not sit comfortably with Thälmann's political socialisation in the pre-war workers' movement in Hamburg's docks, nor his desire to force the pace of the German revolution by joining the Comintern and purging opportunism from the party's ranks. Neither was it welcomed by local officials and activists, who rejected Thälmann's initial efforts to implement a leftist local variant of the united front in the autumn of 1921 out of a sense of "international discipline".¹⁵²

The everyday party culture shaping the Hamburg KPD was defined almost as much by its enmity towards the SPD and the republic as it was by the inspiration of Soviet Russia. In Hamburg Thälmann was at the forefront of projecting communism's message of uncompromising hostility to Weimar. At public meetings, he emphasised that the German Revolution "was only lost by the guilt of the SPD *Bonzen* [in Hamburg] and the blows of Noske and Scheidemann".¹⁵³ After the fiasco of the March Action he hammered home the same explanation of Social Democratic "betrayal", attributing the deaths of "fallen comrades" to their actions.¹⁵⁴ While the Hamburg SPD celebrated the founding of the republic, the KPD commemorated the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht at the hands of new republic which the party defined to span from the MSPD to the Free Corps.¹⁵⁵ Communism's rejection of the Weimar Republic and Social Democracy was presented in terms of a blood-filled gulf between rival worldviews in what amounted to a cult of dead martyr who had fallen in the battles leading to the

149 *Ibid.*, p. 127

150 Klaus Kinner: *Geschichte des Kommunismus und Linksozialismus: Der deutsche Kommunismus: Selbstverständnis und Realität*, Vol. 1, *Die Weimarer Zeit*, pp. 33–34.

151 *Ibid.*, pp. 47–48.

152 StaH, Polizeibehörde I, 333–1: Aus der KPD, 18 May 1922, Bl. 174.

153 StaH, Polizeibehörde I, 333–1 I: Aus der KPD, 7 March 1922, Bl. 52–53.

154 *Ibid.*: Aus der KPD, 14 February 1922, Bl. 32–33.

155 *Ibid.*: Bericht, 17 January 1922, Bl. 25–27.

“dictatorship of the proletariat”. Representative of this was a communist demonstration of some 2,000 activists in November 1921 to the Ohlsdorf graveyard, which culminated in a party rally with a choir singing revolutionary songs, symbols of the Soviet revolution were all around and the speeches denounced the “bourgeois republic” as a sham. Thälmann’s speech emphasised that the party’s fallen comrades had died for world revolution, not the German republic, comparing their sacrifice to the Russian comrades who had fallen in November 1917. The “best revenge”, he announced, was “the victory of the proletariat [...] the workers stood with the sword in their hand, it only needed to be sharpened”. The Communist International was organising the revolution, the crowd was told, and would lead the masses in struggle: “Great decisions stand before us. We do not know if tomorrow the workers will have to stand with weapons in their hands”.¹⁵⁶

Conclusions

Thälmann’s radicalism had its roots in the Hamburg docks. It was here as a local official in the SPD and the transport workers’ union that Thälmann developed a belief in irreconcilable struggle until victory in a fight which would also lead to conflict with the movement’s reformist leaders who settled for compromise and concession. The experience of war had brutalised Thälmann’s generation in the trenches; yet the seminal experience – or founding myth – of German communism was the MSPD’s resort to stabilising the new republic by using the old imperial military to suppress workers’ radicalism – the so-called *Noskepolitik*. Some leading Weimar Communists later recognised that the MSPD – especially after the party’s fusion with the rump USPD in 1922 as a response to the acute threat from the far-right – was no longer the party of Noske and Scheidemann.¹⁵⁷ But Thälmann never did and his hostility to the new state was representative of political opinion beyond the ranks of the KPD. As Peter Gay’s sympathetic study of the rich cultural life during the Weimar concedes, the republic proved unable to integrate sufficient numbers of *Vernunftrepublikaner* who realised that this state was the best political compromise available to them.¹⁵⁸

Thälmann’s rise on the burgeoning left wing of the Hamburg USPD was on the wave of protest at the *Noskepolitik* of 1919/20, which saw Hamburg as well as many other industrial centres occupied by the military and the remaining workers’ councils – the

156 StaB, 4, 65–1587: Polizei-Direktion, Bericht Nr. 96, 9 November 1921, Bl. 1–2.

157 Arthur Rosenberg, the historian and Berlin-based leader of the Left Opposition in the mid-1920s, adopted this interpretation while writing his study of these years in exile in Liverpool, see Arthur Rosenberg: *A History of the German Republic 1918–1930*, London 1936, pp. 126–27. See also, Mario Kessler: *Ein Historiker in Zeitalter der Katastrophen (1889–1943)*, Cologne/Vienna 2003.

158 Peter Gay: *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*, London 1988, pp. 24–47.

symbol of the revolution – suppressed. The rejection of the MSPD and Weimar came with the idealisation of the Russian Revolution. Rather than make any tactical compromise with the republic in the early 1920s, Thälmann looked to forging an ideologically pure vanguard party which was purged of opportunism and held to military-style notions of discipline, which sought to limit any public debate of the nascent mass party's tactical dilemmas.¹⁵⁹ His conception of revolution looked to the role of the party which worked out a technique for uprisings as a substituted for the shortfall of a spontaneous mass movement, as the March Action and its aftermath illustrate.¹⁶⁰ Yet Thälmann was not merely following the Comintern's programme; he had pushed for the acceptance of the '21 Conditions' in order to assert an agenda he had already developed within a specific local context in the German workers' movement.¹⁶¹

In the feuds within the early KPD and with the EKKI over political tactics, Thälmann knew how to advance his views and his own factional position in the party by using his credentials as a revolutionary workman – even opposing Lenin and Trotsky at the Third World Congress of the Comintern. His influence was rooted among the party's core supporters among the unemployed, semi-skilled and casual workers in Hamburg, which gave proletarian substance to the Left Opposition crystallising around the party's Berlin-based intellectuals, notably Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow.¹⁶² As even Thälmann's detractors in the party leadership later conceded, he rose to become communism's public face in the course of the 1920s – the leader who could connect with the party's rank-and-file supporters.¹⁶³

159 This differed from Ernst Meyer's approach as party chairman, which aimed to integrate the party's feuding wings by allowing freedom of discussion including in the party press, see Florian Wilde: *Diskussionsfreiheit ist innerhalb unserer Partei absolut notwendig: Das Verhältnis des KPD-Vorsitzenden Ernst Meyer zur innerparteilichen Demokratie 1921/22*, pp. 168–184.

160 For a discussion of these developments in the KPD during the early 1920s, see Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten: *Aufstand der Avantgarde: Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921*, pp. 12–18.

161 For the influences of the pre-war SPD, see Michael Rudloff: *Politische Säuberungen*, p. 6; Klaus-Michael Mallmann: *Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik: Sozialgeschichte einer revolutionären Bewegung*, Darmstadt 1996, pp. 58–59, 71–77.

162 On the role of Ruth Fischer and the Left Opposition in the KPD, see Mario Kessler: *Communist and Anti-Communist between Europe and America, 1895–1961*, in: *Logos: A Journal of Modern Society and Culture* 11 (2012), online at: <https://logosjournal.com/2012/spring-summer-Kessler/>; see also Mario Kessler: *Ruth Fischer: Ein Leben mit und gegen Kommunisten (1885–1961)*, Cologne/Vienna (2013).

163 See, for example, the comments by Margarete Buber-Neumann, in: *Margarete Buber-Neumann: Von Potsdam nach Mockau. Stationen eines Irrweges*, Munich 2002, pp. 109–110.

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