



The “Berlin Years” of the Communist Youth International

Wladek Flakin of Revolution in Germany looks back at the early years of the Communist Youth International and its fraught relationship with the Comintern after 1921. This is abridged translation of a longer German language pamphlet to be published soon by the Revolutionary Internationalist Organisation

LITTLE HAS been written about the history of the Communist Youth International (CYI) and much of what has views it merely as one of the various “front organisations” of the Communist International (CI or Comintern).¹ But the history of the CYI does not begin with the founding of the Comintern in 1919. It begins with the founding of the International Union of Socialist Youth Organisations (IUSYO) at a conference in Stuttgart in 1907, a youth organisation that was originally part of the Second or Socialist International.

During the First World War, many of the organisations in the IUSYO were radicalised, broke away from the pro-war Second International leadership and formed autonomous political youth organisations, the nucleus of the future CYI. Because of this, from its inception the CYI had a long tradition of independent work and decision-making. It saw itself as a vanguard of the workers’ movement, which had to remain independent in order to push things forward in every situation. It took several years for the Comintern apparatus in Moscow to bring the global political youth organisation under its control.

The beginnings of the socialist youth movement

The first socialist youth organisation in history emerged in 1896 in Belgium as “La Jeune Garde” or “De Jonge Wacht”. At the time, when the army was repeatedly used against striking workers, anti-militarist work amongst the youth was a question of survival for the socialist movement. In Germany, later the centre of a worldwide socialist youth movement, a young workers’ association was not founded until October 1904, although at the time the country had between four and five million young workers.

Following the congress of the Socialist International in Stuttgart, an international socialist youth conference was held from 24 to 26 August 1907. Twenty delegates from 14 countries launched the youth international. The

German Social Democrat Karl Liebknecht, who spoke at this conference on the struggle of the youth against militarism, was elected chairman of the international union and became the “elder statesman” of the young socialists (he had turned 36 before the Stuttgart conference).

From the beginning, conflicts raged between the youth organisations and the leaders of the social democratic parties and trade unions: the former saw themselves as fighting political organisations, the latter saw them as associations for largely educational and cultural work. This conflict caused a heated debate both in the youth organisations and the parties. The social democratic party leaders accused their youth organisations of trying “to completely detach the youth movement from the movement of the adults”. Karl Liebknecht in contrast fought for the model of self-governing youth organisations:

“There are two points that guarantee the success of the attempts to organise the youth: independence of the youth and the protection of young people’s rights. Only the free youth organisations, which emerged from the youth themselves, have provided for these needs of the youth. These needs emerge from the modern position of youth in economic life . . . Simply following the compulsion of circumstances, the young person strives for independence, for independent activity, now as never before. This drive of the young people cannot be suppressed by force.”²

Through this conflict, the youth organisations developed an identity as an explicitly political and independent movement. Strong independent youth organisations developed in Italy, Switzerland and the Scandinavian countries, by contrast, in Germany and France the youth were heavily dependent on their respective parties.

The youth movement during the war

With the outbreak of the First World War on 4 August 1914 the Socialist International, and therefore also its youth international, collapsed after the social democratic parties – with few exceptions – supported the war efforts of their respective capitalist governments. Only a small minority opposed this policy of a “sacred truce”. But by 4 April 1915, eight months after the outbreak of war, an IUSYO conference in Bern with delegates from nine countries set out to restore the international links between the socialist youth organisations and establish an anti-war centre. This was a full five months before the first Zimmerwald Conference that brought together internationalist (adult) social democrats. This chronology alone makes clear that the youth played a genuine vanguard role in the reconstruction of the international.

A newly elected secretariat of the IUSJO in Zürich under the leadership of the 25-year-old German Willi Münzenberg, who had refused military service, organised the contacts between the youth organisations of the warring countries and published the newspaper “Youth International”. Eleven issues of this newspaper appeared during the war until it was banned in the spring of 1918 by the Swiss authorities. Nevertheless it had been a vital forum for the internationalist socialists to debate and argue the anti-war programme. The “Youth International” tried to unite all socialists who based themselves on the

class struggle and opposed the war – accordingly, articles by Eduard Bernstein, who belonged to the centre and defended pacifist positions, appeared next to articles by V I Lenin, who as a leading figure of the left wing of the movement argued that only the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism – “the transformation of the imperialist war into a civil war” – could end wars. The majority of the youth international at the beginning of the war supported the pacifist demand for the complete disarmament

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of all states, a position that was criticised sharply (but patiently) by Lenin.³

Of the entire socialist movement, the youth were the first who could be enthused for the rejection of the “social patriots” or “social imperialists” (social democrats who supported the war) and this strengthened their self-image as independent political groups that could push the entire workers’ movement forward. Oppositional young socialists from Germany wrote to their central office:

“What does the young workers’ movement want? It wants to be more than a union for hiking, socialising, entertainment and education. The young people want to be educated as future class fighters in the spirit of scientific socialism, not in the sense of social imperialism.”⁴

During this time, the alliance between left wing social democrats and the independent youth groups, which had been established in the years before the war, became more profound. Lenin, for example, who was in close contact with the secretariat of the youth international while in exile in Zurich in 1916, vehemently defended the autonomy of the youth organisations:

“The middle-aged and the aged often do not know how to approach the youth, for the youth must of necessity advance to socialism in a different way, by other paths, in other forms, in other circumstances than their fathers. Incidentally, that is why we must decidedly favour organisational independence of the Youth League, not only because the opportunists fear such independence, but because of the very nature of the case.”⁵

The internationalists, like Lenin, who a few years later founded the Communist International, found amongst the youth a fertile ground for their revolutionary programme against the war. They supported the autonomy of the youth so that they would be able to adopt and spread revolutionary ideas.

The creation of a new youth international

After the war’s end a new, third international – the Communist International – was founded at a congress

in Moscow in early March 1919. But in the revolutionary wave following the war, the creation not only of a new international but also of a new youth international was on the agenda. In May 1919 the newly elected Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) called on the proletarian youth organisations of the world to form a new youth international:

“Young friends . . . join the ranks of the fighting columns of the Communist Youth International and storm

served only to cover up the contrast between two opposing positions: the Russian delegate Lazar Schatzkin argued for the integration of the CYI into the Comintern while the Austrian delegate Richard Schüller suggested constituting it as an equal sister organisation of the Comintern.⁸

Münzenberg made clear in his presentation about the role of the youth international that he desired a close link to the Comintern while maintaining the autonomy of the youth:

“The healthy part of the proletarian youth has always seen itself as a part of the entire workers’ movement. The socialist youth organisations have nothing to do with the ideas of a fully self-sufficient, not only organisationally but also ideologically and politically, independent youth movement . . . Therefore we call for the closest alliance with the Communist International and all its parties.”

He continued, however:

“Nevertheless, it would be wrong to demand the dissolution of all special youth organisations . . . I want to draw attention to the fact that an early, independent activity in their own organisations wakes feelings of responsibility, lets the youth gain self-confidence, bravery, audacity, as they often get the opportunity to show solidarity, idealism and determination.”⁹

All the formulations in the Berlin programme make clear that the founders of the CYI pictured a relationship with the Comintern on an equal footing. The East German (GDR) historian Karl Heinz Jahnke described the adoption of this position as a defeat for Münzenberg, who had supposedly advocated the complete political independence of the CYI.¹⁰ But Jahnke presents no evidence for this claim; in reality, Münzenberg probably voted for the compromise position himself. The Canadian historian Richard Cornell argues, on the basis of the stenographic report of the congress (which was published only in Russian), that the proposal by the delegate of the Russian Young Communist League, Schatzkin, also failed to win a majority.¹¹ He – and the Comintern leadership – wanted a closer integration of the CYI into the Comintern as a subordinate section. Instead, a compromise was reached which defined the CYI as a part, but not a subordinate part, of the Comintern. The 17 votes for this position and 8 against (from a total of 33 votes) shows the compromise was by no means unanimous.

The first years of the CYI

In its first year and a half, the headquarters of the CYI was in Berlin. Münzenberg has described how the illegal office in Berlin was able to work for more than a year before it was finally discovered by the police.¹² In the first year, the CYI executive in Berlin sent more than 30 delegates to other countries and received more than 100; since the members of the executive lived without passports, they had to cross the borders illegally and were arrested repeatedly. Despite the difficulties involved with maintaining an illegal office in Berlin, close contact with the socialist youth movement in western Europe and a certain autonomy from the ever-growing Comintern apparatus in Moscow were clearly valued.

In the period after its founding congress, the CYI expe-

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the citadels of capital, capture freedom and happiness for mankind!”⁶

After this call, a Commission for the Preparation of the First Congress of the Communist Youth International was established in Moscow and a preparatory conference took place in late August 1919 in Vienna. Finally, the founding congress of a new youth international was convened in Berlin.

On November 20, 1919, delegates from 14 countries met in “a dark, dirty, cramped back room of a pub in a working class district outside of Berlin”, disguised as a meeting of a pigeon breeder’s association. There were delegates from youth movements from Russia, Poland, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, German-Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania and Switzerland representing organisations with up to 250,000 members. The congress had to take place in conditions of illegality, every day in a different location, as the repression following the failed Spartakus League rising of January 1919, in which Liebknecht and Luxemburg were murdered, continued unabated.

After six days the delegates founded the Communist Youth International (CYI). They defined it as an organisation linked to the Comintern which at the time was only six months old. But the concrete form of this link was only vaguely defined, a fact which led to much controversy in the next few years. In the political programme adopted in Berlin, paragraph 14 stipulated:

“The Communist Youth International bases itself on the resolutions of the First Congress of the Third International and forms part of this Communist International. The central leadership of the Communist Youth International is organisationally linked to the Third International and works with it in the closest companionship of struggle.”⁷

This formulation recognised the Comintern and the decisions it had made until then – but this recognition was not extended to the future. From the point of view of the young communists it was by no means guaranteed that the Comintern would remain on the path of revolution. The wording that the CYI was a “part” of the Comintern

rienced explosive growth, from 14 sections with 219,000 members at the end of 1919, it grew to 49 sections with 800,000 members in early 1921. This was done by creating new organisations and by splitting centrist youth organisations (i.e. those who wavered between the left social democrats and the communists). The centrist youth organisations were, within a few years, ground to dust between the social democracy on the right and the Comintern on the left, partly because the CYI leadership exerted a strong pull on them.

During this time, broad discussions took place about the relationship between the CYI and the Comintern. The first meeting of the CYI Bureau in June 1920 adopted a set of theses on the relationship of the Comintern to the CYI, and of the national communist parties to their youth organisations, that described the compromise of the Berlin congress in more detail.¹³ According to these theses, because of the “organisational connection created by the youth international officially joining the Communist International”, it was necessary to guarantee mutual aid and an exchange of representatives in the respective executive committees of the CYI and the Comintern. Although they don’t explicitly mention two fully equal organisations, there is also no mention of a hierarchy between the two.

In August 1920, an informal meeting took place in Moscow with young people who had participated as delegates to the Second Congress of the Comintern. This meeting produced the first substantive shift in the relationship between the Comintern and the CYI. Two members of the CYI Executive Committee, Luigi Polano from Italy and Lazar Schatzkin from Russia, worked out new theses which spoke for the first time of the CYI subordinating itself to the Comintern:

“The Communist Youth International is part of the Communist International. As such it subordinates itself to the decisions of the congresses of the Communist International and the political directives of its Executive Committee.”¹⁴

These theses presented a dynamic model: the relationship between youth organisations and political parties should depend on the political situation and the level of development of the communist movement in each country. But they also stipulated:

“Only independent, that is, self-governing, youth organisations develop bold and determined revolutionary fighters and astute organisers of the proletarian revolution and soviet power.”

Accordingly, the organisational independence of the CYI was repeatedly stressed – the youth organisations should “conduct their work independently in leading, organising, strengthening and expanding the youth international” – and this in all countries. These theses, which were subsequently adopted by the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI), described a model of organisational independence and voluntary political subordination of the communist youth movement – with the exception of countries where no strong communist party existed, where the absolute (i.e. political and organisational) independence of the communist youth organisations was defended.

Preparations for the Second Congress

In the course of 1920, the number of CYI sections more than tripled. Their representatives were to meet for an international conference to consolidate the youth international after this period of growth. At various international meetings in the summer of 1920, spring of the next year was set as the date for the second CYI congress.

Now the discussions about the relationship between

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the CYI and the Comintern began again. After the end of the Russian civil war, the Russian Young Communist League (Komsomol), finally had the resources to participate in leading the CYI according to its size (it made up two-thirds of all CYI members worldwide). With the support of the Comintern, they argued that the workers’ movement, including its younger parts, needed centralised leadership – which was simply “common sense” among the adherents of the Third International. They concluded:

“Thus the need arises for the communist youth organisations to recognise the programme and the tactics of the communist parties and submit to their political leadership.”¹⁵

Münzenberg defended the necessity of centralisation, but insisted on maintaining the organisational independence of the youth organisations. He was by far the best-known figure of the CYI and a reference point for all those who continued to defend its autonomy. Thus, a conflict arose between “Berlin” and “Moscow”, i.e. between the CYI executive in Berlin and the western European communist youth organisations on the one hand, and the Komsomol and the Comintern executive in Moscow on the other. Münzenberg reported to the CYI executive about his impression of a “too strict tutelage [of the Komsomol] by the party” and therefore rejected the Russian youth organisation as a role model for all other sections of the CYI.¹⁶

On this question, a wide range of positions existed. CYI members who belonged to the so-called “ultra-left” current (mainly adherents of Amadeo Bordiga in the Italian youth organisation) demanded the complete autonomy of the youth movement. Between this position and the Comintern there was a middle position, mainly represented by the leadership of the CYI.

Various western European sections argued that the tasks of a communist youth organisation in a capitalist society were fundamentally different from the tasks after a socialist revolution, as was the case in Russia – which is why the Komsomol should have a very different relationship to the Russian Communist Party than all other CYI sections to their respective adult parties. Moreover, the Komsomol was formed after the revolution, mean-

ing they had no experience as an independent youth organisation.

Münzenberg and the Italian member of the Executive Committee, Luigi Polano (who published a pamphlet on the topic), argued for a flexible relationship depending on the situation of the country. For all countries, they defended the organisational independence of the communist youth organisations. But for the countries in which there were large communist parties, they additionally

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called for voluntary political subordination.

The political debate was overshadowed by an escalating conflict over the question of the location of the upcoming CYI congress. In the summer of 1920 the Komsomol proposed holding the second CYI congress in Moscow. However, this proposal was rejected by the leadership of the CYI (by the Berlin executive committee, by the Bureau meeting and also by the youth meeting after the Second Congress of the Third International in Moscow). The conference was originally planned for Italy, but the rising class struggle and the approaching takeover of power by the fascists made a meeting of this kind impossible there. So the congress was convened by the Executive Committee for April 1921 in Germany. Because the repression in Berlin was too harsh, they decided on the “provincial town” of Jena.

For months the Komsomol, Moscow with the support of the Comintern, continued to campaign for holding the congress in. In a detailed letter the Komsomol secretary, Schatzkin justified the proposal by arguing the need to integrate CYI sections from the east. The ECCI explicitly supported this proposal. But the CYI executive explained that “despite the resistance of the EC of the Third International, the EC of the youth will not give up its right to decide” and reprimanded Schatzkin for working, as an EC member, against the decisions of the EC about the location of the upcoming congress.¹⁷

The “theory of the offensive”

This debate coincided with the intensification of the class struggle in Germany. The “March Action” of the KPD, when a general strike in Middle Germany in March 1921 was to be expanded into a nationwide armed uprising, was crushed and various communist organisations were banned as a result. The Communist Party had hoped to “electrify” masses of workers with the actions of a radical minority, but in reality this adventurous line opened the road to another defeat of the workers.

This “offensive” had been launched by the left wing of the Comintern leadership, including Grigory Zinoviev, Nikolai

Bukharin, and Bela Kun (all from the ECCI). The “March Action” intensified the conflict within the Comintern between the left and the right wing: the cautious KPD chairman Paul Levi was expelled from the International and the ultra-left wing appeared to be strengthened. But the leadership of the Russian Communist Party around Lenin and Trotsky rejected this “offensive” line as ultra left and at the next, third, Comintern congress they introduced the united front policy (i.e. winning the masses by patient work and participation in their daily struggles, even in alliances with reformists). This was, in brief, the background against which the discussions about the location of CYI congress and the relationship between youth organisations and parties took place.

The conflicts over the “theory of the offensive” and on the “youth question” were mixed up, but it was not the case – as Kurella has argued and it has been assumed ever since – that support for the theory of the offensive also meant support for the independence of the CYI from the Comintern.¹⁸ This became clear in the course of the debate, as will be shown below.

The Jena Congress of the CYI

The second world congress of the CYI was opened on 6 April 1921 in Jena. Twenty-six CYI sections and several other organisations were represented by nearly 100 delegates. However, the delegates of the Russian Komsomol, by far the largest section of CYI, were not present. Due to police repression the delegates had to move to Berlin, where the congress was reopened on 11 April. But no sooner had the deliberations begun than a short note arrived from a representative of the Comintern informing the delegates of an ECCI decision from 5 April that the second congress of the CYI would take place in Moscow (despite the decision by the leadership of the CYI as stipulated by the statutes). The meeting was now to take place after the third Comintern congress which was scheduled for June/July. The congress that had already opened in Jena/Berlin was to be considered a “private conference”.

Thus the question was posed concretely whether the CYI was still an independent organisation that could convene its own congresses or whether it was under the direct organisational control of the ECCI. A slight majority of the delegates who had gathered in Berlin protested against this decision with a resolution, but accepted the authority of the ECCI as well as the discipline of the Comintern and interrupted their deliberations.

The “Jena resolution” of the CYI, which was not adopted but met with great approval during the discussion, was full of ultra-leftist slogans. The resolution noted that “the main task of all communist parties is unleashing an uninterrupted series of actions” and that especially the youth had the task to “contribute to the progress of the communist masses towards the organisational preparations for a civil war. “ In addition, it was not possible to “transform the economic and social crisis of capitalism into the decisive moment of world revolution without ruthless offensive tactics.”¹⁹

This resolution did not question the centralism of the Comintern. On the contrary, it attacked “opportunist

tendencies” for using slogans such as “decentralisation in the International”. Given that the initiative for the ultra-left course – and especially for the March Action in Germany – had come from representatives of the ECCL, the delegates to the CYI congress thought their ultra-left documents were in the spirit of Moscow. Münzenberg wrote a month later that the congress would have produced results, “which surely would have been completely in line with the spirit of the Communist International and its current legitimate demands on all its parts.”²⁰

It was the representatives of the Comintern, the Hungarians Bela Kun and Josef Pogany, who campaigned at the CYI congress for the “theory of the offensive” (and also for retroactive support for the March Action). And it was precisely the CYI members who had participated in a delegation to Russia in the spring of 1921 who had become passionate supporters of the theory of the offensive – they justified this support by citing the difficult situation in Russia, which needed relief from imperialist pressure via revolutionary crises in other countries. Münzenberg was not an opponent of the theory of the offensive, but he believed the moment was unfavourable.

A little later, at the third Comintern congress in the summer of 1921 in Moscow, the theory of the offensive and the whole ultra-left course was discarded on the initiative of Lenin in favour of the united front and patient work amongst the masses. Thus, the impression was created that the second CYI congress had been cancelled by the Comintern to prevent a victory of the ultra-leftists. But the opposite was the case, since at the time of the Jena congress the ultra-leftists enjoyed the backing of the Comintern leadership. In fact, Münzenberg was accused of not accepting the moving of the congress because he wanted to prevent the CYI from adopting the theory of the offensive!

Alfred Kurella, who represented the Komsomol in the Executive Committee of the CYI, presented his judgement nearly ten years later:

“It is of course clear that the ECCL’s measure was not organisational but eminently political . . . when it did not stick to the letter of its agreements with the CYI, but instead threw its whole authority into the scales to save the CYI from a fatal political mistake.”²¹

However, it was not a question of political “authority” but of an organisational command – one that was not even justified to the people receiving it. It violated not the “letter” of the agreements between the Comintern and its youth organisations but rather the entire spirit of the resolutions on the organisational independence of the youth. Interestingly, Münzenberg – in a book that appeared almost simultaneously with that of Kurella – described the canceling of the congress as a voluntary decision that was taken only because of police repression.²² In reality, the CYI had lost its autonomy.

The Moscow Congress of the CYI

When the CYI congress re-opened in Moscow on 9 July 1921, the subordination to the Comintern was already a done deal. The protocol recorded that all relevant decisions were adopted unanimously, but behind the scenes

Münzenberg was thinking about his resignation.²³ Many socialist youth organisations had broken with their social democratic parties and joined the CYI to escape the tutelage of a party bureaucracy and win political and organisational independence – this was now to be sacrificed in the name of revolutionary discipline.

The second CYI congress decided to move the Executive Committee to Moscow, while maintaining a sub-secretariat with limited political powers in Berlin. Although

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Münzenberg was re-elected to the EC, he lost his post as EC secretary and withdrew from the EC work (almost a year later, he formally resigned from the EC). Thus, the youth international lost its only leading figure with the standing to assert himself against the Comintern leadership in Moscow.

The theses adopted in Moscow did not explicitly abolish the organisational independence of the communist youth organisations. But they held that the focus of the youth movement could no longer be “political and tactical questions” but rather the “revolutionary education of the masses”.²⁴ That must have been a bitter pill for many young communists because the social democratic parties prescribed educational instead of political work for their youth organisations.

With the devaluation of political work by the youth organisations, the entire CYI was committed to the “Russian model”; connected to this was the rule used by the Komsomol that, even though the youth organisations were organisationally independent from the parties, individual young party members – who made up the majority or in some cases the entirety of the leading bodies of the youth organisations – were subjected to party discipline. Organisational independence became a dead letter because the General Secretariat was able to control the youth organisation directly via its control of the individual party members.

At the second congress of the CYI there were heated debates on this issue, but in the end there were large majorities for the theses presented by the Komsomol. Even more serious was the resolution on the youth movement which was adopted at the Third Congress of the Comintern, which had taken place right before in Moscow. This established that the CYI was not only subordinate to “the decisions of the congress of the Comintern and its EC,” but that it also had to “act as a mediator of the will of the Comintern in all its sections”.²⁵ There was hardly any mention of the CYI’s own will. Holding the CYI congresses after the Comintern congresses also meant the CYI lost the ability to collectively intervene in the decision-making process of the Comintern – the young communists

were presented with the finished resolutions from the Comintern congresses and could not change or much less reject them. Accordingly, the Comintern resolution on the youth question was supported by an overwhelming majority of the CYI congress.

Münzenberg had hoped that the canceling of the Jena congress by the Comintern would not create a precedent. He wrote in an article entitled "A precedent?" in the newspaper Youth International:

An independent CYI could have been a barrier to Stalinisation – or at least an additional hurdle that the bureaucracy would have needed to break down

"We see neither cause nor reason for the abolition or even a restriction on the organisational independence of the communist youth organisations by the Communist International, and would consider this the most serious damage not only to the communist youth movement but also to the Comintern itself."²⁶

But it was shown in the following years that the political and organisational control of the CYI was increasingly in the hands of the Moscow apparatus.

The decline of the CYI and conclusions

In the following years, the history of the Comintern and especially of the CYI became less and less interesting: the "Bolshevisation" campaign in 1924 and the further steps towards the Stalinisation of the Comintern transformed the CYI into an apparatus of Comintern policy (and ultimately of Soviet foreign policy). Congresses were held less frequently and controversies were covered up. The CYI was disbanded in 1943 at the same time as the Comintern.

After an analysis of the conflict about the independence of the CYI during its first two years, the question arises what role this conflict played in the further development of the youth international as well as of the communist movement as a whole. The work of Richard Cornell presents the bureaucratisation of the communist movement as an inevitable product of the ideas of Lenin. Consequently, the CYI founders who insisted on independence for so long were leading a completely futile struggle: once they had decided to join the Comintern they relinquished any kind of autonomy – even if it took several years before they realised it. This analysis is problematic because social factors in the bureaucratic degeneration of the Comintern and the Soviet Union are ignored in favour of purely political ones. Various Marxist thinkers have assumed that the desolate social situation in the Soviet Union after the revolution and the civil war had more to do with the establishment of Stalinism than this or that text by Lenin.

But even Trotsky and his adherents have not provided a satisfactory evaluation of the history of the CYI. In The

Revolution Betrayed, for example, Trotsky criticised the depoliticisation of Komsomol under Stalin. But he said nothing about how the first steps in this direction were taken at the second CYI congress where he intervened as the Comintern representative. The growing apparatus in Moscow developed its own, not political but social, interest in anti-democratic centralisation, for the simple motive of self-preservation.

The subordination of the CYI should not be seen as "central" to the degeneration of the Comintern. But even if the taming of CYI was not crucial for further developments, it was a political decision that ultimately favoured and accelerated the social processes of bureaucratisation. Even Trotsky admitted that the ban on factions within the Bolshevik Party in 1921 was "one of the starting points" for the degeneration:

"It is true that the Bolshevik party forbade factions at the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, a time of mortal danger. One can argue whether or not this was correct. The subsequent course of development has in any case proved that this prohibition served as one of the starting points of the party's degeneration."²⁷

In this sense the de facto abolition of the autonomy of the CYI can be seen as a measure that, while it did not trigger, did expedite the bureaucratisation of the Soviet society and the international communist movement, as it provided the bureaucracy a further weapon against the party base. In the case of Trotsky personally this was particularly evident in early 1924 when eight prominent members of the Komsomol protested publicly against the campaign against "Trotskyism".

Shortly thereafter, fifteen members of the Central Committee of the Komsomol (a majority) were removed from their work in the youth organisation by the General Secretariat of the party. This dissolution of the Komsomol Central Committee by the party apparatus, ignoring the statutes, was justified by the threat of "Trotskyism". Thus, the subordination of the youth – just like the ban on factions – served as a basis for administrative measures by the bureaucracy against its critics. One of the most prominent Comintern bureaucrats, the Finn Otto Kuusinen, said in mid-1929:

"The most valuable thing the communist youth movement has done in the last five years is that it has effectively helped our parties and the Comintern in the struggle against Trotskyism."²⁸

The subjection of the CYI was intended as a measure to implement a correct revolutionary line amongst the youth – but this measure provided a framework for the Soviet bureaucracy, with the help of a tamed youth international, to discard this revolutionary line and make the entire communist movement toothless. An independent CYI could have been a barrier to Stalinisation – or at least an additional hurdle that the bureaucracy would have needed to break down. But the decapitated CYI, as the quotation from Kuusinen shows, became an activism-oriented and bureaucratised organisation which the party leadership could use against internal critics.

The early history of the CYI proves impressively that young revolutionaries need to organise themselves as a part of the revolutionary workers' movement – but also that

they need independent structures to be able to integrate themselves into this movement. The thoughts expressed by Lenin in 1915 on the youth movement were just as relevant in the years 1919 or 1921; namely, that communists have to respect the desire of youth for independence and, in the case of conflicts, must restrict themselves to patient convincing. The Comintern leaders rejected these principles in 1921 in order to carry out a political turn "quickly" (i.e. disregarding the democratic decision-making mechanisms). In the process they dissolved the established and tested leadership of the CYI, which enjoyed an independent authority. Its place was taken by rather unimaginative bureaucrats who collaborated actively in the decline of the CYI and the Comintern as a whole,

rather than fighting actively against it.

By Wlodek Flakın, Revolutionary Internationalist Organisation (RIO), Berlin, 20 February 2010

An extensive bibliography will be available in the German language RIO pamphlet to be published soon. Most of the sources this work is based on are in German, which was the principal language of the Comintern and the CYI in their early years. All translations are by the author. Due to the weakness of the communist youth movement in English-speaking countries, many of these documents are not available in English. The author is prepared to translate source material into English for researchers and can be contacted via RIO.

ENDNOTES

1. Most of the sources for this article are in German. The most comprehensive history in English is Richard Cornell, *Revolutionary Vanguard: the Early Years of the Communist Youth International, 1914-1924*, (Toronto 1982). A review article of Cornell from PR 3 first series (1986) can be found at: www.permanentrevolution.net/?view=entry&entry=475
2. Karl Liebknecht, "Arbeiterbewegung und Jugendorganisation" (1 August 1908) English translation: "Workers' Movement and Youth Organisation". in *Revolution: Declarations of Independence*, p10-13 www.onesolutionrevolution.org/?p=74&language=en
3. VI Lenin, Youth International, (December 1916) www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1916/dec/00d.htm
4. Quoted in, Institut für Marxistische Studien und Forschungen (IMSF), *Aus der Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiter-jugendbewegung 1904-45*, (Frankfurt 1975) p48-49
5. Lenin, Youth International, op cit
6. ECCI, Aufruf des Exekutivkomitees der Kommunistischen Internationale an die proletarischen Jugendorganisationen der Welt, 29 May 1919, Kurella, Gründung, Appendix III. p216
7. Communist Youth International, Manifest, Programm und Statut, p12
8. Alfred Kurella, Gründung und Aufbau der CYI (Munich 1970) p36-38. According to Kurella, Münzenberg was for maintaining the "closest contact" with the Comintern, "but without being bound by any alliances in all tactical questions."
9. Ibid. p10.
10. "The majority of delegates rejected Willi Münzenberg's proposal to constitute the CYI as an equal sister organisation of the Communist International, and thus to join the Comintern politically but not organisationally. By 17 to 8 votes, the congress adopted the proposal introduced by the Komsomol and the FSJ which called the CYI a part of the Communist International", from Karl Heinz Jahnke et al, *Deutsche Arbeiterjugendbewegung, 1904-45* (Berlin 1973) p258
11. Richard Cornell, *Revolutionary Vanguard: the Early Years of the Communist Youth International, 1914-1924*, (Toronto 1982) p.96-98
12. Willi Münzenberg, *Die Dritte Front, Aufzeichnungen aus 15 Jahren proletarischer Jugendbewegung*, Berlin 1978 p303

13. Communist Youth International, "Thesen über das Verhältnis der KI zu der CYI und das der KP zu den KJO" in Kurella, Gründung, Appendix IV, p224
14. Revolution, Declarations of independence, p17-18 www.onesolutionrevolution.org/?p=68&language=en
15. Komsomol: "Thesen des ZK des russischen Kommunistischen Jugendverbandes" in Kurella, Gründung, Appendix IV, p227-30
16. Kurella, Gründung, p124. On this occasion Münzenberg was also accused of meddling in the internal affairs of the Komsomol for defending an oppositional tendency against administrative measures by the leadership
17. Kurella, Gründung, p157
18. This version of events was also presented in a debate on the "youth question" between the independent youth organisation REVOLUTION and Permanent Revolution. See Stuart King, "Lessons of Revolution", PR5, London 2007 p39-40 www.permanentrevolution.net/entry/1713
19. CYI, "Resolution des 'Jenaer Kongresses' über die Weltpolitische Lage." in Kurella, Gründung, Appendix VI, p241-43
20. Willi Münzenberg: "Ein Präzedenzfall?" *Jugend-Internationale*. Volume 2. Number 10. June 1921. Berlin, p282
21. Kurella, Gründung, p170
22. Münzenberg, Dritte Front, p344
23. Cornell, Vanguard, p230-31. In his book about the CYI Münzenberg writes nothing about the political reasons for his withdrawal from the leadership of the CYI besides mentioning "more urgent work" for the International Workers' Aid which he had been called on to lead. See Münzenberg, Dritte Front, p348
24. Communist Youth International, "Resolution zur Frage der Beziehungen zwischen den kommunistischen Parteien und den KJO." in Kurella, Gründung, Appendix VII. p244-46
25. The CI and the Communist Youth Movement, 12 July 1921, Theses, Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International, *Ink Links* 1980, p231. Also at: www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/3rd-congress/youth.htm
26. Münzenberg, "Ein Präzedenzfall?" p283
27. Leon Trotsky, "Trotskyism and the PSOP", in *New Internationalist* Vol. 5, No. 10, New York, October 1939, www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1939/07/psop02.htm
28. Cited in Münzenberg, Dritte Front, p299