



BRILL

‘Freedom of Discussion Inside the Party Is Absolutely Necessary’

KPD Chairperson Ernst Meyer and Party Democracy, 1921–2

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Abstract

Despite being ‘one of the most notable leaders of the German Communist movement’, Ernst Meyer (1887–1930) remains relatively unknown. Prior to the online publication of the author’s PhD dissertation – an extensive 666-page biography of Meyer – there existed beyond two short biographies – an informative political autobiography from Meyer’s wife Rosa Meyer-Leviné and an essay by Hermann Weber published in 1968 – and some recent texts from the author, no other publications dealing closely with his life and work. Of these, only Meyer-Leviné’s biography has been published in English.

Meyer played a major role in the left wing of the German labour movement, beginning in 1908 when he joined the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) until his death over twenty years later. A friend and collaborator of Rosa Luxemburg, he was also one of the founding and leading members of the International Group and its successor, the Spartacus League, in which the radical, anti-war wing of Social Democracy organised itself after the outbreak of World War I. He represented both of these groups as a delegate to the international conferences of anti-war socialists at Zimmerwald (1915) and Kienthal (1916). Elected to the KPD’s *Zentrale* at the party’s founding conference, Meyer remained a member of the leadership almost continuously in the years to come, occupying various leading positions. He also represented the party at the Second and Fourth World-Congresses of the Communist International (1920 and 1922).

This is an updated, translated and extended version of an article originally published under the title “‘Diskussionsfreiheit ist innerhalb unserer Partei absolut notwendig.’ Zum Verhältnis des KPD-Vorsitzenden Ernst Meyer zur innerparteilichen Demokratie 1921/22’ in the *Jahrbuch für historische Kommunismusforschung* in 2006. It was translated from the German by Loren Balhorn. This translation was funded by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.

Keywords

Social Democracy – Germany party democracy – freedom of expression

Ernst Meyer – a Forgotten KPD Leader

Despite being ‘one of the most notable leaders of the German Communist movement’,¹ Ernst Meyer (1887–1930) remains relatively unknown. Prior to the online publication of the author’s PhD dissertation² – an extensive 666-page biography of Meyer – there existed, beyond two short biographies³ – an informative political autobiography from Meyer’s wife Rosa Meyer-Leviné and an essay by Hermann Weber published in 1968 – and some recent texts from the author, no other publications dealing closely with his life and work.⁴ Of these, only Meyer-Leviné’s biography has been published in English.⁵

Meyer played a major role in the left wing of the German labour movement, beginning in 1908 when he joined the German Social-Democratic Party (SPD) until his death over twenty years later. A friend and collaborator of Rosa Luxemburg, he was also one of the founding and leading members of the International Group and its successor, the Spartacus League, in which the radical, anti-war wing of Social Democracy organised itself after the outbreak of World War I. He represented both of these groups as a delegate to the international conferences of anti-war socialists at Zimmerwald (1915) and Kienthal (1916).⁶ Elected to the KPD’s *Zentrale*⁷ at the party’s founding conference,

1 Weber 1968, p. 180.

2 Wilde 2013.

3 Weber and Herbst 2004, pp. 501–3; Weber (ed.) 1969, pp. 220–2; Weber 1969, pp. 325ff.; Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus (ed.) 1970, pp. 328ff.

4 Meyer-Leviné 1977; Weber 1968; Wilde 2005; Wilde 2009; Wilde 2010a. A major biography of Meyer by the author has recently been published online and will be printed in abridged form by Dietz Verlag, Berlin.

5 Meyer-Leviné 1977.

6 For more on Meyer’s role during the war and the German revolution see Wilde 2009; Wilde 2010a, Wilde 2013, pp. 51–169.

7 Note: until 1925 the leadership of the KPD was organised into a 12-member *Zentrale* divided into political (*Polbüro*) and organisational (*Orgbüro*) wings, similar to what is now known as a central committee. Above the *Zentrale* stood the *Zentralausschuss*, a body of delegates from the regional committees of the party which convened quarterly. As these terms are not directly translatable into English equivalents, the German terms will be retained in this article.

Meyer remained a member of the leadership almost continuously in the years to come, occupying various leading positions. He also represented the party at the Second and Fourth World-Congresses of the Communist International (1920, 1922).

Following the arrest of KPD chairman Heinrich Brandler⁸ in April 1921, Meyer assumed acting leadership of the organisation and was elected head of the *Polbüro* directly after the August 1921 party conference in Jena, making him the de facto chairperson of the party until the following party conference in January 1923.⁹ In the years to come Meyer's united-front policy, which sought to organise coordinated mass actions with the SPD and trade unions, would be primarily responsible for the KPD's consolidation as a mass party.

Brandler's return in August 1922 prompted a gradual decline in Meyer's power and status, a move supported by the Comintern. Meyer was not re-elected to the *Zentrale* at the January 1923 party conference in Leipzig, but assumed a leading role in opposition circles following the ascendancy of the party's left wing around Ruth Fischer in early 1924. His so-called 'middle group' would later be taunted by its opponents as the 'conciliator group'.

Meyer returned to the centre of power in 1926 as the leader of the middle group, and for a while was, along with Ernst Thälmann, the 'actual leader of the party', having a 'substantial impact upon its fortunes'.¹⁰ He was once again removed from the leadership and marginalised politically after the KPD's ultra-left turn in 1929. At this point he had already been gravely ill for some time. Ernst Meyer died on 2 February 1930 and was buried alongside other prominent socialists such as Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht and Franz Mehring in Friedrichsfelde Central Cemetery, Berlin.

8 For biographical details of other KPD members mentioned in this article see Weber and Herbst 2004.

9 The *Zentrale* of the KPD was formally composed of 'equal members' (see Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus (ed.) 1966). Meyer, along with Wilhelm Pieck, received the most votes at the Jena party conference and was elected as chairperson of the *Polbüro* at the first session of the *Zentrale*. During this time he exercised decisive influence on the policies of the KPD. Meyer's formal position as the chairperson of the *Polbüro*, the 'top committee in the party' (Weber and Herbst 2004, p. 43), his very real role as a party leader and widespread references to him as party chairperson in historical literature legitimate attributing this role to him.

10 Weber and Herbst 2004, p. 503.

The KPD in 1921–2 – Still a Democratic Party?

The extent to which the KPD in the early 1920s should be considered a democratic organisation is heavily debated by scholars. The ‘classical’ West German historiography of the KPD, represented by Ossip K. Flechtheim and most importantly Hermann Weber, makes a very clear delineation between an early period of open, democratic debate in the KPD and the later years of the Weimar Republic, in which the party was under the firm control of the party bureaucracy, which in turn was subjugated to the leadership of the Comintern and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). The transformational period is located in the years 1924–9, during which a fundamental Stalinisation (referred to in the KPD as ‘Bolshevisation’) of the party apparatus took place.

Stalinisation in the KPD meant a shift from an organisation with a large degree of internal democracy to a disciplined party with a strict and centralised authority. The internal dynamics of the party changed – it became monolithic, tightly controlled and extremely hierarchical. Inside the party, the leadership ruled over the membership with the help of the party apparatus, ... policy was dictated by the Stalinist CPSU. ... Pluralism, independence and open discussion were replaced by submissiveness, discipline and rule by decree.¹¹

The potential of ‘democratic Communism’, as envisioned by Rosa Luxemburg and dominant in the party’s early years, was buried in the dispute with so-called ‘bureaucratic-dictatorial Communism’.¹² This Stalinisation, however, was ‘hardly necessary or unavoidable, nor should it be considered the inevitable trajectory of German Communism’.¹³ This thesis of transformation was developed primarily in Weber’s ground-breaking 1969 text, *Die Wandlung des deutschen Kommunismus*.¹⁴ He continues to defend this position today.¹⁵

There are however also scholars who contradict this thesis. Sigrid Koch-Baumgarten, a historian who ultimately agrees with Weber’s thesis of transformation,¹⁶ nevertheless in her 1986 book *Aufstand der Avantgarde. Die Märzaktion der KPD 1921* locates the beginnings of this process before 1924.

11 Weber 1991, pp. 27ff.

12 Weber (ed.) 1969, pp. 47ff.

13 See Weber’s Introduction to Flechtheim 1986, p. 52.

14 Weber 1969.

15 Weber and Herbst 2004, pp. 13ff., 17ff., 43.

16 See Koch-Baumgarten’s Introduction to Flechtheim 1986, p. 30.

She labels the expulsions of members in the aftermath of the March Action¹⁷ ‘purges’ and concludes: ‘The first phase of “Bolshevisation” in the KPD concluded in 1922 – it did not, as previously believed, begin in the mid-1920s.’¹⁸ ‘The trends that would come to fundamentally influence the development of the KPD began to take shape in this phase . . .’¹⁹ – the phase during which Ernst Meyer stood at the head of the party.

Klaus-Michael Mallmann takes the criticism further in his 1996 publication *Kommunisten in der Weimarer Republik*, rejecting the transformation thesis and deriding it as the ‘orthodoxy of Stalinisation’.²⁰ According to him, authoritarian structures and the rule of the party apparatus had been intrinsic to German Communism from its beginnings, discrediting the notion that Luxemburgian ‘democratic communism’ had been dominant around the party’s founding. He takes as evidence the Heidelberg party conference in 1919;²¹ not even Ernst Thälmann (later leader of the Stalinised KPD) would have dared to clamp down on the party membership in the way Paul Levi, self-styled successor to

17 The term ‘March Action’ refers to an attempted insurrection launched by the KPD in March 1921, the failure of which led to a deep crisis in the party and a dramatic loss of membership. For more information on the March Action and the aftermath see Koch-Baumgarten 1986 and Weber 1991.

18 Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 436.

19 Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 443.

20 See Mallmann 1996, pp. 54–83.

21 The KPD’s Heidelberg party conference, held illegally in October 1919, was witness to intense conflicts between the *Zentrale* and an ultra-left wing of the party which later left and formed the Communist Workers’ Party of Germany (KAPD). The *Zentrale* was only able to retain a majority for its position by granting its members voting rights (see Flechtheim 1986, pp. 145ff.). Flechtheim describes Levi’s methods at the conference as ‘centrist-bureaucratic-dictatorial’, while Mallmann argues that the *Zentrale*’s behaviour in Heidelberg represented ‘the model for future internal discussions in the party’. See Mallmann 1996, p. 64. Angress, in contrast, states: ‘At the party congress at Heidelberg, in the fall of 1919, Levi did not conduct a purge, but manoeuvred the left-wing extremists into such an untenable position that they seceded on their own account’ (Angress 1972, p. 174, n. 25). Levi’s biographer Beradt points out that the split Levi forced was comparable to later splits ‘in terms of method, but not in terms of content’ (Beradt 1969, p. 33). Interestingly enough, the Comintern leadership criticised the actions that led to the split, and Lenin singled out Levi personally for causing tens of thousands of members to leave the KPD. See Winkler 1985, pp. 502ff. Recently, the authors of a close study have concluded that Levi’s actions are not comparable to the behaviour of the Thälmann leadership, in terms neither of content nor method. Nor can Levi’s forced expulsions be generalised as the indicator of an early degeneration of party democracy in the KPD (see Wilde and Bois 2007).

Rosa Luxemburg, had.²² Mallmann concludes: ‘No Stalin was required for the “Stalinisation” of the KPD.’²³

A recent contribution to the debate comes from Andreas Wirsching.²⁴ Though he devotes most of his essay to attacking Mallmann, he agrees with Mallmann’s criticism of the transformation thesis, considering it one of the ‘most convincing sections of the entire book’ and arguing it to be ‘much more accurate than Weber’s thesis of “Luxemburgian early communism”’.²⁵ The Heidelberg party conference is reason enough to ‘call the thesis of “extensive internal democracy” into question.’²⁶ The seeds of bureaucratisation and dependency on Moscow had been planted by 1919–20, making ‘the path to “Stalinisation” appear to be predetermined and unavoidable... Thus, we should speak not of “Stalinisation” but rather of an early Bolshevisation of the KPD.’²⁷ Regardless of the accuracy of his position, we must agree with Wirsching when he states: ‘The thesis that the KPD in its early years had the potential to develop along alternative lines must base itself upon empirical proof.’²⁸

This essay is intended to be a contribution to the debate, to ask if an alternative development was possible in the early KPD. We will examine the relationship of party chairperson Ernst Meyer to internal democracy in the period between the party conferences in Jena (August 1921) and Leipzig (January 1923).²⁹ We will look closely at Meyer and the party leadership’s behaviour towards both its right and left wings,³⁰ as one of the vital indicators of democracy within a party organisation is its handling of oppositional minorities.

22 Mallmann 1996, p. 64.

23 Mallmann 1996, p. 67.

24 See Wirsching 1997, pp. 449–66. See Mallman’s response in Mallmann 1999, pp. 401–15. See also Weber 1996.

25 Wirsching 1997, p. 463.

26 Ibid.

27 Wirsching 1997, p. 465 (underlining present in the original).

28 Wirsching 1997, p. 463.

29 This study focuses on the 12 months following the Jena party conference. Meyer spent September–December 1922 serving as a KPD delegate to the ECCI and Fourth World-Congress of the Comintern in Russia, thus having little influence on internal developments in the party.

30 Although the KPD was, when compared to other parties of the Weimar era, on the extreme left, the party itself was from its founding until the conclusion of Stalinisation in the late 1920s split into various factions on both its right and left wings: ‘Fundamentally there were two currents. A realist current that sought first to gather the majority of the masses behind it, as opposed to taking power via insurrection, and was open to

Primary focus will be lent to the conflicts with the right-opposition, as these reached both their highpoint as well as conclusion during the period of time this article focuses on. The political content of the debates will not be of primary importance, but rather Meyer's fundamental positions vis-à-vis internal democracy (and those of the *Zentrale* he led). Meyer's positions will allow us to draw conclusions regarding the health of internal democracy in the KPD of 1921–2.

The March Action and Internal Crisis

The KPD witnessed intense internal conflicts in 1921, after unification with the left wing of the USPD had finally brought it to the level of a mass party. The leadership decided to engage in an isolated, adventurist attempt at insurrection – the so-called 'March Action'. The insurrection was a catastrophe. Roughly 150 Communists were killed and 6,000 arrested. Over half of the party membership left in frustration and disgust. The disaster of the March Action led not only to mass resignations, but also to intense debates within the party: should it continue to follow the theory of the offensive regardless of the consequences, or attempt to win over the majority of the working class with a long-term united-front strategy? How much criticism can the leadership tolerate after such a disaster, and how capable is it of self-criticism? To what extent was the Comintern responsible for the disaster (Karl Radek had pushed hard for the insurrectionist position, going so far as to send emissaries to Germany to enforce the line)? Was public criticism of the leadership permissible when political opponents and even the state could use said criticism for their own ends, or must criticism remain an internal matter?

The most vocal critic of the March Action was Paul Levi, who had become the central leadership figure in the party after the murders of Luxemburg, Liebknecht and Jogiches and remained at the top until February 1921. On 12 April 1921 Levi published a pamphlet containing damning criticism of both the party and its leadership during the March Action, labelling it the 'greatest Bakuninist putsch in history to date', and openly denouncing the role played

compromises and the establishment of united fronts with the leaderships of other workers' organisations. The radical current rejected all forms of compromise, and aimed directly for a revolutionary insurrection and the taking of state power' (see Weber and Herbst 2004, p. 18).

by the Comintern and its emissaries.³¹ The SPD used the pamphlet to prove the Communists' responsibility for the March Action.

Levi was expelled from the party on 15 April for 'breach of trust and inflicting damage upon the party'.³² Many party members, including leading members such as Zetkin, Braß, Däuming, Hoffman and Geyer, expressed solidarity with Levi. This right-wing oppositional current, known as 'Levites', began an intense internal conflict with the *Zentrale*, pushing for a condemnation of the March Action, a different relationship with the reformist working-class organisations, and the KPD's political independence from the Comintern. The *Zentrale* pursued highly restrictive measures against their opponents, though they were nevertheless permitted to argue their position extensively at district conference and a meeting of the *Zentralausschuss* on 3–5 May 1921. Even the already-expelled Levi was permitted to conduct a defence of his position at this meeting, though his expulsion was reaffirmed by a vote of 37 in favour and 8 opposed.

The criticisms of Levi targeted primarily the way in which he had conducted himself: by publicly and relentlessly criticising the party during its deepest crisis to date he had played into the hands of political opponents and the German state. The membership exodus following the March Action also removed the right-wing opposition's base, as it was primarily the members that had left the party who would have sympathised with their views. It was thus inevitable that Levi's allies would be defeated in the internal struggle. Tragically, the right-wing opposition exited (or was forced out of) the KPD just as the Communist movement was beginning to agree with many of their positions (except for their criticism of the Comintern's functioning). This change of course became clearly visible at the Third World-Congress of the Comintern and would become known as the united-front strategy. The KPD would soon adopt the new line at the Jena party conference. Despite the political rapprochement occurring within the party, the conflict had already taken on such an internal dynamic that the KPD majority refused – despite pressure from Lenin and other Comintern leaders to reintegrate Levi and his followers – to forgive Levi's breach of discipline as a mistaken over-reaction to a particularly dramatic situation. The Levites themselves were unwilling to humiliate themselves by admitting their own poor behaviour, although this may have been their only chance to be readmitted into the party.

Meyer had belonged to the main protagonists of the theory of the offensive and was, as a leading member of the *Zentrale*, partially responsible for

31 See Levi 2009.

32 As cited in Winkler 1985, p. 519.

the disaster in March. He issued sharp attacks against Levi in the first months of 1921 and demanded harsh organisational measures against the opposition, while insisting that these occur upon the basis of an open debate within the party. During a session of the *Zentralausschuss* in May 1921 Meyer called for an 'open and clear statement of antagonisms' so that 'comrades would finally be informed about that which is occurring in the party, what antagonisms exist within the party' and emphasised the necessity of 'continuing the discussion inside the party . . . : actions alone do not lead to the party's consolidation, but also discussion about them and the lessons to be learned from them. And it is false when comrades accuse the *Zentrale* of seeking to limit this discussion.'³³

Meyer himself would soon come to support a strategy directly opposed to that of the KPD during the March Action. Meyer transformed himself into a passionate defender of the united-front strategy³⁴ and internal democracy and even became a bold critic of the Comintern, although he never called into question the necessity of a centralised world-party.³⁵ As Meyer shifted his political positions he presumably would have found important allies in Levi's followers. This would have required an increased willingness on behalf of the KPD to tolerate strategic differences within the party, instead of declaring them to be questions of principle and reacting with expulsions. As it was, the KPD's expulsions of Levi's followers generated a climate in which organisational reunification, even upon the basis of a political rapprochement, seemed impossible.

In September 1921 the expelled members around Levi formed the *Kommunistische Arbeitsgemeinschaft* ['Communist Working Group', or KAG],³⁶ attempting to influence the KPD's course from without while maintaining contact with members of the party's right wing. This right wing shared Levi's criticisms of the March Action and the role of the Comintern and oriented themselves around the united-front strategy. On the other side of the party stood a strong left wing that held to the theory of the offensive and defended the March Action on principle. Between the right and ultra-left wings of the party a centrist current formed around Ernst Meyer, the new chairperson after the party conference

33 Protokoll ZA 1921a.

34 For more on the united front in the KPD under Meyer see Wilde 2013, pp. 248–82. Under Meyer's leadership, the KPD's united-front strategy was able to achieve consolidation and renewed growth. See also Wilde 2013, pp. 321–4.

35 For more on Meyer's relationship to the Comintern in 1921–2 see Wilde 2013, pp. 308–20.

36 See Koch-Baumgarten 1986, pp. 409–44. The KAG criticised KPD policy as 'putschist' and argued for a stronger focus on immediate reforms as well as more autonomy from the Comintern.

in Jena in August 1921. This current dominated the new *Zentrale* elected at the Jena party conference in August 1921.³⁷

This centrist current considered its main task to be holding the fragile party together during a difficult period, de-escalating the tense situation in the organisation, rebuilding the party's capacity to act, and developing a concrete praxis around the Comintern's united-front decisions. The centrists found themselves confronted with constant attacks from both the right and left wings.

The Conflict with the Right-Opposition

Commenting on how to deal with oppositional currents within the party, all members of the new *Zentrale* stated 'that it is absolutely necessary to intervene forcefully in the political life of the party, but not via organisational means, rather through political observation and discussion.'³⁸ A circular issued by the *Zentrale* on 30 October 1921 stated: 'we beseech the comrades in the districts in no way . . . to engage in reprisals against right-wing party members, but rather to pull them into political activity more than we have up until now.'³⁹

The desire to solve political conflicts in the party politically rather than organisationally (for example through reprimands or expulsions) would define the behaviour of the entire *Zentrale*, albeit most especially Meyer, in coming conflicts. Notable was Meyer's report to the November session of the *Zentralausschuss* in which he sought to deliver an objective criticism of the KAG's positions. He concluded by labelling the KAG's 'actions . . . and existence' a 'crime against the working class' because they 'hold back elements from the USP [Independent Social-Democratic Party] and the SPD who are ready to join our ranks', many of whom, influenced by the KAG's criticisms, believed 'that our party is good for nothing'. He nevertheless argued forcefully for political engagement with the group. The KPD was to 'discuss politically, and in discussion disprove' the positions of the KAG, while the party press must disprove them in a 'brief, objective and sober' manner. 'It would only be necessary to move against the members of the working group in an organisational manner if they were to attempt to turn the group into a party and make our work more difficult. Any organisational activities that go beyond representing their

37 For more on the Jena party conference, the election of the new *Zentrale* and its composition, see Wilde 2013, pp. 239–43.

38 Protokoll *Zentrale* 1921b, p. 339.

39 *Zentrale der KPD* 1921c, p. 317.

interests and false positions in publications will be met with an organisational response.⁴⁰

The conflict with the right-opposition reached its high point – as well as its conclusion – in the winter of 1921–2, during the so-called ‘Friesland crisis’.⁴¹ Ernst Reuter Friesland, General Secretary of the KPD and originally a sympathiser with the ultra-left wing of the party, had gradually shifted toward the positions of the KAG since the Jena party conference.

The KAG’s national conference on 20 November 1921 had adopted ‘guiding principles’, formulated as five demands, which were to be the conditions for the KAG’s re-entry into the KPD. The first three demands addressed the KPD’s relationship to the Comintern (‘total material independence from the Communist International’, ‘subjection of all literature from foreign communist organisations... to the inspection of the German party leadership’ and security ‘against all organisational interference from the ECCI, both open and secret’), while the last two demanded a programmatical commitment to the united-front strategy and a strategy for the trade unions that did not threaten trade-union unity.⁴² Though Friesland had previously articulated differences with the other members of the *Zentrale*, it nevertheless came as a shock when he declared his support for the KAG’s demands: first at a session of the *Polbüro* on 12 December 1921, and again two days later during a meeting of the entire *Zentrale*.⁴³ He remarked that the only regrettable part of the demands was ‘that they come from the KAG and not the KPD itself’.⁴⁴ These revelations made his membership in the leading organs of the party problematic. On the same day that Friesland made his position known, the *Polbüro* voted five to three (with Friesland, as well as his close friends Ernst Meyer and Clara Zetkin, dissenting)⁴⁵ to abolish the position of General Secretary, effectively removing him from his post. Several leading members also demanded that Friesland be expelled from

40 Protokoll ZA 1921b, p. 30.

41 See Winkler 1985, pp. 532–7 as well as Brandt and Löwenthal 1957, pp. 181–204.

42 *Die Internationale* 1921. It is worth noting that the KAG’s statement of principles was submitted after the *Internationale*’s editorial deadline, but the editors chose to publish the statement anyway, without comment. This shows the party’s willingness to provide space for democratic debate, but also shows the leadership’s remarkable trust in the membership by allowing the publication of an oppositional statement without feeling the need to answer with their own statement immediately.

43 Protokoll Polbüro 1921, pp. 412–20.

44 Protokoll Polbüro 1921, p. 67. Friesland repeated his position at the *Zentrale* session two days later, calling the KAG’s demands ‘acceptable’ (see Protokoll Zentrale 1921d, p. 415).

45 See Protokoll Polbüro 1921, p. 72. See also Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 428, and Brandt and Löwenthal 1957, p. 131.

the *Zentrale*, a demand that Meyer opposed.⁴⁶ On 27 December 1921, during a session in which Meyer was absent, the *Zentrale* voted unanimously to suspend Friesland from his functions in the leadership, as well to suspend Otto Brass and Heinrich Malzahn, sympathisers of Friesland, from their leading positions in the KPD's *Reichsgewerkschaftszentrale* (party organ responsible for coordinating trade-union activity).⁴⁷ Meyer retroactively cast his vote in favour of suspending Friesland, but opposed the actions taken against Brass and Malzahn.⁴⁸

The justification given for their suspension was a public appeal to KPD members they had issued on 20 December 1921 in which sympathies with the KAG were clearly visible, as they demanded an end to Comintern interventions in the German party and the resignation of all *Zentrale* members whose roles in the March Action – including the preparation of bombings which were to be blamed on reactionaries and used to motivate workers to join the uprising – had been revealed by the Social-Democratic newspaper *Vorwärts*. Friesland had published a pamphlet that very same day entitled *On the Crisis in our Party* dealing with the same questions as the public appeal. Friesland, Malzahn and Brass submitted a declaration signed by 128 party members and five KPD parliamentarians to the *Zentrale* on 22 December demanding the resignation of various *Zentrale* members and the establishment of an internal committee to investigate the March Action. A second appeal, signed by 28 prominent members of the right-opposition, was released in early January 1922.⁴⁹

The leadership was under mounting pressure. The resignation of the *Zentrale* members would have constituted a significant weakening of the leadership as a whole and risked giving the impression that the party had bowed to Social-Democratic pressure and police repression.⁵⁰ For his own part, Meyer

46 Protokoll Zentrale 1921e, p. 464.

47 Ibid.

48 Zentrale der KPD 1921a, p. 361.

49 See *Die Rote Fahne* 1921b, *Die Rote Fahne* 1921c, and *Die Rote Fahne* 1922. The third appeal was accompanied by a sharp polemic from the paper's editors. Koch-Baumgarten claims that *Die Rote Fahne* delayed the publication of the appeal in order to force its authors to publish in Paul Levi's *KAG-Mitteilungsblatt*, an infraction against party discipline (see Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 431).

50 At the *Polbüro* session on 12 December 1921 Meyer declared that the problem with the KAG was its 'opposition to a Communist Party and the Communist International' (see Protokoll Polbüro 1921, p. 69). In his report to the third session of the ZA Meyer again argued that the demands of Friesland and the KAG implied 'an attempt to separate away from the Communist International entirely', or at least stronger autonomy for the national sections. In contrast, according to Meyer, 'we demand closer relationships, more

interpreted the KAG's criticisms of the Comintern as an attempt to liquidate the Comintern as a centralised world-party that must be resolutely opposed.

Under pressure from the KAG the *Zentrale* issued a 'political circular' on 17 December stating: 'The attitude of the KPD and its members towards the KAG can ... only be one of intense struggle. Any support for the goals of the KAG within the ranks of the KPD, whether direct or indirect, is incompatible with the duties of a party member.' Nevertheless, the circular also declared that 'there is a clear difference between comrades who sympathise ideologically with the KAG and those who engage in behaviour which ... breaks with party discipline. Opinions are not disproved with disciplinary action, they can only be liquidated through argument and explanation.' Even in cases where party discipline was infringed upon, branches were encouraged by the *Zentrale* to ensure 'that a serious attempt is made to convince comrades of the damaging effect of their actions, only after such attempts appear to be hopeless should disciplinary action be pursued.'⁵¹

Despite criticisms from the Executive Committee of the Communist International that the KPD leadership had been 'too weak' and 'too tolerant' towards the right-opposition,⁵² the *Zentrale* held its line. Meyer wrote on 8 January 1922: 'Our party ... answers political questions politically, and will only intervene organisationally when crass violations necessitate it.'⁵³ Indeed, the *Zentrale* actively pursued political debate and presented numerous opportunities for the opposition to state their case: Friesland, Brass and Malzahn's public appeal, as well as both of the declarations they submitted to the *Zentrale* were published in the *Rote Fahne* (the party's central organ); Friesland was invited to speak at countless KPD meetings, including a gathering of 2,000 KPD functionaries in Berlin, and was permitted to present his case at a *Zentrale* session on 22 January 1922.⁵⁴

intensive exchange of ideas between the executive committee and our party'. Meyer resolutely opposed any return to the conditions of the Second International (see Protokoll ZA 1922a, p. 254). Meyer and the *Zentrale* behind him, the status of the Comintern as a centralised world-party could not be questioned. This position did not, however, preclude the possibility of expressing tolerable and even necessary criticisms thereof. Numerous *Zentrale* sessions reaffirmed that criticism of the ECCI remained possible and necessary. For more on Meyer and the Comintern see Wilde 2013, pp. 308–20.

51 *Zentrale der KPD* 1921b, p. 108.

52 See Koch-Baumgarten 1986, p. 435.

53 Meyer 1922, p. 49.

54 Reisberg 1971, p. 291. It is worth noting that even in Berlin, a stronghold of the party's left wing, the attendees listened to Friesland's presentation 'without interruption' for over an hour. See *Zentrale der KPD* 1921a, p. 361.

At the same session Meyer presented a political report. He devoted extensive attention to the KAG, the Friesland crisis and the right-opposition. There he concluded:

The comrades from the opposition have no reason to complain that they did not have enough freedom of discussion. . . . Have they not been given the opportunity in the last months to tell the organisation everything they wanted to say? Article after article has been published and meeting after meeting has been held in which the comrades had the broadest freedom of discussion. . . . The political attacks of the KAG were answered politically, and the political question of the opposition was answered politically. But when the comrades began to move against us organisationally, the *Zentrale* had no choice but to take organisational measures. The *Zentrale* has been accused of waiting too long, of taking these measures too late. . . . We consider these accusations to be false for the following reasons: every organisational measure was and continues to be perceived as a reprimand, as a sign of our inability to respond to these attacks politically. It is because of this that we first had to conduct the struggle politically [before reverting to organisational measures].⁵⁵

Meyer submitted the *Zentrale's* motion to the *Zentralausschuss* expelling Friesland, Brass, Malzahn and the signatories to the declaration of the 28. It was the 'necessary consequence of their political and organisational behaviour'. Meyer argued that the conflict was distracting the party from engaging in political activity and should be ended.⁵⁶ The *Zentralausschuss* voted for the motion 41–4 and expelled the members in question.⁵⁷ The expulsion of Friesland and the circle around him, as well as the voluntary resignation of various sympathisers, brought the conflict with the right-opposition to an end.⁵⁸

55 Protokoll ZA 1922a, p. 256.

56 Protokoll ZA 1922a, p. 257.

57 See Angress 1972, p. 219. The majority of the expelled members joined the KAG, which soon joined the USPD and then in 1922 reunified with the SPD. Friesland, using his real name Ernst Reuter, had an impressive career in the SPD and became Mayor of West Berlin after the conclusion of World War II.

58 The path of the KAG eventually led it to enter the USPD in early 1922, leaving the Communist movement and returning to Social Democracy, which it rejoined together with the USPD in September 1922. There it formed the nucleus of a new left wing inside the SPD. The conditions of the economic crisis in 1931 led the KAG back out of the SPD and to the formation of the Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei (SAP). See Wilde 2010b.

Although Meyer was considered a victor of the conflict in the formal sense, in the long-term it probably weakened his position in the KPD. The number of members who left the party was small, but many of them were experienced, long-standing activists and functionaries of the labour movement capable of thinking independently as socialists. Politically they were much closer to Meyer's 'revolutionary *Realpolitik*' than the revolutionist, ultra-left course of adventurism and blind submission to Moscow of the later leaderships around Ruth Fischer and Ernst Thälmann. The two tendencies that would later become the leading opponents of ultra-leftism and Stalinisation in the KPD, Meyer's 'conciliationists' and Brandler's 'rightists', tragically were pushing those out of the party whose positions they were actually quite close to. Meyer, one of Levi's strongest opponents in the early summer of 1921, now tried in vain to prevent the expulsions of oppositionists, and hoped that facilitating wider debate within the party would keep them in. The Levi and Friesland crises revealed the limits of Communist pluralism, which even in 1921/2 were already quite narrow. The inability to tolerate and withstand political differences would prove to be one of the greatest handicaps of the Communist movement and one of the reasons behind its failure.

Dealing with the Left-Opposition

The left-opposition⁵⁹ was numerically much stronger than the right. Its strongholds were the districts of Berlin-Brandenburg – the domain of the left wing's leading lights Ruth Fischer and Arkadi Maslow – and Wasserkante (a regional party district comprising Hamburg and parts of Schleswig-Holstein). The left wing was politically opposed to the united-front strategy, propagated the continuation of the theory of the offensive and defended the March Action accordingly. The left wing had 'made strong gains' at the 1921 Jena party conference.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the conference's acceptance of a united-front policy represented a 'definitive victory for the right-wing and moderate elements of the KPD over the militant left wing'.⁶¹

Though the left wing remained in permanent opposition to the united front, which became the central and soon also very successful political project of the KPD leadership after the Jena party conference, the *Zentrale* still tried to integrate its members and even kept the party's central organ open to debate

59 For more information on the activities of the left-opposition see Utz 1974, pp. 144–66.

60 Angress 1972, p. 203.

61 Angress 1972, p. 206.

on their views. Thus the Berlin-Brandenburg district organisation submitted a request to the *Zentrale* on 11 November 1921 that the *Rote Fahne* publish an insert entitled 'Tactics and Organisation', with the district organisation being given editorship over the insert. The *Zentrale* decided to publish the insert, but retained the editorship, granting Berlin-Brandenburg's district organisation only a consultative role in its production.⁶² For all practical purposes, the insert became the de facto voice of the left wing until pressure from Lenin led to its cancellation on 1 January 1923.⁶³ Other examples of the *Zentrale's* integrationist policy vis-à-vis the left-opposition can be seen in the numerous articles from leading left-oppositionists in the *Internationale* (the KPD's theoretical journal), the addition of Ruth Fischer (Meyer's greatest adversary in the KPD) to the *Zentrale's* sessions in the summer of 1922, and the large number of left-wingers in the KPD delegation to the Fourth World-Congress of the Comintern.

The left-opposition took advantage of their relatively unfettered access to the party press, and used it continually to mount scathing attacks against the *Zentrale* and Ernst Meyer himself – most noticeably surrounding the conflict in the party regarding the Rathenau campaign in the summer of 1922.⁶⁴ German members of the left wing stationed in Moscow plotted continuously against Meyer, contributing to his removal as party chairperson in January 1923. It was nevertheless the *Zentrale's* integrationist policy towards the left-opposition – pulling them into the party's political practice as leaders of the strongest district organisations – and the 'tolerant party discipline'⁶⁵ that prevented an

62 Protokoll Zentrale 1921c, p. 356. Even the title of the insert was an affront to the leadership, as it referred to a previous brochure written in defence of the March Action: *Taktik und Organisation der Revolutionären Offensive: Die Lehren der Märzaktion*. This brochure was officially rejected by the party after being condemned by the Third World-Congress of the Comintern.

63 See Firsow 1981, pp. 45–9 and Utz 1974, p. 21.

64 The murder of Weimar Republic foreign minister Walther Rathenau by far-right fanatics on 24 June 1922 triggered a wave of demonstrations and strikes across Germany. The three major workers' parties (SPD, KPD, USPD), together with the central trade unions and anti-fascist federations, signed an accord directed against the far right. The KPD's left wing opposed this policy, arguing that it amounted to an uncritical defence of the bourgeois republic, and that the party should be emphasising the necessity to destroy the republic and replace it with the dictatorship of the proletariat instead. See Winkler 1985, pp. 427ff., and Angress 1972, pp. 242ff. For more on KPD policy after the Rathenau murder see Reisberg 1971, pp. 485–535. For examples of left-wing attacks against the *Zentrale* and Meyer see Maslow 1922, Fischer 1922 and Klein 1922.

65 Utz 1974, p. 147.

escalation of the conflict and the expulsions and similar actions that such a course would have entailed.

Ernst Meyer and Internal Democracy

Throughout the internal conflicts of the early 1920s in 1921–2, KPD chairperson Ernst Meyer defended freedom of discussion within the KPD and fought to keep the party press open for the views of the opposition. As he explained at the November session of the *Zentralausschuss*:

We observe . . . that some members have views to the right and left of the party majority There can be no doubt that it is the task of our party to discuss these differences . . . in an objective manner and to repudiate them politically. Freedom of discussion within our party is absolutely necessary – a freedom that must be strengthened by our organs, in particular our central publications . . . in that they provide space for open debate of tactics. We would never think of . . . cutting off these discussions by solving them organisationally or by transferring personnel, rather our party has space – and must have space – for honest discussions of various political views. . . . We can reassure any comrades who fear expulsion, banishment or other terrible things that it is not the intention of the *Zentrale* to solve political questions by dispatching specific members. We consider it the duty of the party to solve political questions politically.⁶⁶

Meyer considered freedom of discussion welcome up until the point when the party majority had reached a decision and sought to carry that decision out in public: ‘The only thing that the party requires is that in times of public activity, those who dissent from the line decided by the majority either be silent or withdraw temporarily, in order to avoid jeopardising our actions.’⁶⁷ On another occasion Meyer remarked how important it was ‘that many of those who criticised the March Action in retrospect had practised revolutionary discipline at the time, had closed ranks and fought with us. We welcome all criticism that is made upon the basis of common struggle, and we reject on principle any criticism that stands aside from the struggle and gripes about that which bleeding proletarians have done or are doing.’⁶⁸

66 Protokoll ZA 1921b, p. 31.

67 Ibid.

68 Zentrale der KPD 1922, p. 216.

Meyer praised the freedom of discussion in the party as one of the KPD's advantages over the other workers' parties in Germany. Thus he stated at the Leipzig party conference in January 1923:

[The debates at this conference have not been particularly prolific because most questions] have already been discussed exhaustively among the membership, to the point that, concerning the political arguments, all comrades are already . . . fully informed. That is what differentiates our party conference from that of the Social Democracy – ours has been prepared through a very thorough discussion of the questions we are confronted with. Our party is not afraid of criticism. We submit our activities to the sharpest introspection, meaning all that is left for the party conference to do is to generalise these discussions and bring them to a conclusion. The party demands criticism, for it is an indication of its health.

At the same time, it is interesting to note the reservations Meyer held regarding this point: 'What we must avoid is the exaggeration of criticism, which can quickly begin to undermine our power of persuasion [within the wider movement]'.⁶⁹ Meyer seems to have rejected freedom of criticism as an end in itself. Rather he saw it as a necessary component in the development of a correct policy and thus critical to the expansion of Communist influence. But because freedom of criticism was linked to the building of the Party (and the Communist International), it was also subordinated to that ultimate goal. Any excessive criticism that worked against the expansion of the party's influence was to be avoided: 'The effect of any criticism must be to strengthen and consolidate the organisation internally while raising the party's profile externally'.⁷⁰

Regardless, his failure to prevent the expulsions of Levi and Friesland's followers – proponents of a revolutionary *Realpolitik*, freedom of discussion and autonomy from Moscow – ultimately weakened not only his own position but the Communist movement as a whole. In them he lost important potential allies in the coming existential conflict against the Stalinisation of the KPD. For the sake of strengthening the party's manoeuvrability in the short-term, political debates were finally solved through expulsions. Unbeknownst to Meyer at the time, this process engendered a long-term weakening of the

69 Zentrale der KPD 1923, p. 251. Meyer made similar comments at the Jena party conference (see Zentrale der KPD 1922, p. 216).

70 Protokoll ZA 1922b, p. 157.

KPD's *Realpolitik* wing and thus the KPD itself. In historical retrospect, the limits of internal discussion drawn by Meyer appear too narrow and exclusionary.

No Early 'Bolshevisation' of the KPD

Meyer and the *Zentrale* he led had approached oppositional currents in the years 1921–2 with a desire to solve political conflicts through discussion. Meyer himself seemed to possess a reluctance to engage in disciplinary measures, expulsions, etc. He described them as 'terrible things' and a 'sign of our inability to respond . . . politically'. His wife wrote that in internal struggles, he fought 'with political arguments in the best tradition of democratic procedure which alone, in the long run, safeguards the functioning of a sane Party. . . fighting with their foul methods . . . was not Ernst's strength.'⁷¹

As part of the *Zentrale*, Meyer initially opposed the suspension of Friesland, as well as those of Malzahn and Brass. It was not until Meyer felt that there was no other way to end the conflict that he supported the expulsion of the oppositionists. When he spoke in favour thereof at the January session of the *Zentralausschuss*, his tone of voice was almost apologetic. For Meyer, the expulsions were not a sign of the leadership's strength, but rather one of its weakness.

Generally, the *Zentrale* under Meyer's leadership tried to integrate the opposition whenever possible.⁷² The party press remained open to them, their public statements were published therein on a regular basis, and they were always permitted to present their position at party conferences as well as sessions of the *Zentralausschuss*.⁷³

Meyer did not view the party as a monolithic organisation. Nor did he think that the decisions of the leadership could not be questioned. He stood for an open, democratic Communist Party, finding its path to socialism through free and open discussion. He vehemently defended the necessity of freedom of discussion and freedom of criticism within the party, making them fundamental tenets of party life in the KPD during his tenure in its leadership, 1921–2. It was only when party decisions were translated into collective action that freedom of discussion met its limit.

In this light Meyer appears as an advocate of democratic centralism in its original Leninist sense: freedom of discussion, unity of action. He emphasised

71 Meyer-Leviné 1977, p. 31.

72 Utz echoes this claim (see Utz 1974, pp. 175, 157).

73 This is confirmed by Weber and Herbst (see Weber and Herbst 2004, p. 23).

heavily the democratic side of democratic centralism. This differed substantially from the version thereof that was later to be applied in the thoroughly Stalinised parties, where in reality a form of bureaucratic centralism reigned, under which freedom of criticism and debate was strangled and dissident opinions were met with reprimands and expulsions.⁷⁴

Our examination of Ernst Meyer's attitude towards internal democracy also has implications for the historical controversy detailed in the beginning of this article. Mallmann tries to use examples from the late 1920s and early 1930s as proof that 'rampant use of the word *Führer*' and 'thinking riven with blind obedience' were always characteristic of the KPD.⁷⁵ But his rejection of the Stalinisation thesis completely ignores the fundamental changes that occurred in the KPD after the early 1920s. Mallmann's characterisations of the KPD in the late 1920s are undoubtedly correct, but simply do not apply to the KPD of the early 1920s. In the entire period of time during which Meyer stood at the helm of the party there are no references to him or any other leading member as '*Führer*'; indeed, not a single historical source indicates that Meyer or other leaders were associated with the term *Führer* or any other forms of leadership!⁷⁶ It is equally problematic when Mallmann tries to generalise examples from the mid-1920s as characteristic of the KPD in its entirety: 'Collegiality was, even among the leadership, impossible under such conditions.'⁷⁷ However, the *Zentrale* under Meyer (especially after the expulsion of Friesland) most certainly gives the impression of a collegial, collective party leadership. Wilhelm Pieck described the atmosphere in the KPD leadership as 'very harmonious' in numerous letters in the spring and summer of 1922.⁷⁸

74 Weber makes a similar judgement of democratic centralism: 'It was not democratic centralism as an abstract principle that led to the bureaucratic and centralised control of the leadership of the KPD. Rather political developments, namely Stalinisation, led to the distortion of this principle. Democratic centralism remained a principle of organisation in the later years of the Weimar Republic, but little was made of the democratic side of the equation.' See Weber 1988, p. 95.

75 Mallmann 1996, p. 145.

76 If anyone in the KPD was referred to as a leader, it was the 64-year-old Clara Zetkin (see Utz 1974, pp. 174 and 182). Utz speaks explicitly of a 'disdain for the leadership' in the KPD between 1921 and 1923 (see *ibid.*).

77 Mallmann 1996, p. 145.

78 Pieck 1922a, p. 92. See also Pieck 1922b, p. 78. Utz considers the collegiality of the leadership one of the important characteristics of the *Zentrale* under Meyer (see Utz 1974, p. 175).

Mallmann's descriptions of 'military organisation',⁷⁹ 'barracks thinking' and 'language of command'⁸⁰ do not fit the KPD under Ernst Meyer's leadership. Mallmann's allegation that the 'process leading to the domination of the party apparatus began long before Stalin'⁸¹ must be rejected. It is accurate to say that tendencies toward centralisation and ideological homogenisation were products of German Communism's own internal logic, but these were necessitated by the extreme ideological heterogeneity of the KPD at its founding; only later were these tendencies appropriated by the agents of Stalinisation. The connection between these early tendencies and the bureaucratic dictatorship of the party apparatus that later arose can only be explained by a much more fundamental shift in the nature and function of the organisation (and the Communist International) during Stalinisation.

This conclusion also puts the thesis of an early Bolshevisation, as represented by the writings of Löwenthal, Koch-Baumgarten and Wirsching, into perspective. It can only be accepted if we differentiate between the Bolshevisation of the early 1920s and the Stalinisation (also referred to as 'Bolshevisation' at the time) of the latter half of the decade as two distinct processes. The Bolshevisation of the early 1920s sought to centralise the party and homogenise it ideologically, but nevertheless maintained a high degree of internal democracy and freedom of discussion, similar to the R.C.P.(B.) at least until the banning of internal factions in 1921. The blatant differences between the democratic functioning of the KPD under Ernst Meyer in 1921–2 and the state of the fully Stalinised party of the late 1920s and early 1930s remain unexplainable unless we accept that a fundamental shift occurred within German (and international) Communism after 1922. This shift changed the nature and function of the Communist Party from a democratic, revolutionary party oriented towards the German working class to an instrument of the Soviet bureaucracy.

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79 Mallmann 1996, p. 149.

80 Mallmann 1996, p. 144.

81 Mallmann 1996, p. 147.

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