

From »World Soviet« to »Fatherland of All Proletarians.« Anticipated World Society and Global Thinking in Early Soviet Russia*

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World society is considered an »all-embracing social system [...] that transcends national states and stretches itself over them as its own coordinate system« (Wobbe 2000: 6). Niklas Luhmann, whose name is connected with this perspective in the first place, concluded back in 1975 that the new »state of the world« would require a new analytic framework. This state of the world includes aspects such as the growing and all-encompassing knowledge about human life and human interaction (and the availability of this knowledge on demand), the universal spread of scientifically secured knowledge, a »global public opinion,« and global financial entanglements. Practically speaking, it is in fact a unified global worldview« that is »new and in a phase of irreversible consolidation« (Luhmann 1975: 53–54; also see Luhmann 1997b).

Luhmann's theory is less concerned with contemporary historical events and processes. However, the early history of communism in particular might serve to illustrate his model of world society—not world society as an existing global sphere of communication,¹ but world society in the making, oriented towards a final stage of a globally liberated proletariat

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1 For empirical studies of world society, see e.g. Albert & Hilkermeier 2004; Stetter 2007.

as anticipated by the communist movement. This final stage, in the eyes of the Russian Bolsheviks (and other communist activists in the wake of World War I), would have to manifest itself on a global level in order not to become prey to the contradictions between socialism and capitalism (cf. Armstrong 1993: 120). It could be secured only through world revolution, an eruptive social and political transformation on a global scale (Drabkin 1996; Agosti 1997). »Revolutionary internationalism,« the idea and practice of global class solidarity, served as cohesion for this path (Halliday 1988; van Holthoon & van der Linden 1988; Forman 1998). This essay attempts to trace the »taking place of the world within communication, which Luhmann identified with world society (Luhmann 1997a: 150), in early Soviet political discourses and practices. It will show that global thought and action was an integral part of the early Soviet communist movement and was used to create the idea of a »revolutionary global« in and through political communication.

This essay does not attempt to explore either the Bolshevik and Comintern leaders' concrete stands on world revolution, or the real (im)possibilities of such a process. Instead it aims to demonstrate how the idea of building a new society on a worldwide scale acted as a powerful element of mobilization for the Russian Communist movement, and was a distinctive feature of the ideological framework of the party's lower ranks. It aims to explore facets of global thinking, global self-placement, and anticipated world society within communist rank and file activists, more specifically within »functionary-enthusiasts« (Kolonitskii 1993: 219), during the first decade of Soviet power. Ideology is to be understood here as a »living tissue of meaning« (Hellbeck 2009: 56) and not just something that is delegated »top down« via coercion and authority. Ideological practices include the (re)production of language (Welskopp 2005: 25–26), thus ideology is embedded in the everyday lives of individual agents and recreated within their practices. My main sources are therefore not documents by top-level decision-makers, but the writings of the movement's protagonists beneath the leadership levels—private correspondence as well as public »ceremonial« products (such as greeting messages and telegrams).

Early classic socialist texts already strove for global social transformation—first and foremost, and perhaps most consistently, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’s *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848). While the proletariat is the agent of change, it is not the first to make the step into global dimensions: for Marx and Engels the bourgeoisie was the first historical agent to widen its radius of action to the global because »[t]he need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe« (Marx & Engels 1908: 12). The bourgeoisie set the preconditions for a globalization *avant la lettre*; the introduction of free trade and a world market increasingly caused national differences to vanish. However, only »[t]he supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster.« Its »[u]nited action [...] is one of the first conditions for [its] emancipation« (Marx & Engels 1908: 31). For Marx and Engels, the proletariat is the predestined successor of the bourgeoisie’s worldwide structures of action and communication because »modern industrial labor, modern subjection to capital, the same in England as in France, in America as in Germany, has stripped him of every trace of national character« (Marx & Engels 1908: 21). The final appeal of the manifesto, that there is a »world to win« (Marx & Engels 1908: 48), should be understood not only as a call to take over and expand into the bourgeoisie’s globalized operating range, but also (and perhaps foremost) to achieve a global horizon of perception, a global thinking. And even though early social democracy mostly acted along a national horizon (Welskopp 2000: 534–541), increasingly it defined itself as a global movement with global aims—in its symbolism as well as in its international associations.²

The onset of World War I and the alignment of the European social-democratic parties to their respective national governments’ policies

2 For the global pretenses of the early social-democratic symbolic universe, see e.g. Troch 1990: 62, 77. For the international organizational structures of the early labor movement, see the classic work by Julius Braunthal (Braunthal 1961).

despite previous declarations about preventing a European war at any cost struck a serious blow against socialist internationalism. Russian social democracy was the only section of the Second International (apart from the Serbian party) that opposed supporting their government's war efforts from the very beginning (Fainsod 1973: 35–36)—even though the course of the war increasingly drove the »defeatist« and pro-war camps within Russian social democracy apart. For the Bolsheviks, as the radical anti-war faction within Russian social democracy, internationalism had an even more prominent place in party politics (Nation 1989; Kenez 2006: 31). For them, however, the idea of global struggle was more than just social-democratic heritage. As stated above, the Bolshevik leadership's discourse about internationalism, as well as their concrete international policies, shifting between world revolution and international diplomacy, deserve their own treatment and shall not be discussed in detail here.³ However, two specifics should be mentioned that may contribute to explaining Bolshevik world-revolutionary thinking.

Firstly, as Immanuel Wallerstein proposes, the development of a capitalist economy by the nineteenth century led to a global modern world system that knew no »outside« (not unlike Luhmann's world society), but only a center and (semi)peripheries. Fully developed, this system is subject to structural crises (Wallerstein 1974–2011). »Antisystemic movements,« such as social democracy, strove to break through the continuum of crisis (Arrighi et al. 1989). Whether or not one agrees with Wallerstein's approach: the Bolsheviks, as one of the »antisystemic movements,« saw themselves precisely at the highest point of a world system crisis; Lenin's conceptualization of imperialism as »the highest stage of capitalism,« written just one year before the revolution, testifies to this. For Lenin, under the impression of World War I—a global manifestation of a global crisis and thus an end stage of capitalism—revolution also had to become global, involving not only the industrial proletariat of the advanced countries, but also those »thousand million peo-

3 For further reading, see Page 1959; Flechtheim 1967; Geyer 1976a; Geyer 1976b; Vatlin 2008a; Vatlin 2008b; Drabkin 1996; Drabkin 1998; and others.

ple» on the periphery affected by global oppression (Lenin 1964a: 185–304). Thus, on the one hand, to the Bolsheviks the Russian revolution was just one inevitable part of a wider global uprising. On the other hand, since Russia itself was located at the semi-periphery of the world system, according to Wallerstein it was also a »national liberation uprising« even though it was led by a party with a »universalist ideology« (Wallerstein 2000: 378). This contradiction shapes the fluctuations of Bolshevik thought between internationalist revolutionary aspirations and Russo-centric views, a problem that will follow us throughout the essay.

Secondly, if we are to place world revolution within the history of ideas beyond socialism, it should be in the context of other »global« ideas of the time. Just as a homogenous concept of time and common vernacular print languages resulted in »imagined communities« of nations at an earlier time (Anderson 2006), a furthering of this process can be observed in the late nineteenth century. The world was now made conceivable as a global entity with the globalization of communication (telegraph, etc.) and the standardization of time zones. This led to a variety of spectacular world-encompassing scientific and economic projects (Krajewski 2006)—some of them failed and forgotten (just like world revolution), but some that also indirectly left their marks on further developments (just like world revolution once again).⁴ To evaluate the messianic qualities of the idea of world revolution, however, one might also consider the biopolitical utopias that flourished particularly in Russia's left-wing circles from the beginning of the twentieth century well into the 1920s. They envisioned such extravagant undertakings as conquering space, overcoming death, and enhancing the human being, ideas that were, to a certain extent, shared and supported by parts of the Bolshevik leadership (Groys & Hagemester 2005).

Therefore, the grandeur and megalomania of the idea that an uprising in Russia would ignite a revolutionary fire throughout the world should not

4 Interestingly, Werner Sombart points out that the »revolutionary spirit« of socialism was being fuelled by general technical progress as early as 1896 (Sombart 1909: 13).

be surprising. It was even part of the Bolshevik's internal decision making on the eve of their revolution. Discussions around the seizure of power in November 1917 had an international perspective: while Grigorii Zinov'ev and Lev Kamenev, senior members of the Central Committee, found that world revolution was not yet ripe enough, and hence feared the isolation of communists in Russia in case of a premature takeover, Lenin, in contrast, considered it a treason against world revolution not to strike now—and prevailed with his opinion (Rauch 1977: 68). After the Bolsheviks ascended to power, the new revolutionary state, which chose the *Internationale* as its national anthem and the call for proletarians of all countries to unite as its national motto, was in this sense a highly paradoxical state—more of an incarnation of the negation of the state. Fittingly, Lev Trotskii, after accepting the post of Commissar of Foreign Affairs, stated his sole aim was to »issue a few revolutionary proclamations to the peoples of the world, and then shut up shop« (Trotsky 1970: 341). After all, considering the anticipated world revolution and the communist world society that would follow thereafter, international relations in the form of traditional diplomacy seemed to have no future. It remains to be shown, however, that it was not just the privilege of the party leadership to see the October Revolution »not as an incident of domestic gravity, but an ignition of the worldwide reconstruction of humanity« (Ikeda 2005: 123).

The ceremonial and everyday practices of the ruling party, and concurrently public life, in the first years after the October Revolution were imbued with the notion of a worldwide struggle. International revolution was everywhere: from newspapers reporting about strikes and uprisings all over the world, to schools and streets being named after foreign revolutionaries (Albert 2010: 18). The »international situation« was a recurrent topic of every political manifestation and public gathering—even when these were not related to international events at all. The American anarchist Alexander Berkman, who visited Soviet Russia in 1920, captured in his diary his impressions of a commemorative event honoring Aleksandr Gertsen, the famous Russian proto-socialist intellectual of the nineteenth century. The hall was decorated for the pur-

pose, yet the event's program had little to do with the person being honored. After the military band played the *Internationale*, Grigorii Zinov'ev, now head of the Communist International, ascended the podium to talk about international revolution:

Soon the Social Revolution will break out in Europe and America—it cannot be far off now, for capitalism is crumbling to earth everywhere. Then there will be an end to war and fratricidal bloodshed, and Russia will receive help from the workers of other countries.

He was followed by Karl Radek, the Bolshevik emissary who had just returned from Germany, promising that »the workers of Germany will come to the aid of their brothers in Russia, and the world will learn what the revolutionary proletariat can accomplish.« The event was concluded by Bolshevik diplomat Adol'f Ioffe, who explained the conditions of a treaty just concluded with Latvia to the audience (Berkman 1925: 38–39). The fact that the content of the memorial gathering had nothing to do with the person being commemorated seemed to disturb neither the Bolshevik organizers and participants nor the observer Berkman. It appeared completely natural that the state of global affairs should be manifest at every possible occasion. Moreover, by »internationalizing« an originally »national« event, a symbolical connection could be created between pre-Marxist national revolutionary traditions and the world-revolutionary present and future.

The picture of political and social life in Soviet Russia represented by historiography is dominated by want and violence, while the Bolshevik movement, particularly its rank and file, is portrayed as being motivated by greed and/or blind fanaticism. However, this research leaves open the question of the »positive« idea that kept the communist movement going and also reached beyond the movement into wider society. It was not so much Marxist theory.⁵ One can hardly expect that global Marxian-type

5 A survey of three hundred party activists in Ulyanovsk in 1926 revealed that over the half of the respondents had never read Marx, twenty per-

thinking would automatically trickle down to the party rank and file. One element of this thinking however—namely the belief in global revolution—was not just immanent among the Bolshevik leadership, but was far more widespread and unanimously accepted than usually assumed.

A central reason for this was the world's political constellation following the year 1914. For Russia and its inhabitants, just as for the rest of Europe, World War I was an epochal and traumatic turning point. The Bolsheviks' consistent anti-war stance and their promise of a just peace swelled their ranks in 1917 and ultimately brought them to power. But since the October Revolution not only did not end war for Russia, but instead threw it into civil war, the idea of raising the October scenario to a global level to bring salvation to the suffering Russian workers was quite attractive. It helped make sense of the world and also proved to be a potent »collective frame« for the communist movement.⁶ Moreover, as Michael Geyer puts it, the struggle for world revolution

was, from the hindsight of future generations, a phantasmagorical, megalomaniac project detached from reality, but the [...] revolutionary contemporaries thought differently (Geyer 2010: 196–197).⁷

Indeed, in the unstable situation following World War I a whole series of revolts, unrests, and revolutions were taking place in Europe and around the world (Konrad & Schmidlechner 1991; Wrigley 1993; Schulze Wessel 2005; Kenez 2006: 31). The fact that this cascade of turmoil remained fragmented and confined within national borders should not be taken for granted as a logical development, but rather critically questioned in

cent had »tried« to read his works, and only eleven percent had read Lenin (Kenez 1985: 133).

6 For »framing« in social movements, see Snow 2004.

7 In fact, in the first years after World War I, world revolution was not just a vision of its adherents, but also a specter that haunted the conservative public (Schulze Wessel 2005: 378; Hanebrink 2008) and appeared as a possibility even to anti-Bolshevik observers within Russia (Kniazev 1993: 107, 111, 127).

the sense of a »blocked transnationality« (Geyer 2010). However the Soviet activists believed the blocked transnationality of the Russian Revolution was purely temporary. The contentious situation in Europe appeared to them as a collective departure, and where connections between the single points of world revolution could not be made, they were to be constructed.

A communist from Omsk wrote in mid-1918 in a letter to the party's Central Committee (CC) that she and her comrades were expecting news of revolution in the West any day now, since it was impossible that the class brothers abroad would turn their backs on their Russian comrades.⁸ When we read this now, we are not just witnessing an attempt at »speaking Bolshevik« (Kotkin 1995) in order to curry favor with the leaders. I would argue instead that this is a genuine belief fuelled not by the mere impact of state/party ideology, but by the wish to make sense of present hardship.⁹ The hope for worldwide revolutionary transformation was not necessarily decoupled from everyday life. Through their »panoptical worldview,«¹⁰ communist activists were able to make such seemingly distant connections. The rank-and-file party activist Ivan Golubev, frustrated by the fact that his family was being held in German-occupied Minsk as much as by thankless party work, wrote in his diary on 8 October 1918, after hearing news about the beginning upheaval in Germany:

8 Letter from the Omsk Committee of the Russian Communist Party (RCP) to the CC of the RCP, May 1918. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii, Moscow (in the following: RGASPI), 17/4/23, 81. Cited in Anikeev 1967: 213–214.

9 Sergei Iarov comes to similar conclusions concerning the belief in international solidarity in the early Soviet Union (Iarov 2006: 504). However he focuses on the »manipulation techniques« the Bolsheviks applied to the »general populace« and thus does not take the inner processes of the Communist rank and file seriously.

10 On the »panoptical worldview« of early social democracy, see Welskopp 2000: 530.

Only one thing pleases me—that a real revolution is taking place in Germany. This means that we soon will have no frontline, I can go to Minsk, fix my affairs a bit. I will be able to calm down my children and stay at one place. That would be quite good. The German proletariat begins to gain consciousness—well, it is about time, to restore order [sic], throw down the bourgeoisie, and to liberate the common people from ages of slavery. This is necessary. (Klyshka 2002: 171)

The cut and dry, superficially Marxist rhetoric in the second half of the diary entry should not distract from the fact that rank-and-file activists were apparently able to connect their »international faith« (Collette 1999) with their daily lives. This connection could also be extended to violence. There was no contradiction in the last line of a provincial trade union organization's message of greeting: »Long live Red Terror, long live the worldwide unity of the proletariat.«¹¹ Internationalism and violence did not necessarily have to be at opposite ends of an argument, and the one could even justify the other—since a worldwide revolution would require even more drastic means than a national one.¹²

What did the world that the Communists thought would come into existence look like? The tendency propagated by the central media during the first years of the Soviet state, in accordance with the »classics«, was toward a Communist world state (cf. Goodman 1960) or at least a »European Republic of Councils«, as a *Pravda* headline read in 1918.¹³ The party's rank-and-file and mid-level activists did not have any clear-

11 Telegram from the Restaurant Workers' Trade Union in Griazi (Tambov *guberniia*) to the Council of Peoples' Commissars, 20 September 1918. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Moscow (in the following: GARF), R-1235/93/2, 153–154.

12 Likewise, counterrevolutionary violence and revolutionary defeat abroad could be used for domestic political deterrence, as in »Look what happens when a revolution fails!« For this kind of Soviet usage of the communist defeat in Finland, see Vihavainen 2008.

13 Evropeiskaia Respublika Sovetov. *Pravda* (26/13th January 1918).

cut viewpoints about what the final result of a world revolution would ultimately look like.¹⁴ World revolution appeared before them as a global process which would make uprisings, revolutions, and finally revolutionary states mushroom up from the ground. In 1921, the organization committee of the Third World Congress of the Communist International (Comintern) came up with an ambitious plan to celebrate the event's opening with a spotlight projection of a world map onto Moscow's night sky using fireworks to highlight the worldwide unrests and revolutions—a plan which was never carried out due to financial and technical limitations.¹⁵ However, this imagined scenario perfectly illustrates how contemporaries perceived (and experienced) the world revolutionary process: a fascinating spectacle of a revolutionary world ablaze, fused together by smaller and local fires happening simultaneously that fed off each other and expanded.

This impression was substantiated by the proclamation of many, albeit short-lived, Republics of Councils in Europe—the most prominent in Bavaria (April–May 1919) and Hungary (March–April 1919). The creation of a German Republic in November 1918 reinforced this perception. Likewise, the fact that a »Council of the People's Representatives« (*Rat der Volksbeauftragten*) was bestowed with the highest governmental powers within the new Germany fired the Russian activists' imagination of parallel revolutionary development. Even though communist propaganda imagined the revolutionary process splitting the world into two camps—»proletarian/revolutionary« and »bourgeois/capitalist/imperialist«—activists saw this as merely a temporary state. This fissure along class lines would be overcome by an indispensable victory in class struggle, thus creating a classless world society. These temporary class factions were also imagined to be territorial. A mid-1918 message of greet-

14 Which is not surprising, however, considering that the classics also »offer glimpses rather than visions of a unified world« (Stites 1989: 179).

15 Plan of the Artistic Subdivision of the Organisational Department of the Executive Committee of the Comintern (ECCI) and the Artistic Section of the Organisational Commission of the 3rd Congress, [April 1920]. RGASPI, 490/1/7, 18–20.

ing from a party organization shows how this abstract notion of an international final class struggle took visual shape in the minds of activists:

Our revolution had separated Europe into two camps—one socialist and one imperialist. Into the socialist camp the proletariat of all nations will have safe passage, and after having unified soon, we will hoist the red flags of the International and in one common uprising sweep away the parasites and oppressors of all countries from the face of the earth. Then we will proclaim: ›The time of world revolution has come! There are no more exploiters! We will conduct our lives the way we want!¹⁶

In his classic essay on world society, Luhmann outlines the existence of two different »styles of expectation« that can coexist in every social system: cognitive expectation, which is adaptable and willing to learn, and normative expectation, which claims and prescribes morality. These styles of expectation define themselves by how they cope with disappointment: the style of

[n]ormative expectation proves itself determined to hold to its expectations even in case of disappointment, drawing upon resources such as inner conviction, means of sanction, consensus.

Cognitive expectation, on the other hand, is adaptive and can align itself anew after disappointments. Luhmann notes that »world society constitutes itself foremost in spheres of interactions in which cognitive expectation [...] can be stabilized« (Luhmann 1975: 55–56; cf. Luhmann 1995: 320–325). If we apply Luhmann’s theory of expectations to the imagined world society anticipated by communist activists, we end up with an ambivalent picture. On the one hand, from the activists’ perspective, the expectation of a world revolution was cognitive because it was scientifically cognoscible and predictable. Yet the activists’ talk of coming world society was unmistakably normative: a worldwide socialist future simply

16 Resolution of the RCP-Committee of the 1st Revolutionary Battalion of Orel, 19 May 1918. RGASPI, 17/4/112, 8.

had to set in because it was diagnosed by socialist theory (perceived as the scholarly method *par excellence*) as the logical consequence of the past and present. Political realities of any kind had to adjust to this fact, and not the other way around.

Wishful thinking often got ahead of actual events in this area. The expectation of international revolution accelerating without boundaries turned desires into facts—especially when world-revolutionary fervor was fuelled from above. Aleksandr Vatlin describes the international strategy of the Bolshevik leadership in 1918 as oscillating between sober analysis of and even some pessimism as regards a possible German revolution in the first two-thirds of the year, and fervent enthusiasm in autumn—both sentiments being reflected by the central party press (Vatlin 2008a; Vatlin 2008b). However, enthusiasm and expectations of the outbreak of revolutions in the West were alive in the rank and file throughout the whole year, as the letter from Omsk and countless other documents »from below« illustrate. Thus when the central press finally declared revolution in Germany as the order of the day in early October, the expectations that now skyrocketed had already been present. Vatlin most certainly had high-ranking party members in mind when he wrote about the propagandists who must have emitted a »sigh of relief« for now being able to speak freely of world revolution (Vatlin 2008a: 78), but this feeling most likely had also permeated a larger strata of the active party membership.

In November 1918, an employee of the Red Army's military inspection sent a telegram to the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), congratulating on the »victory of world revolution« as if it was a fact that had come to pass.¹⁷ A few months later, an assembly of communist activists near Arkhangelsk passed a resolution asserting that the workers of the whole world would come to the aid of proletarian Russia,

17 Telegram from Iren'ev to the VCIK, 15 November 1918. GARF, R-1235/93/2, 318.

as the Bavarian and Hungarian proletariat had already done.¹⁸ This occurred just one week before the Bavarian Republic of Councils was crushed by the counter-revolutionary Free Corps; and even though communists in Budapest were able to hold their positions until August, neither Bavarian nor Hungarian communists appeared at the borders of Soviet Russia to help revolutionary activists in the provinces. The looming decay of the Hungarian Republic of Councils did not diminish the world-revolutionary optimism of Russian activists—quite the contrary. A party conference in the central Russian town of Viatka, which took place on 3 June 1919, interpreted the conflicts of Hungary with its non-socialist neighbors as follows: »They [the Entente] want to suffocate Hungary through the Czechoslovaks, but instead they get the Slovak Republic of Councils!«¹⁹ This republic of councils, however, lasted less than a week. And even directly after the fall of communist Budapest, when Trotskii declared in a letter to his fellow party leaders that revolution in the West was put on hold and it was now time for a re-orientation towards revolutionizing Asia (Meijer 1971: 182–184), local party activists were not fazed by the defeat. A speaker at a party meeting in Kazan was still able to proclaim that world revolution would not perish, but instead would grow constantly. Ignoring the crushing of the Spartacist Uprising in Berlin earlier in January and the subsequent murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the speaker proclaimed Berlin—now that Munich and Budapest were no longer at disposal anymore—as the global epicenter of revolution.²⁰

However, it did not even require the founding of a revolutionary state to make further communist fireworks appear on the revolutionary world map in the imagination of provincial activists. For the editors of a pro-

18 Resolution of a citizens' assembly in Spassko-Maretskii *raion*, 21 April 1919. RGASPI, 17/6/1, 149–150.

19 Minutes of the 5th Party Conference in Vyatka, 3 June 1919. RGASPI, 17/6/53, 2ob.

20 Minutes of a plenary meeting of communists and sympathizers, [Kazan], 28 August 1919. RGASPI, 17/6/100, 1–2ob.

vincial party paper in Cherepovets in northwest Russia, a short news item about the founding of a communist party in Constantinople resulted in the flamboyant headline »*I tam kommunizm*« (»There too, there is communism«).²¹ The founding of a political splinter group in far-away Turkey was equated semantically with the imagined existence of communism in many places all over the world (»too«).

»Too« could likewise be read as »just as we are building it here in Soviet Russia.« Not only the Bolshevik leaders, but also the revolutionary activists of lower rank could see their revolutionary activity as part of a world-revolutionary process. The speaker at the fourteenth Party conference of the Moscow branch of the RCP (April 1919) began his report on the advances of the communists in Bavaria and Hungary with the statement that »our position« was strengthening day by day. Now was the time »to send the revolutionaries in the Western republics of councils our greetings, and to tell them that we are ready to team up with them for joint struggle.«²² This feeling of taking part in a worldwide struggle also prevailed in 1923, when, in connection with the revolutionary situation in Germany, genuine world-revolutionary hopes among the rank and file would flare up for perhaps the last time (Albert 2011; Bayerlein 1999; Bayerlein et al. 2003). At a solidarity meeting for the workers of the Ruhr, the party organization of Saratov proclaimed it felt itself to be »part of the world proletariat.«²³ John Boli's and George M. Thomas' conclusion about actors within international NGOs who »have found it »natural« to view the whole world as their arena of action and discourse« (Boli & Thomas 1999: 14) can also be applied to early Soviet communist activists.

Even though, as previously mentioned, the activists' conceptions of the final stage of world revolution were rather vague and it is worthwhile

21 *Kommunist* (Cherepovets), N° 240, 26 October 1920. RGASPI, 17/60/9, 52.

22 Minutes of the Fourteenth Party Conference of Moscow *guberniia*, 12–13 April 1919. RGASPI, 17/6/151, 10.

23 *Krasnaia pechat'*, N° 6 (27), 25 February 1923, 6.

elaborating on them further. The events of 1918–1919 confronted the communist movement in Russia with the (albeit short) simultaneous existence of multiple communist states, and thus must have provoked reflection about the nature of a communist world order. The position of the party leadership, particularly Lenin, during the first years of the October Revolution was unmistakably one of denying the possibility of a single revolutionary state being able to »build socialism« on its own. Lenin’s opinion in late 1918 was that »the complete victory of the socialist revolution in one country alone is inconceivable and demands the most active co-operation of at least several advanced countries, which do not include Russia« (Lenin 1965a: 151). Obviously, such a categorical and consistent position cannot be observed within the movement as a whole. As a tendency, though, it can be noted that world revolution was in no way equated with »Sovietization« (in the sense of a domination of Soviet Russia or an »export« of the Soviet model). In view of the November Revolution in Germany, the Moscow Soviet Executive Committee publicly promoted the notion of a »Federated German-Austro-Russian Republic« (in that order) (Ikeda 2005: 125), while a message of greeting from party members in the Red Army to the Council of Peoples’ Commissars in view of the November Revolution in Germany hailed the »brotherhood of two free Soviet Republics.«²⁴ A similar argumentation (shifts in the party leadership’s international policies notwithstanding) can still be found five years later when, in a private report by the party organization in Arkhangelsk, a non-party worker is quoted as having said during the revolutionary situation in Germany in late 1923 that there will be »two Soviet Republics« that would make life easier for each other.²⁵

24 Message of greeting from communists within the staff of the 6th Red Army to the Council of Peoples’ Commissars and the German Council of Soldiers’ and Workers’ Deputies, 15 November 1918. GARF, R-130/2/468, 111.

25 Closed letter of the Arkhangel’sk *guberniia* organisation of the RCP to the Secretariat of the CC of the RCP, [March 1924]. RGASPI, 17/33/177, 14.

Even though the idea of a revolutionary Germany as an ally of Soviet Russia is most prominent in early Soviet internationalist thought, it was about more than an alliance between two states: the vision was the creation of global unity between »revolutionary proletarians« of all countries. A cartoon published in the party newspaper *Bednota* on the occasion of the 1918 revolution in Germany visualized this idea memorably: under the disapproving gaze of Entente, a sturdy worker embodying the »German proletariat«—recognizable as such by the flag he is carrying—marches towards his revolutionary comrades: the »Russian Soviet Republic,« the »Bulgarian proletariat,« and the »Austrian proletariat« (see fig. 1).



Fig 1: »Long live Soviet Germany.« The »German proletariat« (inscription of the flag on the left) joins the revolutionary camp, welcomed by the »Bulgarian proletariat,« the »Russian Soviet Republic,« and the »Austrian proletariat.«

Source: *Bednota*, 12 November 1918.

The vision was not just one of a union of national states. As the organizers of a train workers' congress in Moscow in August 1918 proclaimed in a message of greeting to striking Ukrainian railway men, the day was near »when all national borders will fall and we will join together under the

flag of the Third International into one worldwide family of labor.«²⁶ The immense symbolic power of a »Third international« in the Soviet communist movement, even before the foundation of the Comintern (the »real« Third International), remains nearly unexplored by research to date (Albert 2012: 29–30). As Gerd Koenen noted, »a space of resonance whose political-psychological effects were at first more important than its real successes« (Koenen 2010: 44) took shape for the international communist movement in the form of the foundation of the Comintern in March 1919. This, however, is even truer concerning the impact of the International on the communist movement in Russia itself. As the prospects of world revolution began to dwindle even in the early 1920s, the Comintern—its institutional embodiment and symbolic projection screen—remained. The Comintern fulfilled a function for communist activists inside and outside of Soviet Russia that can be described, as Theresa Wobbe has done, as the premise for the assumption of a world society—namely a »global level of social organization [...] that formed a horizon of expectation for individual and collective agents« (Wobbe 2000: 7). Communist media portrayed the foundation of the Comintern as a counter-project to the League of Nations²⁷—hence it was perceived as something much bigger than what it ultimately turned out to be: a union of (mostly) small parties. Besides being a concrete global network of communist activities and organizations, at the same time it remained a space of resonance for the dreams of international brotherhood that moved early Soviet activists.

In 1919, due to the foundation of several republics of councils, a short-lived international communist landscape appeared. How did activists imagine »most active cooperation« (Lenin 1965a: 151) within this landscape? Due to the Civil War in Russia, rank-and-file activists, particularly

26 Message of greeting from the Sixth Congress of Railway Workers' Deputies in Moscow to striking Ukrainian railway workers, 18 August 1918. GARF, R-1235/93/2, 138.

27 See e.g.: N. Baturin, »Liga narodov ili 3-j internatsional?« *Pravda* (19 October 1918). For the historical parallels between the Comintern and the League of Nations, see Koenen 2010: 40 and Schlögel 1998: 152.

on the frontlines, mostly envisioned and hoped for military cooperation from the newly acquired German and Hungarian comrades. This can be seen for example in the following telegram from a party meeting at the Civil War's southern front, sent to the VTsIK on 28 November 1918 (the heyday of the German revolution) to be forwarded to German communist leader Karl Liebknecht:

Soon will come the hour when, together with the revolutionary army of the German Socialist Republic, we will purge the hydra of the Russian counter-revolution from the face of the earth. After we will have strengthened our brotherly proletarian republics, we will fight together for international communism. Long live the International of socialist republics!²⁸

Now that the Russian Civil War was turning international (due to intervention by several foreign powers on the side of the »Whites«), Russian rank and file communists hoped to employ international help themselves. These hopes were fueled by the presence of numerous World War I prisoners of war (mostly German and Austro-Hungarian) within Soviet territory,²⁹ because many of these foreign nationals had become radicalized in revolutionary Russia and participated in communist propaganda activities or even joined »international« units of the Red Army (Badcock 2007: 162–164; Grigorov 2005: 104–105; Vorobtsova 1975: 83ff.; Iakovlev 1964). Furthermore, Red Army commanders tried to build a bridge to Hungary during communist rule in Budapest in order to join forces with the Hungarian communist army—these attempts, however, were not successful (Bak 1971: 190; Solov'ev et al. 1972: 174–239).

It is not surprising that, due to the Civil War, the form of cooperation most frequently envisioned was military cooperation. However, visions of civilian cooperation existed as well. The Soviet journal *Eko-*

28 Telegram from the ceremonial meeting [of the party cell] in Annenskii *uezd* to Karl Liebknecht, 28 November 1918. GARF, R-1235/93/8, 8–9.

29 In 1917, 2,100,000 prisoners of war were being held in Russia (Vorobtsova 1975: 83). For an overview of this topic see Pardon 1994; Leiding-er & Moritz 2003.

nomicheskaia zhižn' printed an enthusiastic report on the Hungarian communist government proposal to help Soviet Russia with coal mining in the Donbas (Mel'nik 1974: 26–27)—a plan that was completely illusory in the present situation, but still able to generate enthusiasm, because it represented a beginning for communist normality in a transnational framework. While it is easy to say in hindsight that »Russia had no chance whatsoever to build an antisystemic economy in the midst of an overpowering world capitalist system« (Brucan 2000: 444), communists in the first years after the revolution did not see it that way. They saw not only Russia, but also the other communist republics which, for a short while, seemed to grow and multiply.

The visit of Tibor Szamuely to Soviet Russia, the Hungarian People's Commissar who flew to Kiev in a spectacular plane flight, must have been perceived in a similar light. While Szamuely proceeded directly to Moscow to promote solidarity with his government and to meet with Lenin, the Hungarian pilot who flew him was given an enthusiastic welcome by Soviet military personnel in Kiev. The official statement said that »aviation, as we now have seen, is not necessarily a weapon against mankind, but also serves cultural purposes.« Furthermore the document expresses

hope that there will be soon an international family of pilots that will serve the proletariat just as it used to serve the kings, tsars, and capitalists. Long live Soviet Hungary and the international union of pilots! (Solov'ev et al. 1972: 213)

The visit of a pilot from the communist ally was thus perceived as an entry into a civilian communist society on the one hand, where aviation, in contrast to World War I, did not only serve destruction. On the other hand, this communist society was to be a transnational one, causing the local aviators to think about international unions.³⁰

30 It is worth noting that the short existence of several Soviet republics besides Soviet Russia fuelled the dreams of activists outside of Russia as well. The German Communist Party envisioned financial support from Soviet Hungary (Müller 2010: 180), while the latter disseminated updates

The motif of a symbiotic exchange between communist Soviet Republics did not disappear immediately after the capitalist stabilization of Europe after Versailles. During the German crisis of 1923, when the corresponding campaign in support of a »German October« was launched in the Soviet Union, the image of mutual support of a highly industrialized Soviet Germany and an agrarian Soviet Russia played a central role in the leaders' arguments as well as those of the rank and file (Albert 2011). Zinov'ev, speaking in September 1923 in front of local party functionaries about the coming German revolution, emphasized these prospects: »What we do not have, we will get from the Germans, and vice versa. [...] [W]e will have a coalition at sight of which everything will crumble.« (Zinov'ev 1923: 21). The rank and file also had high hopes for these anticipated international events: An anonymous respondent to a survey conducted by the party organization in Perm amongst its members stated that he expected an advancement of his personal situation from »a social revolution, at least in Europe.«³¹

Alongside global visions in which revolutionary states are an equal and symbiotic part of a coming world system, a different, opposing topos can be observed in Soviet communists' global thought: a topos of »Russian dominance« of international revolution. This idea, which became hegemonic under Stalin, was already present in the early years of Soviet rule, albeit in a subliminal way. In particular, it was based on the indisputable fact that the chain of revolutionary unrest in the wake of World War I began in Russia with the February Revolution of 1917. This fact

about the Soviet Republic in Munich and vice versa (Schulze Wessel 2005: 378). A part of the Ukrainian Communist Party even strove toward a Ukrainian Soviet Republic independent from Moscow by mobilizing Béla Kun, the leader of Soviet Hungary, to bring their cause before Lenin (Ford 2010: 594–595).

31 Completed questionnaire, late September 1923. Permskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii, Perm', 557/4/383, 3. I would like to thank Aleksandr Reznik, St. Petersburg, for providing information about this document.

motivated Lenin in his famous »Farewell Letter to the Swiss Workers« (March 1917) to speak of »the great honour of *beginning* the series of revolutions« that had fallen to the »Russian proletariat«—however:

the idea that the Russian proletariat is the chosen revolutionary proletariat among the workers of the world is absolutely alien to us. [...] It is not its special qualities, but rather the special conjuncture of historical circumstances that *for a certain, perhaps very short, time* has made the proletariat of Russia the vanguard of the revolutionary proletariat of the whole world (Lenin 1964b: 371).

As a convinced internationalist and someone who felt he was an expert on the Western labor movement through personal experience, Lenin was sure that the Russian revolution would simply clear the way for the more »advanced« Western industrial proletariat to make their own revolution. For the broad masses of party activists, however, such a perspective was less alluring since it could imply the devaluation of their own revolutionary achievements. On one hand, it was flattering to see »their« revolution in an international context; on the other hand, the role of the »vanguard« was key to their self-confidence. As a result, activist discourse on »Russian« vs. »global« as regarded the Russian revolution leaned toward the first from the beginning. This was without doubt also part of a populist strategy: Yoshiro Ikeda observed that while the Moscow party committee had already stressed the vanguard role of the Russian proletariat in public manifestos in late 1917, it was still much more »internationalist« in its internal language (Ikeda 2005: 123). However, it would be another five years before Otto Kuusinen, a leading Bolshevik and Comintern functionary, could claim in an article that foreign workers had done next to nothing to support revolutionary Russia and thus the international communist movement should be put, as the article's title stated, »Under Russian Leadership« (Kuusinen 1966: 64–81).

Initially, however, the idea of Russian/Soviet domination over international revolution was spoken only subliminally. The party's Central Committee issued a circular letter to local party organizations in May 1918 stating that even though world revolution would come inescapably, »for now we are alone, for now we only can serve as a bright example for

the proletarians of other countries» (Fedoseev & Chernenko 1970: 31). Organizations at lower levels, however, did not make such precise distinctions and assumed that their role as »bright examples« gave them the right to give advice to revolutionaries abroad. For example, a message of greeting from the Moscow metal workers' union directed to Karl Liebknecht in November 1918 had a pronouncedly instructive character and »recommended« the usage of certain slogans to the German communist leader (Kondrat'ev 1960: 451–452). The message of greeting from a local congress to »foreign proletarians who are as yet only languidly picking up our flag«³² sounded like harsh criticism from the start. The longer world revolution kept Soviet activists waiting, the more such criticism seemed justified. Meanwhile, the party fostered its image as a »leader« of international revolution more and more pronouncedly. As early as 1920, a provincial newspaper's headline read »For three years the Russian Communist Party of the Bolsheviki has been leading the international proletariat,«³³ and a provincial party school curriculum from the same year included a whole lesson unit on »The RCP as leader of the world proletariat.«³⁴

Such tendencies were possibly not the decisive factor for Stalin's turn, beginning in 1925, from the early Bolshevik primacy of world revolution towards the »building of socialism in one country,« but they helped pave the way. The abandonment of internationalism by Soviet propaganda can be explained in part, as David Brandenberger has suggested, by the idea being too abstract and inaccessible for the majority of the population (Brandenberger 2000). On the other hand, we know only little about the reception of internationalist motifs by the different social and political strata of Soviet society, as well as about their participation in interna-

32 Message of greeting from the Soviet Congress of the Sovetskii *uezd*, Viatka *guberniia*, to the SNK, 29 December 1918. GARF, R-1235/93/2, 125.

33 Svobodnyi pakhar' (spezial edition), 7 November 1920. RGASPI, 17/60/12, 71.

34 Report on agitprop work in Perm' *guberniia*, 24 December 1920. RGASPI, 17/60/8, 40.

tionalist practices. Furthermore, communism in the Soviet Union through the second half of the 1920s was not yet structured in such a top-down fashion as to be able to implement such an immediate paradigm change without friction. Moreover, during the phase of social stabilization and the New Economy Policy (NEP), Soviet activists continued to think in global categories. For example, the readers' correspondence column of a Soviet distance-learning journal from 1925 printed a question from a provincial party member as to whether there would also be a NEP phase in »advanced« countries like the United States when revolution succeeded there. The journal editors answered in the positive, and went even further in their public response:

When the proletariat will prevail in all capitalist countries, it will stand before the difficult task of coupling [*smychka*] with the agrarian countries of the East. The question of a NEP on a global scale will arise.³⁵

On the one hand, international revolution is being measured using Soviet dimensions: they assume the universal validity of the NEP model of development, and transpose the concept of *smychka*, the USSR model of collaboration between workers and peasants (Malle 2002: 396), to relations between industrial and agrarian nations. It is striking, on the other hand, that activists in the center as well as at the periphery were still talking in all seriousness about the inevitable coming of a communist world society.

The Stalinist paradigm change regarding internationalism went hand in hand with factional struggle in the party leadership. Back in 1923–1924, the Left Opposition led by Trotskii made a stand against Stalin's group, and the struggle flared up again in 1926–1927, when Zinov'ev and Kamenev joining Trotskii for a »United Opposition« against Stalin. These struggles were not only struggles for leadership, but also over the definition of world revolution and over how the Soviet Union should

35 *Kommunisticheskiĭ universitet na domu* (1925, 2): 224–225.

position itself in an international context.³⁶ The global dimension of this conflict manifested itself very prominently in the economic debates between the opposition and the Stalinists in autumn 1926, which were held publicly and the minutes of which were even published. The debate in the Communist Academy on 26–27 September 1926, may serve as an illustration. Even though the topics were initially about industrial planning and peasant taxes, the question of a world revolutionary perspective hovered over the debate. Economist Evgenii Preobrazhenskii in particular, an adherent of the opposition, spoke out drastically against giving up the demonstrative hope for world revolution: if a General were to say to his soldiers that they might win the battle, but also lose it, then, as Preobrazhenskii argued, he would need to be replaced or even shot. Preobrazhenskii believed a world revolutionary perspective must be upheld and building socialism in the USSR should only be thought of as a breathing space between two battles (Miliutin 1926: 236). Karl Radek, veteran Comintern functionary and in some respects the embodiment of international communism in Bolshevik circles, also rose to speak and castigated »building socialism in one country« as a betrayal of world revolution (Miliutin 1926: 249). The oppositionists however were not only concerned about sticking to a formula of revolutionary fervor—for them it was also about their vision of communism, which they believed could only function as a world-embracing phenomenon. In his contribution, Bolshevik oppositionist Grigorii Sokol'nikov postulated: »Socialism is a system of world economy, and everyone who claims that we can build socialism in one country falls prey to a blatant contradiction« (Miliutin 1926: 205).

As is widely known, Stalin's interpretation of socialism gained the upper hand—a fact that of course led to modifications of the Soviet discourse on internationalism. However, this does not mean that world revolution and international solidarity completely disappeared from the Soviet propaganda arsenal—on the contrary, they survived well into the post-

36 The standard monograph on intra-party opposition is still Daniels 1969. For the »international« aspects of intra-party struggle, see esp. pp. 209–235 and 253–272.

war era. What changed, however, was the content behind these formulas. Internationalism now meant the export of the Soviet-Russian model. As has been demonstrated, what already existed in the first years of Soviet rule as a tendency now became the sole intent. This trend can be traced not only in politics, but also in cultural production. For example, a common motif in Soviet children's literature was pioneers traveling/flying around the world to convince proletarians of other countries to follow the Soviet example (Steiner 1999: 99–110). In the party journal *Krasnaia pechat'* (*The Red Press*), one of these children's books was reviewed and severely criticized—not however for its chauvinistic implications, but for a lack of literary quality.³⁷ This image is exemplary for how internationalism was drained of its egalitarian content and replaced with a formula for international Soviet domination. In this context, it makes sense to remember the sharp-sighted conclusion Walter Benjamin drew while visiting Moscow. On the one hand, he noted in his diary, the Soviet government was

trying to bring about the suspension of militant communism, [...] to de-politicize the life of its citizens as much as possible. On the other hand, the youth is being put through »revolutionary« education in pioneer organizations, in the Komsomol, which means that they do not come to revolution as an experience but only as a discourse. (Benjamin 1986: 53)

The point Benjamin made concerning revolution is even more valid when it comes to world revolution. With the Stalinist turn, the new generation of activists could no longer experience the anticipation of a worldwide communist society within reach, but encountered it solely as discourse, or rather as a »slogan« (»*Parole*,« as in Benjamin's original German text, Benjamin 1980: 79–80) that can be filled with any content (or remain empty).

37 *Krasnaia pechat'* (Nr. 22/November 1926): 64–65.

What conclusions can we draw for the history of the Soviet Union and the communist world from the study of early Soviet global thought? First and foremost, certain »theses of continuity« should be challenged. A number of recent publications still hold to the opinion that Stalin consistently followed and carried out the Bolshevik dream of world revolution by extending the Soviet sphere of influence over the course of World War II (Raack 1995; Musial 2008). However, to assume that Stalin strived for world revolution means utilizing a notion of world revolution that is de-historicized and hollowed out to an extent that minimizes its explanatory value. Even Stalin's declaration of the invasion of Finland by the Red Army as an act of world revolution (Bayerlein 2008: 201) should not hide the fact that this »world revolution« had little to do with the way it was conceptualized in early Soviet political discourse. To assume differently would mean falling prey to Stalin's notions.

On the other hand, an intense examination of early Soviet global concepts as shared by leaders and grass-roots activists independent from Bolshevik *realpolitik* might assist in a consistent historicization of the notion of world revolution. The world revolution that they expected (and were ready to push forward), was nevertheless not a completely voluntaristic act, but was rooted in assumptions of global politics that resulted from the social and political situation in the wake of World War I. Following this concept, revolutionary Russia was not, or rather was just temporarily, the center of attention, and as a revolutionary state it was not an end in itself but just one step toward a global communist structure. Of course communism was also about expansion, but not of the *one* state however »revolutionary« it might be. Rather the revolution itself, which seemed to flare up in different places, was to connect to form a global whole.

The revolutionary territorial entities generated during this process were not supposed to simply mirror the Soviet model. To understand this, Lenin's reactions to the foundation of the Hungarian Republic of Councils are an insightful and surprising read. The fact that Soviet power was initially installed in Hungary not through a communist coup, but through a socialist alliance did not cause Lenin to denounce it as a deviation. In-

stead he praised the Hungarian revolution as »extraordinarily original« (Lenin 1960: 260). At another occasion he characterized the Hungarian revolution as having been »incomparably easier and more peaceful« (Lenin 1965b: 387), a characteristic unmistakably meant as a compliment, since he also attested the Hungarian »comrades« had »set the world an even better example than Soviet Russia« (Lenin 1965b: 390). Lenin did not eschew violence as a means of a successful revolution, in Russia as well as in Hungary (ibid.), however other communist states were not expected to slavishly emulate the model of October 1917. The envisioned communist world was a world of contingency, with an open end and not preconfigured to be Russo-centric. As has been shown, rank-and-file activists were able to share this vision, no matter its hopelessness in hindsight.

This excursion into the global thought of early Soviet activists may hopefully contribute to the history of communicating the global, and extend the focus of studies on world society to the time before 1945 (cf. Wobbe 2000: 18). It is questionable whether Luhmann would have agreed with either the global vision of early Soviet activists or with this author's attempt to connect it to his theoretical framework, but it is beyond doubt that Soviet activists engaged in communication transcending national borders and made the global »take place« within it (cf. Luhmann 1997a: 150).

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