

*Mia Roth*

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# The wide-ranging influence of the 1928 decree of the Communist International

## Summary

This article deals with the impact of a decree passed by the Communist International in Moscow in 1928. It shows how it influenced not only the most important communist party outside the Soviet Union at that time, namely the German Communist Party, but also the smallest, the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), both of which were hampered by the rigid doctrinaire beliefs forced upon them by Stalin via the Comintern. The paper argues that the CPSA would have been more successful if it had listened to the views of some black party members. This might have shortened its long period in the political wilderness.

## Die uitgebreide invloed van die 1928 dekreet van die Kommunistiese Internasionale

Hierdie artikel behandel die inpak van 'n dekreet deur die Kommunistiese Internasionale (Komintern) in Moskou gedurende 1928. Dit bespreek die invloed op die belangrikste kommunistiese party van daardie tyd buite die Soviet Unie, naamlik die Duitse Kommunistiese Party, maar ook die kleinste, die Kommunistiese Party van Suid-Afrika (KPSA). Beide is gekortwiek deur die rigiede doktrinêre idees wat via die Komintern deur Stalin op hulle afgeforseer is. Daar word geargumenteer dat die KPSA meer suksesvol sou gewees het indien hulle na die menings van sommige van die swart partylede sou geluister het. Dit kon die tydperk wat die KPSA in die politieke wildernis deurgebring het, aansienlik verkort het.

This article deals with the context and the results of a decree passed by the Communist International (Comintern) in 1928. There was, of course, a multiplicity of causes shaping the events of the time, in both Germany and South Africa, the two countries examined in this article. Emphasis is placed on one particular cause here in order to give it its rightful place in the sequence of events. The writing of much of the period's history, particularly in the case of the Communist movement in South Africa, occurred before the opening of the Comintern Archives in Moscow and it is hoped that this new information will augment present-day knowledge of the events of the time.

The Bolshevik Revolution took place in 1917. By 1921 the small communist movements throughout the world had affiliated themselves to the Comintern. At that time, it appeared perfectly obvious that the Bolsheviks held the key to the success of the communist movement. They had triumphed in Russia and it seemed that other communist parties which correctly followed their Bolshevik policies would be successful. The assumption was that the Bolsheviks must be right, because they alone had carried through a successful socialist revolution. By the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1927, however, the Comintern had not succeeded in spreading the communist revolution to other parts of the world. By 1921, Lenin had already reluctantly come to the conclusion that joint action, preferably only with the socialist rank and file but for a period also with socialist leaders, was a necessity.<sup>1</sup>

At that time it seemed that unless a connection could be made and, more importantly, maintained with numerically better-supported movements of the left, communists would never come to power. The tactic which they employed from 1921 until 1928 was thus to gain political influence by establishing ties with the Labour Party or the social democrats. However, not only the European parties, but also Asian and South African parties affiliated to the Comintern had been unsuccessful in establishing direct connections with leftist movements on a permanent basis. New tactics were thus called for, ones that would

1 K McDermott & J Agnew, *The Comintern, a history of international communism from Lenin to Stalin*. London: MacMillan, 1996: 6-8, 27, 45.

have to result from some drastic rethinking, if they were to be any more successful than the failed joint tactics. It was this failure that propelled the endeavours of the Comintern for the next five years.

Nikolai Bukharin, Chairman of the Comintern, and his supporters had been committed to joint action. This policy changed after they lost influence, and by 1928, a year after the tenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution, a new policy had come into force. Action with other, more powerful organisations, putting members of the party into such organisations and forming organisations with those who were not party members, the policy favoured by Bukharin had undoubtedly failed by 1928, which now became unacceptable. It was, in any case, not the way the Bolsheviks had gained control of Russia. The new policy to be followed the one which had succeeded at the time of the Russian Revolution. This was an acknowledgment that it was the unique characteristics of the Bolshevik Party that had enabled it to triumph in the Russian revolution.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of joint action, although dropped in 1928, was later to prove the most consistent method used by the communists to further their aims. When the method resurfaced in 1934 it became known as the “united front”. The word “front”, in this context, can have two meanings. One is that of a unity between disparate elements against the common enemy. The other meaning is that of a pretext, a false façade. The first meaning was presented to the world by the Party, but the second was the reality.

The method used during the 1921-1927 period was that of making use of front organisations which were formed as part of Comintern directives from Moscow. The purpose of a front organisation was to form a movement that would give the appearance of being an independent, spontaneously created organisation. The chairman of such an organisation would not be a party member or, at most, a clandestine member, or one they believed to have left the party. Behind the notion of the united front lay the realisation, at a very early stage in the history of the twentieth-century communist movement,

2 D Hallas, *The Comintern*. London: Methuen, 1985: 49; H Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978: 228; 230, 235ff, 262, 270, 272.

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that the mass of organised workers remained committed to their reformist organisations.

By 1928, the Comintern had already assumed its air of invincibility and was not ready to acknowledge that its previous policy had been a failure. It continued to maintain that it was still in favour of joint action, but now called this a united front from below. This simply meant that communist parties were to encourage members of other organisations to join them, something that they should have been doing all along in any case.<sup>3</sup>

Initially, the Comintern was a genuinely international communist organisation. In spite of being based in the USSR, it could and did exercise autonomy of action. However, when the 1921-1927 directive failed, the end of Comintern autonomy was signalled. Communist strategies after this were elaborated in the Kremlin and distributed throughout the International by the Russian-dominated Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI).

The following five years (1928-1933) saw the promotion of the independent identity of the communist party as a distinct and separate entity. No form of co-operation between communist parties and other political organisations was now permissible.<sup>4</sup>

This decree was personally promoted by Stalin and first made its appearance at the Sixth World Congress in July-August 1928. At that time, there was an economic boom in the USA, hardly a sign of capitulation on the part of capitalism. However, by 1930, the whole world except for the USSR was in a slump. This contrast enormously reinforced Stalin's authority and, with it, the 1928 directive.<sup>5</sup>

At that time, the most important parties of the left in European politics, directly in competition with the communists, were the social democrats. Not only did they retain working-class support, but

3 J Ngubane, *An African explains apartheid*. London: Pall Mall, 1963: 183; SAIRR, Ad 2182, The communist bogey, League for the Maintenance of Democracy. Cape Town: South African Institute of Race Relations, 1946; McDermott & Agnew, *The Comintern*, 1996: 28.

4 McDermott & Agnew, *The Comintern*, 1996: 68, 73.

5 Hallas, *The Comintern*, 1985: 106-7; 126, 136; G Padmore, *Britain's third empire*. London: Dobson, 1959: 327.

also the most important of these parties, the *Sozialistische Partei Deutschland* (SPD) of Germany, was committed to a Western-orientated foreign policy. To discredit them, the communists from then on described them as social fascists, maintaining that they were worse than the Nazis.<sup>6</sup>

However, the Comintern advocated the same tactics throughout the world in this period. It was immaterial whether the discussion involved the largest communist party in the world after the Soviet Union, namely that of Germany, or probably the smallest, that at the furthest tip of the African continent, the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA).

In South Africa there were no social democrats to oppose. The only possible parliamentary party with which the CPSA could align was the South African Labour Party. By 1924, however, that party had completely rejected the communists by entering into a pact with J B M Hertzog's National Party. The Comintern tactics remained the same, but the strategy differed. In South Africa it centred on the slogan "Native Republic", with its accompaniment "Return the land to the Natives". This was the new method by which the Comintern hoped to win over black South Africans to the communist cause. In spite of a great deal of later discussion about what this slogan meant, it appears that its meaning was perfectly clear in 1928. It meant a republic controlled by the South African black majority, and had nothing to do with the class struggle. Both S P Bunting, CPSA chairman at that time, and George Padmore, an Afro-American communist who worked in Moscow when the theory first made its appearance, agreed on its meaning. They held that the Comintern had switched its South African tactics from a class struggle to a race struggle.<sup>7</sup> Whatever its trappings, the root of the decree was the prohibition of fraternisation with other political organisations. Both the German and the South African communists had to go it alone.

6 Mc Dermott & Agnew, *The Comintern*, 1996: 87-8.

7 University of the Witwatersrand, A949 Bunting Articles, E Roux to V Dachin, 6.3.29; *Ibid*, A949, "The new slogan and the revolutionary movement among white workers in South Africa", Eddie Roux; P van Dumm, "Class struggle, race emancipation of national liberation, the communist movement in South Africa and the Comintern". Unpubl speech at the Africa Institute, Moscow, 1993: 20ff.

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Given the insignificance of most of the communist parties then affiliated to the Comintern, the decree was naturally accepted under protest, and various communist parties world-wide attempted to modify it. Its adoption caused a severe drop in membership in all countries except Germany. The perception that it had succeeded in South Africa because it “had a new partly black leadership [and] it was able to lead a number of strikes and gain influence in spite of repression” later proved incorrect.<sup>8</sup>

Resistance to these instructions from the Comintern was widespread, particularly in the European communist parties. At the local level, enthusiasm for the united front continued to be displayed among the Berlin district party leadership, for example, in spite of their being severely reprimanded for this. There were other examples of this kind of fraternisation between the communists and the social democrats in Germany, but they all came to naught because the leadership was firmly under the authority of the Comintern. The new tactics meant open opposition to the Social Democrats. In October 1927, French communists, who had in previous elections voted for Socialist Party candidates in order to defeat the right-wing bloc, were now forced to split the leftist vote by putting up their own candidates. The decree thus successfully split the leftist vote and weakened it significantly. British communists also opposed the decree on the grounds that it would play into the hands of the Conservatives. It was not until 1929 that the opposition to the decree in the British Communist Party was overcome and the new tactics finally accepted.

Initially, the peculiar circumstances of German politics made it seem as if the go-it-alone decree had been successful there. The KPD (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschland*) share of the votes increased steadily from May 1929 to November 1932. In November 1932 the Nazis won the German election with 33.1% of the votes. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) won 20.4% and the communists 16.9%. Thus even as late as 1932, a vigorous united front policy on the part of the KPD could have garnered more votes than the Nazis. Stalin's Comintern ensured that they did not pursue such a policy. On 13th September 1932, the communists presented a vote of no confidence in the

8 Hallas, *The Comintern*, 1985: 130.

Von Papen government. They were supported by the Nazis. The Chancellor was deposed and the way was open for Hitler to become Chancellor of Germany. Had the communists continued to pursue their former tactics of a united front with other parties of the left, they would not have joined the Nazis in this crucial vote.<sup>9</sup>

The KPD had been for many years the pre-eminent hope for the installation of Marxist socialism in a western country.<sup>10</sup> Because of the divisive tactics imposed on the KPD by the Comintern, an anti-fascist front with the social democrats proved impossible. This left the way open for Hitler, despite the electoral strength of the left-wing parties. It is true that the SPD harboured a deep antipathy towards Bolshevism, but the tactics pursued by the KPD after the Comintern Decree inevitably led to a split in the votes for the leftist parties. Although an outright alliance would have been difficult, in spite of opinions to the contrary, splitting the vote was undoubtedly of advantage to the Nazi Party. The question of Stalin's role in the Nazi's rise to power has generated a great deal of historical debate. An American expert on the topic, Robert C Tucker, holds that by

[f]orcing upon the KPD a policy of uncompromising belligerence against Social Democracy [social fascism], he [Stalin] abetted the Nazi victory [...] insofar as the possibility existed of heading off this event by encouraging a united front of the German left and other anti-Nazi forces, he was chiefly responsible for its failure to materialize.<sup>11</sup>

It was only in March 1933, literally hours before the KPD was declared illegal, that Moscow unenthusiastically considered the establishment of a united front with the social democrats. This overture was (not entirely surprisingly) rebuffed by the social democrats, still smarting from their designation as "social fascists". Once Hitler as-

9 P Johnson, *A history of the modern world, from 1917 to the 1980s*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1984: 280-1; A Bullock, *A study in tyranny*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986: 109-10, 112-3, 230-1; McDermott & Agnew, *The Comintern*, 1996: 73-4.

10 D P Hornstein, *Arthur Ewart, a life for the Comintern*. London: Hutchinson, 1993: 157, 159-60, 169-70, 187; Hallas, *The Comintern*, 1985: 136.

11 R C Tucker, *Stalin in power: the Revolution from above, 1928-1941*. New York: Redcliffe, 1992: 225-32, quoted in McDermott & Agnew, *The Comintern*, 1996: 116.

sumed the chancellorship in January 1933, Nazi control over German society and government succeeded so readily because there was no organised opposition. At least part of the blame for this state of affairs can be attributed to the disastrous Comintern directive.

In spite of all this, at the meeting of the Comintern ECCI held in November 1933, there was no criticism of the disastrous policies pursued in Germany as dictated to the German party by the Comintern. In fact those among the German communists who had advocated joint action with the socialists to defeat the Nazis continued to be denounced as traitors. This slavish obedience to the directive of the Comintern is borne out by much documentary evidence. By forcing upon the KPD a policy of uncompromising belligerence against the social democrats, Stalin aided the Nazi victory. The anti-Social Democratic stance of the KPD was at times translated into joint action with the Nazis, the two most notorious examples being the Prussian referendum of 1931 and the Berlin transport workers' strike of November 1932. In 1933 Zinoviev went so far as to state that Stalin was responsible for Hitler's victory, perhaps an unwise comment but certainly at least partially true.<sup>12</sup>

However, in the Comintern, even at the end of 1933, at the 13th ECCI Plenum, they were still attacking the social democrats. It took until February 1934, when the French communists for the first time ignored the Comintern decree, and united with the socialists. These events were among the aspects analysed by Georgi Dimitrov, the Bulgarian communist whose contribution to the Reichstag fire made him a hero in the Soviet Union. By then Stalin himself clearly realised that his policy had failed. With Stalin's blessing (the only *caveat* being that they should not implicate Stalin himself in the policy change), Dimitrov demolished the policy of the past four years. The period of going-it-alone was over.<sup>13</sup>

12 Bullock, *A study in tyranny*, 1986: 112, 116, 118, 122; Hornstein, *Arthur Ewart, A life for the Comintern*, 1993: 157, 159-60, 169-70, 187; Hallas, *The Comintern*, 1985: 136; D Orlow, *The history of the Nazi party: 1933*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1973: 23-4.

13 Bullock, *A study in tyranny*, 1986: 124-5.



By that time the Communist parties of Europe were in disarray and Hitler was firmly in power in Germany. However, the repercussion of the failure were also felt in the Soviet Union. Stalin's purges of the 1930s have been portrayed as the unreasonable actions of an evil despot. Very few attempts have been made to see his actions as a logical, if extreme reaction to the circumstances of the time. After 1933, Stalin began to believe that the Comintern was a hotbed of spies. This was not a totally unwarranted assumption. There was some leakage of Comintern activities. For example the executions of three members of the Communist Party in South Africa, Lazar Bach and Maurice and Paul Richter, were reported at that time in the South African press. The fact that a black CPSA activist, Josie Mpama, gave evidence at the commission appointed to investigate the South African party (CPSA) in the name of "Henderson", was also known to the South African government.

So even in the case of a small and insignificant party like the CPSA the government could obtain information about what was going on in Moscow. There were thus some leaks, probably through the British Communist Party. The singular lack of success of the parties that had affiliated to the Comintern, in contrast to the success of the Bolshevik party in Russia, may have seemed incomprehensible to Stalin, unless the Comintern was, as he thought, riddled with spies.<sup>14</sup>

The CPSA in South Africa was of course given a similar directive. The difference between the European parties and the CPSA was that by 1928 the only organisations that were still co-operating with the CPSA were black political organisations. The party members who protested at the Comintern prohibition against co-operating with other political organisations were, with two exceptions, all black.

From 1924 the CPSA had concentrated on the national liberation of blacks. As previously mentioned, by that date its only possible ally in white politics, the South African Labour Party, had rejected its overtures. The new 1924 policy directives from the Comintern coincided with this rejection and the emphasis was now placed on form-

14 Moscow, Comintern Archives (hereafter CA) 495/14/354/14, Cutting on the deaths of Lazar Bach and Paul and Maurice Richter, *Sunday Express*, July 18, 1937; CA 495/1/349.

ing a united front with the only two black organisations of any significance in the country at that time, namely the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) and the ANC. All-out efforts were then made by the CPSA chairman, Sidney Bunting, to ensure that the CPSA played a significant role in both these organisations. Unfortunately for him, the ICU expelled its communist members in 1926 and the alliance with the ANC eventually fared no better.

The new directive of 1928 was officially adopted by the CPSA in January 1929. It maintained the 1924 emphasis on supporting the national liberation of blacks but, as in Europe, forbade co-operation with other organisations. The new directive emphasised liberation, as its name, "Native Republic", indicated.

The impossibility of carrying out the directive was immediately apparent to Sidney Bunting. He was fully aware of the extremely small and powerless status of the party. The CPSA needed to align itself with other organisations if it was to have any influence at all.

Unfortunately by 1930 the CPSA had also been ousted from the ANC. The attempt at organising its own black trade union movement, the Federation of African Trade Unions, had failed, the Federation remaining weak and ineffectual, as Bunting himself admitted. Certainly the Comintern was right in thinking that its previous strategy had not succeeded in South Africa and that a new directive was called for. Bunting, however, was also correct when he maintained that the Comintern's new directive would not work in South Africa. He did not think that they should abandon joint action, in spite of its lack of success.

Understandably, the Comintern believed that the South African communists were unwilling to carry out its directive. This was true of Sydney Bunting, the Party chairman. Bunting was thus expelled in 1931. The Comintern expelled many others along with Bunting, those regarded as lacking in commitment to the new tactics. The blacks they expelled were among those who had aided Bunting, some in giving the Comintern false information on his successes, in an attempt to prevent the decree from being adopted in South Africa. For example, his hastily assembled Federation of Trade Unions was found to be a "paper organisation" by the Comintern. Bunting then tried to ingratiate himself with the Comintern by busying himself, during

the course of 1931, with the successful organisation of mine workers. This “success” also turned out to be fraudulent.

After the expulsions, the Party realised it had no choice. Part of the new directive, as far as South Africa was concerned, meant that there was now an emphasis on the training of blacks in the Soviet Union as party activists. Those blacks who went to Moscow at this time were probably initially enthusiastic about the new slogan. However, it was evident to the Comintern that what appealed to them were the nationalistic aspects of the “Native Republic” slogan.

Moses Kotane was one of those who initially gave his unqualified support to the slogan. Otherwise, he would not have been sent for training to Russia. In spite of this training, however, he seemed beset with difficulties in carrying out his instructions after his return. This was because it was impossible to carry out in practice in South Africa, although the underlying theoretical basis of a country under black control, as “The Native Republic” slogan suggested, was appealing.

Kotane had done well in Moscow and, on his return, was immediately made party secretary, the highest position to which a black party member could then aspire. Kotane was party secretary for only a few months, however, when the Comintern ordered his removal, presumably because he was not conforming to the decree.

Kotane had expressed unhappiness with the aspect of the decree that prohibited co-operation between the CPSA and other black organisations. He was against the party’s continual denigration of the leaders of the successful protest organisations, which were now frowned upon, like the social democrats in Germany. This was not because Kotane personally had any great respect for such activists, but because he thought that the CPSA would lose support if it held such views. Black activists outside the party were more successful in gaining mass support than activists within the party, and denigrating them would not, in Kotane’s view, gain the CPSA any adherents.

After his demotion, Kotane was made a party organiser in Johannesburg. However, he left Johannesburg and his new, less prestigious, position without party permission and moved to Cape Town. There, with other disaffected members of the party, like Jimmy La Guma and Johnny Gomas, he started a national liberation movement. This had

initially been a part of Comintern strategy for the “Native Republic” slogan, but had been dropped at the insistence of Bunting. To what extent this National Liberation League (as it was called) would have been similar to the initial idea of the Comintern is not certain. Nevertheless, its decision to prohibit whites from becoming members of the League was not to the Comintern’s liking, nor was its ready acceptance of Trotskyites among its leaders. White members of the party were effectively prevented from having any say in the National Liberation League. Whatever the National Liberation League purported to be, it was not class-based.

As the party leaders were always white, such attempts by black activists might be viewed as racist. Later, at the Commission of Inquiry in Moscow in 1936, Kotane was labelled a racist for his views. However, it would be more accurate to see it as an attempt by the black activists of the CPSA to achieve some kind of local autonomy from centralised party rule. The organisation that they formed was the only way in which they could assert themselves. By denying membership to whites, they effectively excluded the party bosses. The inclusion of dissident elements like the Trotskyites was definitely against party tactics and specifically against the decree that prohibited interaction with other organisations.

Most of the black activists, including Johnny Gomas and Jimmy La Guma, appeared to support Kotane’s initiative. The only exceptions were J B Marks and Edwin Mofutsanyana. Their lack of support was more a sign of internal party politics than of any ideological difference. Marks had been party secretary for a few months before the return of Kotane and had lost his position to him. There always seemed to be a certain amount of rivalry between them. Mofutsanyana was appointed to the obviously coveted position after Kotane. In 1937 Mofutsanyana was, in turn, castigated for his “nationalistic” views, so it is unlikely that he was against Kotane on principle alone.

Kotane, Gomas and Eddie Roux held the united front tactic to be correct and were against the decree. Their revolt, however, was five years down the line and thus overlapped with the realisation in the Comintern itself that the decree had been a mistake. The protests of the South African comrades were not against the idea of a native

republic but directed at the fact that this had to be implemented without the aid of non-Party members.

The formation of the National Liberation League led to the expulsion of Kotane and his supporters, including Eddie Roux, from the Political Bureau of the CPSA. They, in turn, threatened to inform the Comintern of the disastrous state into which the Party in South Africa had fallen by 1934.<sup>15</sup>

Shortly after these events, in October 1934, Kotane wrote a letter to the Comintern, to explain his reasons for forming a nationalist organisation with activists who were not members of the CPSA. He held that the Comintern ideas on an independent native republic would lead to the formation of a non-socialist, national state under black control. This would then be followed by the second stage, that of the workers' and peasants' republic, which would be a class-based, socialist state. Although it was Kotane who wrote the letter to the Comintern, these were probably the accepted views of the whole of the factional section of the Party in 1934. The letter went unnoticed, probably unread, and certainly unanswered. Kotane then left for Moscow, uninvited, to present his views and those of the group which became known in Moscow as the factional triumvirate. This was an extremely unusual thing to do in 1935 when, it seems, the dangers of visiting the Soviet Union were already known in South Africa.<sup>16</sup>

After the arrival of Kotane, all the influential members of the Party in South Africa were ordered to present themselves to the Comintern to explain their actions. It is instructive how few of them did so. Eddie Roux refused to go. Lazar Bach, an important member of the party who had fostered the now doubtful decree, was warned not to go by Max Joffe, a member of the CPSA secretariat. J B Marks bungled his exit from South Africa and never arrived in Russia. The

15 CA 495/14/355, Report; CA 495/64/133, unsigned letter written in Johannesburg, 31/7/34; University of the Witwatersrand, A949, Bunting Papers, FS /10340/10/24.8.28, 38th session, VI Congress; *ibid*, 23/7/28, ARB 3608, File 1103, Report on the Federation of Non-European Trade Unions, 7.2.29.

16 CA 495/14/355; A Drew (ed), *South Africa's radical tradition, a documentary history, 1 1907-1950*. Cape Town: Bunchu Books, 1996: 217-24.

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Comintern suspected that he had done this on purpose because he, too, knew of the dangers of visiting Moscow at this time.<sup>17</sup>

They were asked to present themselves in Moscow because the Comintern had decided to appoint a commission of inquiry into the activities of the CPSA. They hoped in this way to pinpoint and remove dissident elements. This action would remove responsibility from the Comintern decrees and place the party's problems squarely on the shoulders of party members.<sup>18</sup>

At this stage, Kotane's letter was at last read and appreciated, particularly by Andre Marty, the French communist who headed the commission. At this stage, the decree was no more, but its embarrassing repercussions were still echoing among Comintern officials. Kotane's interpretation was extremely useful. It provided adequate justification for both the "Native Republic" slogan and the "popular front" strategies which followed. The actual cause of dissent, namely the refusal to allow co-operation with other organisations, was ignored, but again became acceptable practice after 1934. If Kotane's interpretation is followed, then one cannot state that the slogan was withdrawn (showing that the Comintern had not erred in putting it forward in the first place). On the contrary, it was still current. There had merely been a shift of tactics in carrying it out. The eagerness of the Comintern to accept this interpretation is readily understandable. It was never willing to acknowledge its mistakes, always preferring to put the blame on its functionaries.<sup>19</sup>

17 CA 495/14/158(71), 26.11.37, Minutes of the PB CPSA held at Johannesburg, on Saturday June 12th 1937; CA 495/14/350, Report of a meeting of the Political Bureau of the CPSA, Johannesburg, 11th June 1937; CA 49/14/350, Minutes of a meeting held in the Johannesburg Offices at Party Headquarters, 9th August 1936; Drew, *South Africa's radical tradition*, 1996: 245; CA 495/14/351/7, CPSA Report.

18 CA 495/14/159 (311); CA 495/14/349(133); CA 495/14/349 (176), 15 March 1936.

19 CA 494/14/352, On the situation of the Communist Party of South Africa, 2.12.37; CA 495/14/360/23 Notes; CA 495/14/360, "The Boers and British imperialism in South Africa, 5/9/40", Review of the theses of Comrade Potekhin; Drew, *South Africa's radical tradition*, 1996: 217-24.

The commission's work was twofold. On the one hand, those who had faithfully carried out the now useless previous directive were of no more use to the party and had to be removed. On the other hand, there were those who had opposed the tactics of the previous directive, and whose views had now been vindicated by the new Comintern decree, with whom it would be more difficult to deal. The new decree was basically a return to the initial Comintern policy of 1921-1927 when a "united front" with other, non-communist organisations had been held to be the correct way forward.

Since the expulsion of the party chairman, Sidney Bunting, who had disregarded the slogan in 1931, emissaries from Moscow had been sent out on a fairly regular basis. They came to the South African party to assess its obedience to the Comintern and its success in carrying out Comintern directives. In 1934, Lazar Bach was called to Moscow, ostensibly for retraining. This was not necessarily sinister. Douglas Wolton had gone for such training in 1930 and come back to replace Bunting as party chairman. It merely meant that a party leader needed extra training to administer the party in the way the Comintern wished. Bach, however, was in Moscow when the disastrous results of the decree were becoming painfully apparent.

At the sittings of the commission, Bach was forced to admit to faults for which he could hardly have been blamed, such as that he had been against participation in the All African Convention (AAC). The AAC only met in 1935, and Bach was in Moscow from 1934. Of course now that he understood that this was what the new "line" called for, he did his best to abide by it. Now the CPSA had to work with the ANC and even the tribal chiefs could form part of the new united front in South Africa. All this was in complete contradiction of the Comintern's previous policy, but unfortunately insufficient to save his life.<sup>20</sup>

The commission decided that those who had adhered to the now outdated "Native Republic" slogan were at fault. They were Lazar Bach, Maurice and Paul Richter, Max Joffe and J B Marks. The conclusion of

20 CA 495/14/349, Meeting of the Commission on the South African question, 19th March 1936; CA 94/14/152(10), Memorandum on the South African question, 1.2.36; CA 494/14/156, (32), Information.

the commission was that Bach had played a major role in drawing up the wrong line of the party, which was of course quite untrue, and that he must be detained in the Soviet Union. All the people named as being at fault had in fact faithfully followed the Comintern directive.

The summing up of the commission stated that the party had ignored the ANC, ICU and the Afrikaner parliamentary opposition under D F Malan. The 1928-1934 period had been totally against organisations such as represented by Malan, the ICU and the ANC. Lazar Bach and the brothers, Paul and Maurice Richter, were murdered in Russia. Kotane was permitted to go home, although some members of the commission wanted to retain him in Moscow on the grounds of his racist views. Another black South African who never returned from Moscow was Albert Nzula. In 1929 he had been made assistant secretary of the CPSA. This accorded with the new emphasis on putting Africans into positions of authority in the party, a move that was to be expected under the 1928 "Native Republic" slogan. This was the first time any African had been given such a responsible position in the party. Bunting, who was party chairman at this time, was most unwilling to appoint Nzula and removed him at the first opportunity. His excuse was that Nzula was drunk at CPSA meetings. However, the Comintern emissary, although admitting that Nzula did drink, said that Bunting had exaggerated in order to sack him. When Douglas Wolton came back, Nzula was reappointed, this time as secretary.<sup>21</sup>

In his period as assistant secretary Nzula wrote a letter on behalf of the Political Bureau of the CPSA. The letter was very much in favour of continuing co-operation with such organisations as the ANC and the ICU. Whether these thoughts were his own or whether he was prompted to write the letter by Bunting, who held similar views, is not clear. That he was criticising the policy of the Comintern is obvious and could not have gone down well in Moscow.

21 R Cohen, Albert Nzula: the road from Rouxville to Russia, unpubl article, 1978: 4-7; E Roux, *S P Bunting, a political biography*, Cape Town: Mayibuye Books, 1993: 134, 152.



Nzula attended the ANC conference in April 1930, where he unsuccessfully tried to ensure that Josiah Gumede retained the leadership of the ANC. He also put forward a motion for affiliation of the ANC to the Communist Party. This proposal was not well received at the ANC conference and was probably even less well received in Moscow when they found out about it. Motions to affiliate with the ANC were as much against the 1928 decree as affiliation to the Social Democrats was in Germany in 1930.

Nzula was made joint secretary of the League of African Rights. He became secretary of the Federation of Non-European Trade Unions, which the Comintern later found to be a “paper” organisation. In 1929, after the adoption of the “Native Republic” slogan by the party, he eulogised the black nationalist movement, maintaining that both the ICU Yase Natal and the Cape African Congress had revolutionary potential. This, again, was not the correct attitude.

Initially black party members had little understanding of the Comintern’s overwhelming influence on the CPSA and thought that they were permitted to express their own opinions. Neither Nzula nor other black party members appeared to understand that members were not expected to express their own opinions but merely to voice those of the Comintern. Both Nzula’s statements and all the above-mentioned activities in which he participated, were wrong for the 1928-1934 period.<sup>22</sup>

In 1931 Nzula left South Africa, probably via Lourenço Marques. He appears to have been the first to use this clandestine route. The CPSA had organised the route to get members whose passport applications were refused, as was the case with Nzula,<sup>23</sup> out of the country.

22 CA 495/64/85/14, Reply to Political Letter of the Colonial Committee of the CPGB by the Executive Bureau of the Communist Party (SA), 5 November 1929, signed by Albert Nzula; NTS 7215 60/326, Report on the 17th Annual Meeting of the ANC, 4/4/29; Cohen, Albert Nzula: the road from Rouxville to Russia, 1978: 7, 9, 12; Roux, *S P Bunting, a political biography*, 1944: 141.

23 NTS 7215 60/326, Memo on progress of Native agitation in the Union; NTS 27-7,43/301, From the Director of Native Labour to the Secretary of Native Affairs, 26 June 1929.

Nzula arrived in Moscow in August 1931. He was followed a month later by Moses Kotane, after which J B Marks and Edwin Mofutsanyana arrived for training. They left a little later than he did but all of them had returned by the end of 1933, Kotane apparently only a month or two before Nzula's death. They probably all knew what had happened to Nzula.<sup>24</sup>

That Nzula was not permitted to go home is obvious. He arrived in Moscow first and should have gone home first. That he stayed because he was so valuable to the Comintern is not an acceptable explanation. The material in his file in the Comintern archives does not back up assertions that Nzula was on the Central Committee of the Profintern, a member of the Executive Council of the Comintern, or editor of the *Negro Worker*. He had no trade union experience at all and his being made secretary of the Federation of African Trade Unions was meaningless – he was one of many who became the “secretary” of what was a communist “article organisation”. This fact was known to the Comintern by 1931 and would not have stood him in good stead.

It is also difficult to see how he could have been the editor of the *Negro Worker*, as has been asserted. George Padmore writes that he himself was the editor of the *Negro Worker* from its inception until it ceased publication in August 1933. By January 1934, the Negro liberation movement had been liquidated, as Padmore put it. This was the very month that Nzula died. Padmore says nothing about Nzula's taking over or even working with him. Padmore apparently only met him once. In any case, Nzula had only finished his training course in Moscow in late 1933, a month or two before his death. It is unlikely that he would have been on the Executive Council of the Comintern, an extremely important position, while he was still a student. The students of the University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV) were

24 A Madolwana [F Meli], *The communists and black liberation: on the Communist International (Comintern) and Sub-Saharan Africa in the inter-war period (1919-1935)*, Unpubl PhD, Leipzig: University, 1987: 170; Cohen, Albert Nzula: the road from Rouxville to Russia, 1978: 16; B Bunting, *Moses Kotane*. Bellville: Mayibuye Books, 1998: 286; [sn], *The South African Communist Party 65 years in the frontline of struggle*. Cape Town: CPSA, [ca 1994]: 6ff.

called in to support various factional fights in the Comintern and sometimes asked their opinion. According to the Afro-American Harry Haywood, who wrote about his experiences at KUTV, students were not given positions of any authority. Perhaps another indication that all was not well with Nzula's standing in the party was his attendance at KUTV. Nzula, unlike Kotane, Marks and Mofutsanyana, was theoretically an important CPSA functionary by the time he was sent to Moscow. In spite of his position in the South African Party, namely as a member of its secretariat, he was sent to KUTV, not to the Lenin School. Another member of the CPSA Secretariat, Lazar Bach, was also sent to KUTV. If in good standing, such senior party functionaries should have attended the more advanced Lenin School, not KUTV.<sup>25</sup>

A Comintern file on Nzula appears to have been compiled in order to counteract any "slanders" which might arise over his death. It is noteworthy that it was thought necessary to counteract accusations of foul play. If he really had been the incurable drunk that he had been made out to be, the file should not have been necessary, as his death by misadventure would have been no surprise to anyone. None of the claims to the important positions he supposedly occupied in Moscow are noted in this file. It seems that Nzula's "errors" continued to haunt him in Moscow.<sup>26</sup>

There are a number of articles purporting to have been written by Nzula in the *Negro Worker*, under the apparent pseudonym of Jackson. These are puzzling, especially in the light of Padmore's statement that he only met Nzula once and the fact that he does not mention Nzula's extensive involvement in the very publication of which he, Padmore, was the editor. The first article that Nzula wrote for the *Negro Worker* appeared in February 1931, although he only reached Moscow in August 1931. Seven articles were purportedly written by him during

25 CA 495/64/132/1-3, George Padmore to Rathbone, 9.1.34; Madolwana, 170, 172; H Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 1978: 254-6, 328, 329, 383; Cohen, Albert Nzula: the road from Rouxville to Russia, 1978: 4, 7, 18, 19.

26 CA 532/4/439, "This is a school record of the Negro comrade of KUTV who died. File for reference. You may need this in future to meet inquiries, perhaps to overcome slanders". I have been unable to ascertain the initials of Potekhin and Zusmanovitch.

these years. The sixth was written in May 1934, when not only Nzula, but also the *Negro Worker* was dead, having ceased publication in January 1934. The last article was said to have appeared in volume 5 of 1935, when even the slogan was dead.

It is unlikely that Nzula could have been an editor of the *Negro Worker*. How he could have written articles and had them published in a journal that had ceased publication is puzzling. Some of Nzula's work was said to have been done in conjunction with two Comintern officials, Potekhin and Zusmanovitch. Both were removed when the slogan changed, and it seems very likely that Nzula was as well.

We now know that Nzula's activities in South Africa, in contrast to those of the other black activists at KUTV, were against the directives of the Comintern. It is very likely that the above incidents were serious enough to have led to his death.

After the Commission of Inquiry had come to its conclusions, a new Political Bureau was appointed. It officially expelled Bach, the Richter brothers, Marks, and Joffe. Explanations given for the expulsion of Joffe in 1937, centred on his having warned Bach not to go to Russia. Although the warning turned out to be timely, it presumably showed an unacceptable lack of faith in the Soviet Union. Marks was expelled because he did not arrive in Moscow, as he had been instructed to do. For the expulsion of Bach and the Richters, no excuses were apparently necessary and none were given. Albert Nzula was not mentioned. Although no direct order has been uncovered, it seems that all those expelled for failing to adhere to the by then defunct 1928 directive, except for Sydney Bunting, were readmitted to the party after the conclusion of the Commission's inquiries.<sup>27</sup>

Kotane and his allies were initially relatively leniently dealt with. They were not expelled, but nor were they readmitted to the Political Bureau. It seems that they were still viewed with some suspicion. This is not surprising as they were the only ones who were prepared to state that Comintern tactics had to change because of the continuing failure of its policies. Eddie Roux said openly, even if only at a party meeting, that the Comintern line in South Africa had been a

27 CA 495/14/158(71), 26.11.37, Minutes of the PB CPSA held at Johannesburg, on

mistake and that the new line was the result of this mistake. However, the fact that they were so widely supported and that their ideas had become a part of the orthodoxy made it difficult to oust them from the party without causing further ructions. All three were allowed to form part of the Central Committee in 1937. In 1938 Eddie Roux and Johnny Gomas also regained their position in the Political Bureau. In spite of this show of acceptance the Comintern continued to keep an eye on their activities.<sup>28</sup>

The ousting of Kotane as party secretary in 1933 had led to his alienation from the CPSA. Perhaps it was hoped that reinstatement in this position would win him back and cure him of any “factional” tendencies. If so, it proved to be a shrewd move on the Comintern’s part.<sup>29</sup> At the same meeting at which Kotane was given back his position of party secretary, in December 1938, Roux was ousted from the Political Bureau. The instructions from the Comintern were that Roux was to recant publicly at this meeting or be expelled, but was to be given a chance to explain himself. By making Kotane party secretary just as they removed Roux from the Political Bureau, they effectively divided the opposition at a crucial moment. By December 1940, the third member of the faction, Gomas, was no longer a member of the Central Committee either and had lost all influence in the CPSA. The fact that the factional struggle, as the dissent of Kotane and the others was called, was not really over until Kotane was made party secretary, shows the support that he had in the party.<sup>30</sup>

Saturday, 12th June 1937; CA 495/14/350, Report of a meeting of the Political Bureau of the CPSA, Johannesburg, 11th June 1937; CA 49/14/350, Minutes of a meeting held in the Johannesburg Offices at Party Headquarters, 9th August 1936; Drew, *South Africa’s radical tradition*, 1996: 245; CA 495/14/351/7, CPSA Report.

28 CA 495/144/535; *Freedom*, May 1944.

29 M Basner, *Am I an African? The political memoir of H M Basner*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1993: 96; CA 495/17/ 360a/2, Colonial Committee, 21/2/39, p.6; CA 495/14/352,13/149, The inner Party situation in South Africa, 7/11/37.

30 CA 495/14/349/192, Kotane Testimony before the Commission 19.3.36; CA 495/14/350/140,20.9.37; CA 495/14/355/70-162, Statement of Comrade Basner, November 5, 1937; CA 495/14/355,1938, Organisational position of the Party; CA 495/14/352,13/149, The inner Party situation in South Africa,

## Roth/1928 Decree of the Communist International

Moses Kotane, Jimmy La Guma, J B Marks, and Edwin Mofutsanyana were members of the Central Committee at the dissolution of the CPSA in 1950. The CPSA then went on to survive as an illegal organisation. Kotane retained his position of general secretary until his death in 1979. J B Marks, a faithful follower of Lazar Bach, who had initially been demoted and suspended, went on in later years to become party chairman.<sup>31</sup>

The new “line” as applied after 1934 was again the united front, now called the “Programme of Action” in South Africa. From 1934 to date, the Communist Party in South Africa has never again tried to go it alone.<sup>32</sup>

The emphasis of black party activists was on liberation rather than on party ideology. They had difficulty in understanding the changes of policy that emanated from the Comintern. Kotane’s visit to Moscow to explain the position of the faction in 1936 shows that, at this time, he did not quite appreciate the dangers of such an endeavour. His complaints at the hearing indicate that he did not understand why the Party was no longer permitted to co-operate with, or render aid to, other black organisations, as it had previously done.

The expulsions in terms of the 1928 decree got rid of some able men like Gana Makabeni. Makabeni might have become a formidable trade union leader had he remained in the party throughout the period. He and the others were, it is true, readmitted after the decree

7/11/37; B Hirson, *Yours for the union, class and community struggles in South Africa, 1930-1947*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1990: 100; D Musson, *Johnny Gomas* 104; CA495/14/355,7.3.38, Statement of Comrade Banner, 5th November 1937; 495/14/352, On the situation of the Communist Party of South Africa, 2.12. 37; R J Bunche, *An African American in South Africa*. Ed by R R Edgar. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1992: 57, 72, 194; W H Andrews, *Diaries*; Bunting, *Moses Kotane, South African Revolutionary*, 1998: 98.

31 N Mandela, *Nelson Mandela, the struggle is my life*. Cape Town: Mayibuye Books, 1994: 32; Andrews, *Diaries*, National Day of Protest, 1950. Report, Issued by the Secretary-General of the ANC, 26 July 1950; CA 495/64/81, undated and unsigned.

32 CA 495/14/129(122), Report by Josie Mpama; CA 495/17/352, 15.3.37, Tasks in South Africa, 8; Drew, *South Africa's radical tradition*, 1996: 239.

was dropped in the mid-1930s, but such actions led to many wasted years of inactivity when men like him were hampered by their lack of money and support.<sup>33</sup>

If the Communist Party in South Africa had then been given the opportunity to follow its own path, and given the kind of help that the Soviet Union gave black activists after 1950, the road to liberation might have been very different. Kotane and his fellow activists knew the way, but the leaders of the South African Communist Party were too much in thrall to the Comintern to follow them.

The situation in Germany was a far more complex one and whether or not Hitler would finally have come to power in Germany if the German Communist Party had formed an alliance with the Social Democrats we will never know. All that can be said is that the 1928, decree played an important, but previously neglected, role in the events that finally enabled the Nazis to come to power in Germany.

33 Bunche, *An African American in South Africa*, 1992: 189-90, 247, 252, 254, 354, n 47.