

STALIN

and German Communism

A Study in the Origins of the State Party

RUTH FISCHER



Karl Liebknecht

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STALIN

AND GERMAN COMMUNISM

By Ruth Fischer

With the final defeat of the Nazi State Party the Communist State Party challenges the world.

Here is the sober record of the Communist International during the years of Stalin's rise to power, a record in particular of the transformation of the German Communist Party into a branch of the Russian party. This definitive analysis of Stalin's persistent intervention in German Communist affairs provides not only a detailed history of that relation, but a model by which the identical conversion of all the other Communist parties throughout the world can be understood.

Ruth Fischer writes from her own first-hand experience with the German and Russian revolutionary movements. A charter member of the Austrian Communist Party, she went to Berlin in 1919 and there became one of the leaders of the Spartakusbund, the revolutionary league founded by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. She was successively head of the Berlin party organization, deputy to the Reichstag, General Secretary of the German party, elected member of the Comintern Presidium. She was expelled from the German party in 1926

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STALIN AND GERMAN
COMMUNISM

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German Communism

*A Study in the Origins of
the State Party*

By RUTH FISCHER

WITH A PREFACE
By SIDNEY B. FAY

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CONTENTS

Preface By Sidney B. Fay xiii

1. THE ORIGINS OF GERMAN COMMUNISM

1. Resistance to the First World War 3

Social Democracy and War
Liebknecht and Luxemburg
Luxemburg versus Lenin

2. Brest-Litovsk 28

Separate Peace
The Left Communists
Spartakus and Brest-Litovsk

3. Germany, 1918 52

At Kiel
November 9th in Berlin
The Workers' Councils
The Communist Party of Germany Is Founded
Gustav Noske
Bloody January

4. Years of Civil War, 1919-1920	88
The Freikorps and National Bolshevism	
Lenin versus National Bolshevism	
The Weimar Republic and the Comintern Are Founded	
The Bavarian Council Republic	
The Hungarian Soviet Republic	
Mussolini on the Horizon	
5. The Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch	117
German Communists Underground	
The Officers' Rebellion	
Carl Legien	
Red Partisans in Germany	
Effects of the Putsch	
The Second World Congress	
Zinoviev at Halle	
6. The Road to the New Economic Policy	148
Nationalization of Industry	
The Red Army and the Party	
Democratic Centralism	
War Communism and the Trade-Unions	
The Kronstadt Uprising	
7. The United Communist Party	171
Building the Party Apparatus	
The March Action	
A German NEP?	
Discussion with Lenin	

2. NATIONAL BOLSHEVISM

8. The Reparations Crisis	189
Reparations in Kind	
Germany, an Industrial Colony	
9. Karl Radek	201
<i>In the Ranks of the German Revolution</i>	
Bloc with Brandler and Thalheimer	
10. Communist Convention at Leipzig	219
Organization Report for 1922	
Red Bloc in Saxony and Thuringia	

11. Struggle for Succession in the Russian Party	233
Stalin Becomes General Secretary	
Lenin's Testament on Party Leadership	
Lenin's Last Political Statement	
Lenin Breaks with Stalin	
12. Occupation of the Ruhr	252
Passive Resistance	
<i>Die Essener Richtung</i>	
The Krupp Incident	
Conference in Moscow	
Radek Banks on a Reichswehr Coup	
13. The Schlageter Policy	267
The Schlageter Speech	
National Bolshevism in Turkey?	
A Russian-German Bloc	
Forerunners of Nazism	

3. THE COMMUNIST UPRISING OF 1923

14. The Cuno Strike	291
Civil War in Gestation	
Factory Councils versus Trade-Unions	
Strike in the Money Press	
15. Preparation for the Uprising	305
Bulgaria Is Not Germany	
Secret Session in Moscow	
Blueprint for a German Red Army	
Total Mobilization of the Party	
16. Dresden, Hamburg, Munich	329
Brandler in the Saxon Cabinet	
The Chemnitz Conference	
Fiasco in Hamburg	
The Kahr-Ludendorff Plot	
17. Effects of the German Defeat on the Russian Party	348
Trotsky Breaks with the Politburo	
The Maslow Commission	
Talks with Stalin	
Post Mortem at Comintern Headquarters	
<i>Lessons of October</i>	

4. THE PERIOD OF TRANSFORMATION

18. Left Communism and the Dawes Plan 387

An American Offer
 Manuïsky's Mission to Berlin
 Communist Convention at Frankfurt
 The Fifth World Congress
 The Reichstag Accepts the Dawes Plan

19. The Hindenburg Election 412

Monarchist Resurgence
 "Defense of the Republic"
 Thälmann a Presidential Candidate
 The Reich Bloc Is Stabilized

20. Stalin's Intervention in German Communist Affairs . 432

Stalin Explains Bolshevism to Maslow
 Manuïsky versus the German Left
 An Open Letter to the German Party

21. Russia's Foreign Policy versus the Comintern . 456

The Zinoviev Letter
 Adventure in Estonia
 Postlude in Bulgaria

22. Socialism in One Country 471

Bukharin's Neo-NEP
 Is State Industry Socialism?
 A Personal Note on the Fourteenth Congress

5. THE STATE PARTY IS INSTALLED

23. Stalinization of the German Party 499

The Ulbricht-Pieck System
 The Party Hierarchy under GPU Control

24. The Reichswehr and the Red Army 515

Stabilization of the German Economy
 Shall the Princes be Expropriated?
 The German-Russian Treaty of 1926
 Germany Rearms with Russian Factories

25. Trotsky and Zinoviev Form a Bloc 537

- Talks with Bukharin and Zinoviev
- Roll Call of Stalin's Comintern Candidates
- The Anglo-Russian Trade-Union Unity Committee
- The Meeting in the Woods
- Stalin Deprives the Opposition of Party Legality

26. The Defeat of the Bloc 573

- Stalin and Chiang Kai-shek
- To Strike or Not to Strike
- The Fourth International?
- Trotsky is Banished to Central Asia
- The International Left Meets in Berlin

27. Agit-Prop: Agitation and Propaganda 606

- The Red Front Fighters' League
- Willi Münzenberg
- Bert Brecht, the Minstrel of the GPU
- Die Massnahme*

6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

28. Summary and Conclusion 629

MAPS

The Maximum Expansion of the Central Powers after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk	2
Central Europe, April 1919	188
The Rhine-Ruhr, March 1923	290
Germany, October-November 1923	386

PREFACE

It was a tragic misfortune for Germany—and for the world—that at the end of World War I the German working classes were not united in a single coherent working-class party. Such a party might have been able to make the “revolution” of 1918 a really democratic revolution and might have given effective support to the newly established Weimar Republic. It would have counteracted the forces of militarist reaction, of extreme Left radicalism, and of social chaos resulting from the defeat and the rapid demobilization of millions of officers and men. These military elements, with habits developed in wartime, were cast adrift on society and were unable to find jobs or to adjust themselves to postwar conditions. They banded together in Free Corps that at first contained some good and idealistic elements but gradually degenerated into disorderly and defiant military organizations which sought to overthrow the Weimar Republic, murdered its ministers, and formed a large element in the Nazi Storm Troop formations which finally did wreck the Republic in 1933.

Instead of forming a single political party, the German workingmen were divided into at least three rival groups, each seeking to capture the support of the German masses. This contributed to the develop-

ment of that multiplicity of political parties—there were soon more than a score of them—which caused the extreme instability of all coalition cabinets and was one of the fatal weaknesses of the Weimar Republic. It also led to an unhealthy internecine strife among the three parties representing primarily the German working classes.

The first, oldest, and strongest of these three proletarian parties in 1918 was the SPD (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) or Social Democratic Party, led by Ebert and Scheidemann. It arose in 1875 from a merger of Marxists and Lassalleans. The former, led by Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, had been affiliated with the First International and believed ideologically in the inevitable class struggle and the ultimate triumph of the revolutionary proletariat. The Lassalleans, more nationalist, had a socialist program of practical reforms which seemed very radical in those days but which has been mostly won today by workingmen in all industrially advanced countries. They believed in achieving their program, not by violent revolution, but by gradual legal means—by getting and using the secret ballot and parliamentary power to secure improved social and legal conditions for the workingmen. The two wings, Marxist and Lassallean, each continued to keep something of their ideological origins, and at congresses of the Social Democratic Party adopted platforms which reflected the two somewhat contradictory plans of action. Gradually, however, as German industry and commerce made tremendous strides at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, the German working class became far better off in the matter of wages, working conditions, legal rights, and political power. In the Reichstag election of 1912, Social Democratic candidates won more than a third of the total popular vote and formed the strongest party numerically in the Reichstag. But with increased well-being and political power the Social Democratic Party leadership became more conservative, less international and more national, and even somewhat bourgeois in its outlook and action.

The second workingman's party was the USPD (*Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*) or Independent Socialists. With Marxian antimilitarist and international traditions, they developed as a split-off in 1916 from the Social Democratic Party who represented the more conservative, nationalist and bourgeois tendencies of the original Lassallean group before the merger of 1875. They believed

that "the main enemy is in our own country"—the monarchists, militarists and big industrialists who were criminally prolonging the war. They advocated peace at once on the basis of "no annexations and no indemnities," and promoted strikes to bring it about. The party ceased to exist soon after the end of the war. At a party convention at Halle in October, 1920, two thirds of the delegates voted to secede and join the recently formed Communist Party. Fifteen months later the remainder decided to reunite with the Social Democratic Party from which they had split off in 1916.

The third party, KPD (*Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands*) or Communist Party, did not have a separate existence until the end of December, 1918. Most of its members had formed the left wing of the Independent Socialists within which they existed as the Spartacus League. They were more violently antimilitarist and more fanatically in favor of social revolution than the rest of the Independent Socialists. They drew their intellectual guidance and emotional inspiration from Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. The former was a brilliant young Polish intellectual—"an eagle," Lenin called her, though he differed sharply from many of her views—who had escaped from Tsarist oppression. She settled down in Germany in 1897, and by marriage with a German workman acquired German citizenship. Karl Liebknecht was the son of Wilhelm Liebknecht, one of the militant founders of the German Social Democratic Party in Bismarck's day. Karl published in 1911 an influential book against imperialism and the German army, *Militarismus und Antimilitarismus*. Early in the war he was the first Reichstag member of the Social Democratic Party to refuse to vote credits for carrying on the conflict, and was active in the movement which led the Independent Socialists to split off from the Social Democrats in 1916. Because of their opposition and incitement to mutiny, both Liebknecht and Luxemburg were imprisoned by the Kaiser's government and not released until October and November, 1918, at the time of its downfall.

The influence of Luxemburg and Liebknecht increased rapidly during the last weeks of 1918 as a result of the German military defeat, the growing strikes in the factories, the mutiny of sailors in Kiel followed by uprisings all over Germany, and the indignation felt by workmen in uniform against the Kaiser's old officers. It was also in-

creased by the success of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, and by hopes of Russian assistance in utterly destroying militarism in Germany and in preparing a radical socialist revolution there also. Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, similar to the Russian soviets, sprang up all over Germany. Among the metal workers of Berlin and in the industrial centers of Hamburg, Bremen, the Ruhr, and elsewhere, there also appeared a new radical type of organization—factory councils which chose their own shop stewards.

After Ebert replaced Prince Max von Baden as Chancellor on November 9, there was a confused struggle for power between the Social Democrats, the Independent Socialists, and the leaders of the Spartacus League. In order to avoid anarchy, protect the fluid frontiers, and prevent too hasty and violent a revolution, Ebert, with the approval of many Independent Socialists, called for support from the army. To the Spartacus League this was treason to the sacred cause. On December 30, 1918, its members broke away from the Independent Socialist Party and formed their own separate organization, the Communist Party (KPD). Hardly had it been born when its two most brilliant guiding spirits were arrested by monarchist troops and a few hours later, on January 15, 1919, murdered "while attempting to escape." It was shortly after this that Ruth Fischer came to Berlin and quickly assumed a leading position in the new party.

The German Communist Party, strongly based on the teachings of Marx, was more genuinely international in its character and outlook than the other two socialist parties. It was also, in view of Germany's great industrial population, the most important Communist party in Europe outside Russia. It exercised consequently a magnetic attraction upon Communists outside Germany, both upon the Bolsheviks who wanted to use it for their own nationalist purposes and upon other individuals who hoped that it would establish international socialism. It is perhaps significant that Ruth Fischer, like several of its other leaders—Rosa Luxemburg, Leo Jogiches, Arkadi Maslow—were not born in Germany but were attracted to it.

Ruth Fischer was born in Austria and brought up in Vienna, where her father, Rudolf Eisler, was a noted professor and the author of several works on philosophy and sociology. During World War I, as a young student at the University of Vienna, she joined the Social Demo-

cratic Party of Austria. But since this party in the multi-national empire stood for the preservation of the framework of the Austro-Hungarian state, and conceded only cultural autonomy for the various nationalities, she was driven to the extreme left of the party. The "Left Radicals" fought for the right of all nationalities to break away from Hapsburg rule and work out their own destinies.

This right of self-determination, upheld by Lenin and put forward in the Brest-Litovsk negotiations, made a tremendous impression upon the young students in Vienna. It gave Ruth Fischer an active interest in Bolshevism. She had some minor clashes with the Austrian police and published some "underground" socialist pamphlets. She was encouraged by messages from the Bolsheviks, first from Switzerland and later from Moscow. At the collapse of Austria-Hungary, a Bolshevik delegation from Moscow, disguised as a Red Cross Mission, suggested that she and her radical group of students and young workers found a Communist Party in Austria, which would affiliate with the Communist Third International then in process of formation. On November 4, 1918, she became charter member No. 1 of the Communist Party of Austria, one of the first Communist parties in Europe. In this way she came into direct contact with the Soviet regimes in Hungary and Bavaria, and met leading figures like Béla Kun, Eugen Varga, Max Levin, and others.

The Austrian Communist Party, however, was a rather inefficient, artificial, and weak creation, especially after the dissolution of the Hapsburg Empire and the breaking away of its parts. Furthermore, the bulk of the Vienna workers did not wish to leave their old party. In 1919, therefore, Ruth Fischer moved to Berlin, which she believed had become the real center of the revolutionary struggle in Europe. She became active for the Communist Party as an organizer and writer. In November 1921, to her surprise, she was elected chairman of the Berlin branch of the party. It was an unusual step to put a young woman in her early twenties, and not even a German citizen, in command of the largest Communist Party organization in the Reich. It was taken partly because of the ability she had shown, and partly just because of her youth; many of the rank and file of the party distrusted the old leaders, and wanted to avoid having the organization become an instrument in the hands of a small clique or a tool to be used by Russian agents. Al-

though Karl Radek had long been active in Germany in Russian interests, the German Communists had not yet fallen so completely under Soviet influence as they did later.

Ruth Fischer represented the Left Opposition in the Communist Party. This group believed the party should have a democratic organization and an autonomous policy in Germany. It wanted the Comintern to preserve its original international and revolutionary character, instead of being transformed into an agency for Soviet State dictatorship and aggressive nationalist and military aims.

In 1922 Ruth Fischer was elected delegate to the Fourth World Congress of the Comintern, and from 1924 to 1926 she was a member of the Comintern Presidium. Here she fought, but ultimately without success, for the views of the Left Opposition. She was also elected a Communist deputy to the German Reichstag, and was a member of its Foreign Affairs Committee, 1924-1928.

As holder of these various important positions she traveled a dozen times to Russia between 1922 and 1926. She came to know the Russian Bolsheviks much more intimately than was possible from a distance. She became acquainted with Lenin, Zinoviev, Bukharin, Kamenev, Radek, Trotsky, and many other old Bolsheviks whom Stalin gradually eliminated in order to establish his own dictatorship. Zinoviev and Bukharin were her best friends and supporters. She also observed at first hand and learned to know Manuilsky, Dimitrov, Vyshinsky, Thorez, Togliatti, Foster, and many other Stalinists who are still playing leading roles in various countries today.

As a consultant on German Communism she gained an insight into the workings of the Comintern, where "the German question" was the dominant one in the Third International during these years. She perceived how Comintern questions were dangerously intertwined with the internal Bolshevik conflicts which were taking place just before and after Lenin's death in the struggle as to who was to be his successor. Among the men intriguing to inherit his mantle, as is well known, Stalin proved the shrewdest and most ruthless. Observing these conflicts at close range, she realized how Stalin was transforming Lenin's organization into a highly centralized and totalitarian machine of a new type—a State Party dictatorship through the instrumentality of the Red Army, the secret police, terror, and eventually economic dom-

ination. She saw also how the same totalitarian methods were transforming the Comintern into an agency of the Russian State Party and introducing the same tendencies into the Communist parties which composed it.

Seeing this dangerous transformation through the "Stalinist revolution" which followed the Leninist revolution, Ruth Fischer became an active member of the oppositionist bloc led by Zinoviev and Trotsky in Russia, and by Maslow in Germany. She thereby incurred the hatred of Stalin. She describes the private interviews in which Stalin tried, in vain, to win her over. During her last visit to Moscow, called as a member of the Comintern's Executive Committee to attend its Fifth World Congress, she was detained for ten months, at Stalin's instigation, under the surveillance of his secret police in the Lux Hotel. She managed, however, to maintain contacts with her friends, Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Bukharin. At a wink from them and with their assistance, she took advantage of Stalin's absence from Moscow on a brief trip to the Caucasus and made her escape back to Germany in June, 1926.

Meanwhile she had been elected in 1924 a member of the German Reichstag. She continued to head the minority Left Opposition within the German Communist Party, but after her escape from Moscow she was expelled from the Party by the Party machine which had fallen into the hands of Stalinists. They also demanded that she resign her seat in the Reichstag, but she refused. The Stalinists who henceforth controlled the Party were men like Thälmann and Torgler who were put in concentration camps by the Nazis, or Pieck and Ulbricht who fled to Moscow after 1933 and then returned to Berlin in 1945 to serve as Stalin's main tools in the administration of the Russian Zone in Germany.

During the years from 1926 to 1933 Ruth Fischer remained in continuous and close contact with her oppositionist friends in Russia. She also observed how the rising Nazis adopted many of Stalin's totalitarian and terroristic ideas and methods. When Hitler seized power in 1933, his Storm Troopers sacked her house and took her young son as hostage. She herself fled to Paris, where she lived until 1940, still keeping up secret relations with her friends in Germany and Russia. Because of her continued opposition to Stalinism, she and her comrade,

Maslow, were included in the great Moscow purge trials of 1936 and condemned *in absentia*. They were charged by Vyshinsky with having sent an agent to Moscow in 1933, at the order of Trotsky, to murder Stalin!

After the occupation of Paris by the German armies in 1940, Ruth Fischer fled via the Spanish border to Lisbon. The next year she came to the United States, and eventually became an American citizen. Here she has collected a mass of valuable material on the ups and downs of the German Communist Party, on the transformation of the Bolshevik party into a totalitarian dictatorship, and on the degeneration of the Comintern. On the basis of this material, as well as on her own vivid recollections and experiences, she has told the story for the years 1918 to 1929. In a later volume she plans to show how the Stalinist State Party and terrorist totalitarianism were further tightened and strengthened during the critical years of the 5-Year Plans and the Moscow mass purges, while at the same time Hitler was building up his war machine and totalitarian dictatorship.

There are three strong threads which run through Ruth Fischer's present volume and bind its diverse details and complicated ideological expositions firmly and closely together.

The first thread is the history of the German Communist Party, 1918-1929. Others have given an account of this: Paul Merker (*Deutschland: Sein oder nicht Sein?*, Mexico, 1944) from the Stalinist propagandist point of view, and Friedrich Stampfer (*Die Vierzehn Jahre der Ersten Deutschen Republik*, Karlsbad, 1936) from the Social Democratic historical angle. But no one, so far as we know, has given it in such detail and with such detached and authentic inside information as Ruth Fischer.

The second thread is the story of the internal Soviet struggle for political power during Lenin's last years and immediately after his death up to the point where Trotsky was eliminated by exile. It is the confused, shifting, and complicated struggle between Stalin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Bukharin and many others. It involved varying concepts of economic, organizational, and foreign policy which the author disentangles with real insight. She writes with inside information because of the many official positions which she held and because she was personally acquainted with the protagonists in Moscow and with the many

Russian agents like Radek who were active in Germany. She has read, and frequently cites, a great many pamphlets by Russians and official Soviet records. It may be that in attributing motives she occasionally depends more upon her own intuition than upon clear historical proof. Attributing motives is always a delicate and uncertain matter. But she has clearly tried conscientiously to follow strict historical evidence. In any case, her interpretations are valuable as a corrective to the legends and myths which Soviet official writers and historians have built up around Stalin and the formative years of the Soviet totalitarian regime.

The third thread is the connecting tie-up between the other two threads—the interrelation between German Communist policy and the internal conflicts in the Soviet Politburo and the Moscow Comintern; or, to put it more bluntly, Russian efforts to manipulate German Communist policy, not for Germany's own good, but in the interests of Russian internal factions or of Soviet foreign policy. It was this, together with Stalin's use of terror and secret police, and his ruthless elimination, of those who stood in his way, which led Ruth Fischer to break with Moscow and with the pro-Soviet German Communists, including her own brother, Gerhart Eisler. It is her exposition of the beginnings of this aspect of Stalinism which is so significant for the world today, when, as Léon Blum has so often pointed out, Communist parties in France and elsewhere work solely and servilely in the interests of their Moscow masters, rather than as honest patriots for the good of their native land. All the features of terrorist totalitarianism were tested out and matured in the wide scope of Russian society during these years 1918–1929, and then transferred to the Comintern branches. All later forms of totalitarian rule are only offshoots from the model Ruth Fischer saw being formed, integrating in each country its specific national characteristics, but based fundamentally on the example that Stalin had set.

Having known Ruth Fischer a number of years and having read her book, I am impressed with her amazingly vivid recollection of events and wide information about Communist leaders everywhere, not only in Germany and Russia. The numerous footnotes in which she records their liquidation or promotion by Stalin reads like a "Who's Who" of Communism of the past thirty years. Her detailed reconstruction of the interrelation between the internal conflicts within the Rus-

sian Politburo and Comintern on the one hand, and the confused conflicts and vacillations within the German Communist Party on the other hand, is made clear as never before. Her searching analysis of the fine-spun ideological debates and theories is highly enlightening, and a valuable corrective to a common tendency, especially in America, toward oversimplification. Her book is important both for the historian of the past thirty years and for everyone who wants to understand how the present aggressive and terrorist Soviet dictatorship came into being. It is thus an essential contribution to a good understanding of Communism in the world today.

SIDNEY B. FAY

Cambridge, Mass.

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RUTH FISCHER

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Index

- ABC of Communism* (Bukharin), 279
- Abernon, Lord D', quoted on Locarno Pact, 515-516; on German-Russian cooperation, 526
- Abramovich, Russian Social Democrat in Berlin, 145, 146
- ADGB. *See* German Federation of Labor
- Adler, Fritz, Austrian Social Democratic leader, 53; convokes conference of three internationals, 211
- Adler, Max, Austrian Marxist, 111
- Adler, Victor, founder of Austrian Social Democratic Party, 142 *n.*
- Agrarian Party, Bulgarian, 307, 311
- Agriculture, Russian, under NEP, 350, 351
- Åland Islands, 38 *n.*
- Alexander Regiment, 58 *n.*
- Alexandrov, Todor, IMRO leader, 466
- Alexeyev, General, 32
- Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein* (General German Workers' Association), 13
- All-German Committee of Revolutionary Trade-Unionists, 395
- Allied Control Committee, 193
- All-Russian Congress of Economic Councils, 149
- Alpari, Julius, 109, 113 *n.*
- Alsace-Lorraine, 8
- American Federation of Labor, 554-555
- American League for Peace and Freedom, 613 *n.*
- American Peace Mobilization, 613 *n.*
- American People's Mobilization, 613 *n.*
- Ammunition; traffic in, 285-286
- Amsterdam trade-union international, 560
- Anatolia, 36
- Andreyev, A., 234
- Anglo-Russian Trade-Union Unity Committee, 560-562; dissolved, 581
- Ankara, Kemal establishes government in, 274
- Anti-Comintern Pact, Germany organizes, 657
- Anti-Semitism, in German revolution of 1918, 69. *See also* Jews
- Apparat, Der*, German Communist underground, 173
- Arbeiter-Bank (Workers' Bank), 518
- Arbeiterpolitik* ("Workers' Policy"), Socialist weekly, 13
- Arbeiterpolitik* group, Bremen, 207
- Arco auf Valley, Anton Graf von, 101
- Arcos, Ltd., Russian trading company in London, 578
- Arendsee, Martha, 224 *n.*
- Armand, Ines, 22
- Arms, traffic in, 285-286
- Army, German, after uprising of November, 1918, 66-69; reorganization of, 1923, 329, 641-642; and rise of National Socialism, 657-658, 661-662. *See also* Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch, Red Army, Reichswehr
- Artushoff*, German ship, 529

- Asia, Soviet policy in, 481, 575
 Assassinations, political, in Germany, 285, 286
 Auer, Ehrhart, 101
 Augsburg, 100
 August Bloc, anti-Leninist combination, 22
 Aurich, F., 444
 Aurora Company, 608 *n.*
 Austria, republic proclaimed, 64-65 *n.*;
 Social Democrats in, 110-111, 211
 Austria-Hungary, 39, 54
Avanti ("Forward"), 114
 Awakening Youth, Communist youth
 movement, 179 *n.*
 Axelrod, Victor, 12 *n.*, 105; opposes Lenin,
 22
 Azerbaijan, 251

Baden, German flagship, 56
 Baden, Prince Max von, Reich Chancellor,
 54-55, 58, 60, 61
 Baku Letter, Medvedev's, 475-476
 Bakunin, Mikhail, 138
 Balabanoff, Angelica, quoted on Radek,
 204
 Baldwin, Stanley, 578; quoted on Zino-
 vief's letter, 461
 Balkan Federation, formation of, 466-468
 Balkans, 633; Communist expansion in,
 402
Banner of Communism, 531
 Bannmeile Decree, 120
 Barmat affair, 414, 437
 Barmine, Alexander, quoted on Stalin's
 waning prestige, 580
 Barter, trend toward, in Russia, 152
 Barth, Emil, 16 *n.*, 71-72; resigns from
 Ebert cabinet, 79; heads Communist
 underground, 173
 Barthel, Max, 221, 612
 Batum, 38 *n.*
 Bauer, Colonel, assistant to Ludendorff,
 197, 207
 Bauer, Gustav, 414
 Bauer, Otto, Austrian Marxist, 64 *n.*, 111
 Bavaria, separatist movement in, 292-293;
 Kahr-Ludendorff plot, 342-345
 Bavarian Council Republic, 100-108
 Bavarian Peasant Bund, 103
 Bavarian Peoples' Party, opposes London
 Ultimatum, 190
 Bebel, August, 8, 80, 142 *n.*; founder of
 Social Democratic Party, 4; quoted on
 triumph of Socialism, 16
 Becher, Johannes B., Communist poet,
 615 *n.*, 662 *n.*
 Beck, General Ludwig, conspires against
 Hitler, 661
 Becker, Karl, 184
Beggar's Opera (Brecht), 616
 Bennett. *See* Petrovsky, D.
 Berger, Hans. *See* Eisler, Gerhart
 Berlin, 8; mass strikes, 1918, 33; uprising
 of November 9, 1918, 57-65; uprising
 of January, 1919, 82-87; civil war in,
 99, 117; Hundreds and Control Com-
 mittees in, 296
 "Berlin in the Morning" (*Berlin am
 Morgen*), 613
Berliner Illustrierte, 612
 Bernstein, Eduard, Social Democratic
 theorist, 5
 Berthelot, General, 38 *n.*
 Bertz, Paul, 603
 Berzin, General, intelligence chief of Red
 Army, 464
 Bessedovsky, Grigory, quoted on Sofia plot,
 469
 Bettelheim, Ernst, 111
 Bevin, Ernest, 561
 Bielefeld, Ten Points of, 131-132
 Bismarck, Prince Otto von, 4, 5
 Black Disgrace, colored French troops in
 Ruhr, 254
 Black Reichswehr. *See* Reichswehr
 Black Sea, 38
 Blanqui, Louis Auguste, 20
 Blomberg, General von, 535
 Blue Shirts, Russian organization for
 artistic propaganda, 609
 Blumkin, Jacob, 44
 Bogdanov, Alexander A., leader of Work-
 ers' Truth, 159, 251
 Bogrebinsky, Comrade, 494
 Bohumil-Smeral, Czech Communist, 211
 Bolshevik discipline, Stalin's thesis of,
 368-369
 Bolshevik Party, coup d'état of 1917,
 29-31; Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, 31-38;
 Left wing proposes war on Germany
 (1918), 40-44; evaluation of German
 revolution, 45-47; early opposition to
 military discipline, 153-156; growth of,
 157 *n.*; Seventh Congress (1918),
 157 *n.*; becomes Russian Communist
 Party, 157 *n.*; Fourth All-Ukrainian
 Conference (1920), 158, 159 *n.* *See also*
 Communist Party, Russian

- Bolsheviks, rise to power, 22, 648, 649; propaganda in Germany, 53-54
- Bolshevism, Lenin's theories of, 16-19; growth of, in Germany, 521
- Bombacci, Nicola, Italian Socialist leader, 114
- Bonzen*, bigshots, 501
- Borchardt, Julian, 12 *n.*, 13
- Bordiga, Amadeo, Italian Left Communist, 533, 553-554, 577
- Boris III, King of Bulgaria, 309
- Borodin, Michael, Soviet adviser to Kuomintang, 574, 596
- Borries, General Karl von, chairman of GEFU, 529
- Böttcher, Paul, 224, 228, 260, 603; enters Saxon cabinet, 332, 333
- Botzenhardt, Hans, 340
- Bourgeois bloc, government by, 409
- Brandler, Heinrich, 218, 224 *n.*; leader of Chemnitz Communists, 128-129; joins Radek bloc, 209, 210, 215-216, 225, 229, 230; head of German Politburo, 278; opposes Fascism, 287; in money-press strike, 302; prepares for German Communist uprising, 305, 311-323 *passim*, 328, 331, 339; enters Saxon cabinet, 332-335, 336-337; scapegoat of Communist uprising, 348-350, 360; at Comintern Presidium session, 371-374 *passim*
- Braun, Adolph, 519
- Braun, Otto, 131, 415; quoted on Hilferding's finance policy, 330; opposes Reich Executive in Saxony and Thuringia, 334; Social Democratic candidate for president, 418, 420, 421
- Bread Strike, Vienna, 33, 64 *n.*
- Brecht, Bert, Communist poet and dramatist, 615-625
- Bredow, General, 511
- Breitscheid, Rudolf, leader of USPD, 53, 300
- Bremen, 8, 57; siege of, 97
- Bremerhaven, 57
- Brendel, Dr., 206
- Brest-Litovsk, Treaty of, 31-38, 41, 43, 47, 630, 631
- Briacco, Viola, participant in Moscow conferences on German party, 500
- Brockdorff-Rantzau, Ulrich Graf von, German ambassador to Russia, 67 *n.*, 192, 265, 580
- Browder, Earl, 448 *n.*
- Brunswick, 57; occupation of, in civil war, 99
- Bruppacher, Fritz, 610
- Buchrucker, Major Ernst, 331
- Bukharin, Nicolai, 33, 36, 47, 53, 164, 174, 183, 198, 211, 260, 573, 598; leader of Left Communists, 39; trial of, 44 *n.*, 474-475 *n.*, 653, 654-655 *n.*; Lenin quoted on, 243; leader in abstract Communist theory, 279, 366; alliance with Stalin, 471, 477; his Neo-NEP, 471-474, 476-477; in German uprising, 305, 312, 316, 369; talks with Fischer, 543-544; in Berlin to clean up German party, 568; relations with Lenin, 631
- Bukharinists, 39, 41, 45
- Bulgaria, 54; coup d'état in, 306-311; Communist crisis in, 317-318, 465-470
- Bulgarian Federation of Trade-Unions, 308
- Bundesrat, 4
- Calendar, Russian, 185 *n.*
- Callam, Fritz, 445 *n.*
- Canton Commune, 446 *n.*, 596-597
- Capitalism, socialist theories of, 6; Luxemburg's and Lenin's views on, 23-24; Polish views on, 24-25; Russia and, 474-476, 486-489; Lenin's law of uneven development of, 558-559
- Capitalists, Jewish, 283 *n.*
- Cartels, development of, in Germany, 519
- Castlereagh, Lord, 516
- Catholic clergy, oppose separation of Rhine-Ruhr from Reich, 292
- Catholic workers, opposed to World War I, 16
- Caucasus, British in, 273
- Ce Soir*, Paris, 614
- Cell system, reorganization of, 500-501, 505-507
- Central Committee, Luxemburg rejects Lenin's theory of, 18-20
- Central Control Commission (Orgburo), 235-236, 354-355; establishment of, 156-157; reorganization of, 250
- Central European Steel Cartel, 519
- Chamberlain, Sir Austen, British Foreign Secretary, 461, 516, 580, 608
- "Change of Signposts" (Ustryalov), 473
- Chauleff, Peter, 466 *n.*
- Chechen-Ingush Soviet Socialist Republic, 652
- Cheka, 45, 235-236, 247, 639

- Cheka Trial, 325 *n.*, 457
- Chemnitz, in Kapp putsch, 128-129; conference of factory councils, 335-337
- Chernov, V., founder of Social Revolutionary Party, 12 *n.*, 34 *n.*
- Chervonets rubles, 350-351
- Chiang Kai-shek, 574, 575-577, 633
- Chicherin, George V., Soviet Foreign Commissar, 36, 38, 192, 580
- China, Russian relations with, 573-579, 596-597; Communist propaganda, 609
- Christmas Day declaration, Central Powers issue, 32
- Civil war in Germany: Revolution of 1918, 91, 97-99, 117; Bolshevik concept of, 45-47; growing restiveness, 52-55; outbreak at Kiel, 55-56; Berlin uprising, 56-60; Bloody January, 82-87, 88-89; disintegration of old regime, 90-91; end of, 180-183; Uprising of 1923, 632-633, 642; gestation of, 292-297, 301-302, 304; Russian intervention, 304, 311-324, 327-328; preparation for, 311-324; mobilization of the party, 324-328; Reichswehr occupies Saxony and Thuringia, 333-335, 336-338; uprising in Hamburg, 338-342; Kahr-Ludendorff plot, 343-345; dissolution of party, 346-347, 348; effects of, 359-383, 387-388
- Clay, General Lucius D., 179 *n.*
- Cleinow, Georg, 206
- Clemenceau, Georges, 582
- Coal, problem of, in Ruhr, 194
- Cohn, Oscar, leader of USPD, 53, 325 *n.*
- Coimbra, Portugal, bomb plot in, 457
- Collected Works* (Lenin), 482
- Collectivization, Stalin's policy of, 647, 651
- Comintern. *See* Communist International
- Comité des Forges, 253
- Committee of Fifteen, 298; suppression of, 303
- Commodity intervention, Russian Party protests, 353
- Communist, The*, 205
- Communist International, 12 *n.*; First World Congress (1919), 99-100; West European Bureau, 134-135 *n.*; Second World Congress (1920), 138-140; Lenin's concept of, 142; Third World Congress (1921), 176-178; Fourth World Congress (1922), 181, 183-186, 213-214, 279; Fifth World Congress (1924), 280, 401-405; unrest in (1923), 360; Presidium session of January 11, 1924, 371-376; foreign Communists in, 393; in German election of 1925, 419-429; in Russia's foreign policy, 456-459; meeting of Executive Committee (1926), 551-555; Stalin fights opposition in, 551-555; Stalin orders purge of, 602-603, 640; Seventh World Congress (1935), 657. *See also* Communist Party
- Communist Party: Austrian, founding of, 64 *n.*; British, 458; Convention of (1924), 400; Zinoviev's letter to, 459-463; Bulgarian, 308-311; Chinese, 574-579, 596-597; Estonian, 464; German: founding and early development of, 74-79, 137, 140; in Kapp putsch, 126; relations with Russian Party, 134; union of Spartakusbund and USPD, 146-147, 171, 172-174, 174-178; membership, 172, 222-223, 392, 504; Seventh Congress (1921), 182; foreign policy, 196-197, 199-200; organizational skeleton (1922-1923), 219-223; press and publications, 219-221, 530, 531, 612-613; Division for Instruction and Recreation, 221-222; Eighth Congress (1923), 224-231; relations with Politburo, 231-232; regional convention in Essen (1923), 255-257; movement for National Bolshevism, 267-273, 280-287; in money-press strike, 299-303; suppression of, 346-347, 392, 602-605; anti-Moscow trend, 392, 394-399, 400; Ninth Congress (1924), 395-397; in Reichstag election of 1924, 399, 410; revolutionary perspectives, 409; Bolshevization of, 411, 416; Prussian question, 415-416; in 1925 election, 419-429; Stalinization of, 433-444, 454-455, 499-514; Moscow subsidies to, 442, 444-445; Tenth Congress (1925), 442-444, 608; investment in business enterprises, 444-445; in post-Locarno period, 520-524; propaganda, 606-615; in years of Nazi ascendancy, 655-657. *See also* Communist International, Communist Workers' Party; Independent Social Democratic Party; Spartakusbund. Hungarian, 109-110, 111-112; Polish, supports Pilsudski, 558; Second Congress (1917), 34 *n.*; Fourth Congress (1918), 39, 152; Russian: name adopted, 42; Fifth Congress (1918), 43-44; Seventh Congress

- (1918), 38, 42, 157 *n.*; Eighth Congress (1919), 156, 158, 160; Ninth Congress (1920), 164; Tenth Congress (1921), 168, 233, 355; Eleventh Congress (1922), 234, 355; struggle for succession to Lenin, 235, 238-245, 251, 260; Twelfth Congress (1923), 236-237, 249-251, 354, 355; Thirteenth Congress (1924), 240, 357, 457, 473; reaction of German uprising on, 364-365, 381-383; Fourteenth Congress (1925), 439, 478-491; membership, 483, 556-557 *n.*; Fifteenth Congress (1927), 584, 596, 597-601; Seventeenth Congress, 44 *n.* *See also* Bolshevik Party, Turkish, 274-275; Ukrainian, 652
- Communist Policy*, 530
- Communist Worker's Gazette*, German anti-Bolshevik organ, 263, 530
- Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD), 182; formation of, 119, 126, 137-138; at Second World Congress, 138; opposes Rapallo Treaty, 193
- Communist Youth, Russian, 585
- Communist Youth International, 221 *n.*; First World Congress, 1920, 610
- Communist youth organization, 179 *n.*
- Conferences and conventions: All-Ukrainian Party (1920), 158, 159 *n.*; Bielefeld, 131-132; British Communist Party (1924), 400; Essen Communists (1923), 255-257; Factory Councils at Chemnitz, 335-337; Genoa, on war debts, 191-193; International Left (1927), 604-605; International Women's (1925), 608; Lausanne, on Turkish Question, 276-277; National Union of Railwaymen (1927), 579; Reich children's (1924), 608; Socialist, 7, 10, 12, 12 *n.*, 13, 16; Socialist International (1914), 21-22; Spartakist underground (1919), 117-119; Spartakusbund, 74-79; Supreme Allied Council, on reparations payments (1922), 191; Three Internationals (1922), 211-212; USPD, 14, 145-146; Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, 70-72. *See also* Congresses
- Congresses: Chinese Communist Party (1927), 577; Communist International: First, 99-100; Second, 138-140; Third, 176-178; Fourth, 181, 183-186, 213-214, 279; Fifth, 280, 401-405; Seventh, 657; Communist Youth International, 610; German Communist Party: Seventh, 182; Eighth, 224-231; Ninth, 395-397; Tenth, 442-444, 608; International Socialist, 21; Peoples of the Orient, 275; Russian Communist Party: Second, 34 *n.*; Fourth, 39, 152; Fifth, 43-44; Seventh, 38, 42, 157 *n.*; Eighth, 156, 158, 160; Ninth, 164; Tenth, 168, 233, 355; Russian Communist Party: Eleventh, 234, 355; Twelfth, 236-237, 249-251, 354, 355; Thirteenth, 240, 357, 457, 473; Fourteenth, 439; 478-491; Russian Communist Party: Fifteenth, 584, 596, 597-601; Seventeenth, 44 *n.*; Russian Social Democratic (London, 1903), 17; Trade-Union: All-Russian (1920), 164; Breslau (1925), 434 *n.*; British (1925), 560; Leipzig (1922), 223; Paris (1927), 519; Vienna (1925), 519. *See also* Conferences and conventions
- Conradi, Maurice, 277
- Cook, A. G., chairman of British miners' union, 559
- Coolidge, Calvin, 389
- Coöperatives, Russian, 150; growth of, in Germany, 518
- Creutzburg, August, 534
- Crispien, Arthur, 140, 143, 406
- Cuno, Wilhelm, Reich Chancellor, 194, 195, 196, 292, 294; opposes Ruhr Communists, 256, 263; resignation of, 301
- Curzon, Lord, 268, 277, 307
- Danneberg, Robert, 64 *n.*
- Dardanelles, 276; status of, settled by Lausanne Treaty, 277
- Darmstadt, French troops occupy, 132
- Daskaloff, Ravkoff, 466 *n.*
- Däumig, Ernst, 57-58, 140; heads Communist underground, 173; leaves party, 178
- David, Fritz, 446 *n.*
- Dawes, Charles G., 389
- Dawes Plan, 268, 388-391, 397, 399; Reichstag accepts, 405-407; operation of, 407-408, 410, 412, 515; Stalin quoted on, 480
- Defeatists, in Russian Duma, 7
- Defense of the Republic, Maslow's policy of, 416-418, 432
- Defensists, in Russian Duma, 7
- Degoutte, General, 132, 253
- Dekulakization, 652, 655
- Democratic Centralism, workers' opposi-

- tion group, 156-158; supports Trotsky, 352
- Democratic Party, German, in Reichstag election of 1924, 399
- Dengel, Philipp, 447, 603; quoted on reorganization of German party, 506-507
- Denikin, General, 170, 273
- Deportation, under Soviet regime, 652-653
- Deutsch, Felix, 207
- Deutsche Offizier-Bund* (German Officers' League), 413
- Dimitrov, Constantine, 307
- Dimitrov, Georgi, Bulgarian Communist leader, 307-311, 316, 317-318, 371, 467
- Dimitrov, Lena, 467
- Dimitrov, Nikola, 307
- Dimitrov, Todor, 307, 467
- Dinta Institute, 517
- Ditmar, Max von, 325 n.
- Dittmann, Wilhelm, 83, 140, 143 n.; resigns from Ebert cabinet, 79
- Domski, Henryk, 565
- Doriot, Jacques, 555 n., 579
- Dorpat, Treaty of, 464
- Dorten, Adam, separatist leader in Ruhr, 253, 254
- Drama, as German party propaganda, 608-609, 616-625
- Dramatic Work Shop, New York City, 608 n.
- Drums in the Night* (Brecht), 616
- Duclos, Jacques, 448 n.
- Duma, Social Democratic deputies exiled, 7
- Duncker, Hermann, 77
- Dutt, C. Palme, 400
- Düwell, Wilhelm, 178
- Dvinsk, 36
- Dyne, Mrs. Bradley, 461, 462 n.
- Dzerzhinsky, Felix, 44, 136, 248, 568 n.
- East Prussia, farmhands strike in, 296
- Eastman, Max, 241 n.
- Eberlein, Hugo, 14, 77, 100, 230 n.; in March Action, 175; in German Communist uprising, 319; administers Moscow subsidy, 444, 445
- Ebert, Friedrich, 94, 98, 184, 203; in November revolution, 60-73 *passim*, 79; quoted on protection of German frontier, 71-72; resists Spartakists, 86, 89; Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch against, 121-123; urges resistance to Ruhr occupation, 195, 252-253; proclaims Reich Executive in Saxony and Thuringia, 333-334; participation in munition workers' strike, 414-415; death of, 418
- Ebert, Fritz, Jr., 414
- Economists, Russian school of socialist thought, 19 n., 20 n.
- Eglhofer, Rudolf, 106, 107
- Egypt, British colonization of, 23
- Ehrhardt, Captain Hermann, 131; proclaims overthrow of Ebert cabinet, 122; escapes from prison, 292-293, 343
- Eichhorn, Emil, revolutionary chief of police in Berlin, 62-63, 82-84
- Eight-hour day, 194
- Einsiedel, Count von, 284 n.; vice-chairman of Free Germany Committee, 659
- "Eisenacher" wing, of Socialist Party, 13
- Eisenstein, Sergei, 613
- Eisler, Gerhart, 230 n., 263, 332
- Eisler, Hanns, 615 n., 618
- Eisler, Rudolf, 542
- Eisner, Kurt, first Bavarian premier, 100, 101
- Electrification program, Russian, 160, 162 n.
- Engel, Friedrich, 26, 507
- Engels, Friedrich, quoted on Socialism as science, 18
- England. *See* Great Britain
- Enver Pasha, Turkish nationalist leader, 275
- Epp, Colonel von, 107
- Ercoli-Togliatti, Palmiro, 543-544, 582
- Erfurt, 99; Socialist convention at, 16
- Erivan, 38 n.
- Ernst, Eugen, 83
- Erzberger, Matthias, German Finance Minister, 284, 285
- Erzerum, 38
- Espionage, in russified German party, 510
- Estonia, 36, 38 n.; Zinoviev attempts coup d'état in, 463-465
- Ewert, Arthur, 230, 583, 603
- Exchange, foreign, in Germany, 291, 293. *See also* Inflation
- Expulsion for contact, 508
- Fackel, Die* ("The Torch"), 30
- Factory councils, versus trade-unions, 297-299
- Far East, dramatic propaganda in, 609
- Farm and Forest Workers of Germany, 296

- Farmhands, strike of, 296-297
 Farmhands' Trade-Union, 296
 Fascism, Comintern concern for, 270; German Communists resist, 286-287, 294; propaganda against, 613. *See also* National Socialism
 Fatherland Front, Bulgarian, 465
 Fehme, 90, 285; Maslow proposes dissolution of, 416
 Fehrenbach, Chancellor, 190
 Fellisch, Dr. Karl, Saxon Social Democratic leader, 338
 Ferdinand, King of Bulgaria, 307
 Feuchtwanger, Lion, 615 *n.*
 Fimmen, Edo, 560, 613
 Finland, 36, 38 *n.*
 First International, 99. *See also* Communist International
 Fischer, Ruth, 399, 409, 507, 603; talks with Stalin and other Russian leaders, 365-370; at meeting of Comintern Presidium, 371, 372, 405; at British Communist convention, 400; member of Reichstag Foreign Relations Committee, 406; attacked in Open Letter to German party, 447-452; forced residence in Moscow, 454, 494, 541-542, 586; barred from Fourteenth Congress, 491-493; bribe-threat from Béla Kun, 493; expelled from party, 508, 509 *n.*, 531, 568; opposes Russian-German alliance, 531, 534-535; Stalin offers support in Germany, 543; talks with Bukharin and Zinoviev, 543-548; correspondence intercepted, 552; at meeting of Comintern Executive Committee, 1926, 553, 554; returns to Berlin, 565, 568; Zinoviev and Trotsky break with, 570; returns to Moscow for review of expulsion, 571-572
 Five-Year Plans, Stalin's, 567, 651, 653
 Flag, question of, in Germany, 413
 Foreign trade, Russian, 353
 Forgeries, of Comintern documents, 460 *n.*
 "Forward" (Avanti), 114
 "Forward" (Vorwärts), Berlin Socialist daily, 8, 63, 82-83, 84, 86, 178, 180
 Forward (Vperyod), Polish Social Democratic faction, 22
 Foster, William Z., 538 *n.*
 Fourteen Points, Wilson's, 32
 Fourth Jäger Battalion, 58
 France, occupies Ruhr, 194-196, 252, 293, 388; Radek fosters antagonism to, 269
 Frank, Colonel, 465
 Frankfurt am Main, French troops occupy, 132
 Franz Ferdinand, Archduke, 6
 Free Germany Committee, 445 *n.*, 536, 659-660
 Freiheit ("Freedom"), organ of USPD, 143 *n.*
 Freikorps (independent corps), 69, 130, 132, 642-643; opposes labor movement, 90-91, 97; plans military dictatorship, 121; Werden incident, 127; in Upper Silesia, 189, 190; retreats to background, 430
 Frey, Joseph, 587
 Friedman, Marco, 467
 Frölich, Paul, 102 *n.*; quoted on Luxemburg, 48; on anti-Liebknecht demonstrations, 70; at Third World Congress, 176; on German-Russian cooperation, 283
 Frossard, L. O., 211
 Frunze, M. V., head of Russian army, 489
 Fuchs, Professor Georg, 292 *n.*
 Gallacher, William, 400
 Gallwitz, General von, 53
 Gansser, Emil, charges Ebert with high treason, 414-415
 Garde Kavallerie Schützen Division, counter-revolutionary cadre, 69, 121
 GEFU. *See* Society for the Advancement of Industrial Enterprises
 General German Workers' Association (Allgemeiner Deutscher Arbeiterverein), 13
 General Staff. *See* Army, Reichswehr
 Generals' Revolt, 1944, 536
 Genoa Conference, on war debts, 191-193
 Georgia, Republic of, sovietization of, 248, 251; uprising in, 401, 471, 651
 Georgiyev, Konstantin, murder of, 467
 German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, 652; German Control Commission, reported in Petrograd, 38 *n.*
 German Federation of Labor, 97, 172; intervenes in Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch, 123; in reparations conflict, 190, 193; membership, 299, 434 *n.*
 German National Peoples' Party, 418; opposes London Ultimatum, 190; in Reichstag election of 1924, 399; in Dawes election, 410
 German Officers' League, 413
 German Peoples' Party, opposes London

- Ultimatum, 190; demands abolition of eight-hour day, 194; in Reichstag election of 1924, 399
- German People's Party of Freedom, 262, 410; in Reichstag election of 1924, 399
- Germany, resistance movement in World War I, 29-30; Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, 31-38; Revolution of 1918, 45-47, 52-60, 82-89, 90-91, 97-99, 117, 180, 183; Republic proclaimed, 60-65; National Bolshevism rejected, 92-96, 118; Treaty of Rapallo, 192-193, 199, 265, 456, 528; theory of, as industrial colony, 198-200; secret discussions of alliance with Russia, 263-265; Uprising of 1923, 297-299, 301-304, 311-328, 333-348, 359-383, 387-388, 632-633, 642; admitted to League of Nations, 517, 525; stabilization of economy, 517-520; treaty with Russia (1926), 524-527; war with Russia, 658-659. *See also* Social Democratic Party, German; Weimar Republic
- Geschke, Ottomar, 300, 435, 436; chairman of Tenth Congress of German party, 443
- Gesell, Silvio, 102-103
- Gesellschaft, Die* ("Society"), USPD monthly, 143 n.
- Gessler, Dr. Otto, Reich Minister of War, 133, 258, 333; sponsors German-Russian alliance, 533-535
- Gewissen* ("Conscience"), Moeller van den Bruck's magazine, 283
- Geyer, Kurt, 178
- Gilbert, S. Parker, general agent for reparations, 407
- Goelro, plan for electrification of Russia, 162 n.
- Goerdeler, Dr. Karl, conspires against Hitler, 660
- Golke brothers, 513 n.
- Golz, General von der, commander of Baltic troops, 271
- Gorky, Maxim, murder of, 358-359
- Gorter, Herman, Dutch Communist, 119
- Gotha, Socialist convention at (1875), 13; USPD convention (1916), 14; occupation of, in civil war, 99
- Gothenburg*, German ship, 529
- Gotz, M., founder of Social Revolutionary Party, 34 n.
- GPU, 173; controls secret service of German party, 512-514; in Kirov affair, 540; control intensified in Russia, 562
- Grain-collection policy, 568
- Gramsci, Antonio, Italian Socialist leader, 114
- Graupe, Ernst, 337
- Great Britain, tension with Russia, 273, 275, 276-277; trade negotiations with Russia, 458-459; trade-union alliance with Russia, 560-562; breaks diplomatic relations with Russia, 578-580, 581
- Gregory, J. D., 461-462
- Gröner, General, 55, 65, 69, 94, 123; quoted on transfer of government to Kassel, 73
- Gruppe Internationale, Die*, 12, 13, 14. *See also* Spartakusbund
- Gulai-Polske, peasant commune in, 158
- Guralsky, August, 175, 371, 372; Comintern delegate to Germany, 323; forms Center group in Germany, 392
- Haase, Hugo, 7, 83, 143 n.; leader of USPD, 53; resigns from Ebert cabinet, 79
- Haber, Dr. Fritz, 535
- Hagen, Louis, 330
- Halle, in civil war, 99
- Halle an der Saale, street battle in, 413
- Halupp, Emil, 609
- Hamburg, 8, 56, 57; after World War I, 92; rioting in, 291-292; Hundreds and Control Committees in, 296; uprising in, 338-342
- Hamburg Soldiers' Council, 71
- Hammerstein, General von, 528, 535
- Hanecki, 17, 22, 202
- Hanover, 57
- Hansen, Arvid, 554; breaks with Opposition, 570
- Harbou, Major von, 72-73
- Hartfield, John, 608
- Hasenclever, Hauptmann, 127
- Hasse, General Paul, occupies Thuringia, 338
- Heckert, Fritz, 77, 78, 216, 224 n., 441; in money-press strike, 300, 302; enters Saxon cabinet, 332, 333
- Heilman, Ernst, 414
- Heim, Colonel, 535
- Heinz, Friedrich Wilhelm, head of Organization Consul, 193 n., 259
- Heinze, Dr. Karl, civil commissioner for Saxony, 337, 338

- Helfferich, Karl, 331 *n.*
Helgoland, German cruiser, 56
 Hentig, Hans von, Communist organizer in Thuringia, 315
 Herriot, Édouard, 410
 Hertling, Chancellor, 55
 Hertz, Paul, 300
 Herzfeld, Josef, 12 *n.*
 Herzfelde, Wieland, 608 *n.*
 Herzog, Wilhelm, Communist free-lance journalist, 434-435
 Hesse, Max, 361, 371, 435
 Hilferding, Rudolf, 6, 41; at Second World Congress, 142-143; life, 142-143 *n.*; at Halle convention, 145, 146; leads USPD, 179 *n.*; Minister of Finance, 301, 330, 331; his theory of socialist society, 519
 Hillman, Sidney, 612
 Hindenburg, Field Marshal Paul von, 69; quoted on approaching revolution in Germany, 54-55; on army support of Ebert government, 71 *n.*; on Versailles treaty, 94; elected president, 418, 420, 426-431; protests expropriation of Hohenzollerns, 523
 Hipper, Admiral von, 55
Historical Materialism (Bukharin), 279
 Hitler, Adolf, rise of, 292, 293, 343, 383, 520, 538 *n.*, 633; Munich putsch, 345; conspiracies against, 660-661
 Hoelz, Max, Communist leader, 128-129, 216; in March action, 175
 Hoelz guards, 175
 Hoffmann, Adolf, 12 *n.*, 107; protests March Action, 178
 Hoffmann, General Max, 33, 39, 46
 Hofmeister, General Edmund, 659
 Hohenzollerns, 412; revitalize German contacts, 292, 293; plebiscite on confiscation of property, 522-524, 608
 Holubovich, M., Ukrainian delegate to Brest conference, 32
 Hooven, Colonel Hans Günther von, heads League of German Officers, 659
 Hoover Mission to Russia, 350
 Horner, Arthur, 559
 Hörnle, Edwin, 172, 221
 Hötzsch, Professor Otto, 207
 Hu Han-min, leader of Kuomintang, 576 *n.*
 Hughes, Charles E., 389
 Hungarian Soviet Republic, 108-110, 111-112, 629
 Imperialism, Lenin's and Luxemburg's views on, 22-24; Polish views on, 24-25. *See also* Capitalism
 IMRO, Macedonian nationalists, 465, 466
 Independent Labour Party, Great Britain, 12 *n.*, 211
 Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany, 57, 62, 74, 77, 79; founding of, 13-14; attacks German war aim, 32-33; declines to enter labor coalition, 126; stimulated by Kapp putsch, 134; affiliates with Comintern, 140, 142, 144-146; convention at Halle, 145-146; unification with Spartakusbund, 146-147; resents New Economic Policy, 171; in reparations conflict, 190. *See also* Social Democratic Party; Communist Party, German
 India, British colonization of, 23
 Industry, nationalization of, in Russia, 148-152; heavy, state control of, 191, 293; Russian, under NEP, 350-351, 353; state, and socialism, 478-479, 485-489
 Inflation, development of, in Germany, 190, 191, 193, 194, 291, 293, 330, 331; effect of, on trade-unions, 297-301; in Russia, 350-351
 Information services, Soviet, in Berlin, 512
Inprecor, Communist press correspondence, 113 *n.*
Inprekorr. *See* *International Press Correspondence, The*
 Inter-Allied High Commission, orders seizure of Ruhr coal mines, 293
 Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, 465, 466
 International, First, 99; Second, 99, 457; Fourth, 432, 444. *See also* Communist International
 International Bureau, 22
 International League' against Compulsory Motherhood, 607
 International of Transport Workers, 560, 613
International Press Correspondence, The, 57 *n.*
 International Women's Day, 221
 International Workers' Aid, 611-612, 614
Internationale, Die, anti-war magazine, 12, 24
Internationale, Die (Halupp), 609
 Italy, Socialism in, 113-116; repercussions of German defeat, 381

- Ito, Kunio, 609
 IWA. *See* International Workers' Aid
 IWW, 138
- Jahreis, Major von, 101
James Johnson, British trawler, 277
 Japan, Russian policy toward, 481; International Workers' Aid in, 612
 Jarres, Karl, 391; monarchists nominate for presidency, 418, 420, 425
 Jaurès, Jean, 7
 Jena, Socialist convention at, 7
 Jewish Bund, opposes Lenin, 17, 22
 Jews, intelligentsia in German Left, 501
 Joffe, Adolf, 33, 36, 53, 205, 574, 596
 Jogiches, Leo, 9 *n.*, 10, 48, 73, 74, 79, 83, 206
 Junius pamphlet (Luxemburg), 11
 Junkers firm, builds factories and airfield in Russia, 528-529
 Jüterbog, Second Battery, 58 *n.*
- KAG, Working Committee for Communism, 179
 Kahr, Gustav von, Bavarian cabinet minister, 329; in Kahr-Ludendorff plot, 343-345
 Kahr-Ludendorff plot, 342-345
 Kaledin, General, 32
 Kalinin, Mikhail Ivanovich, 166
 Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, 652
 Kamenev, 350, 369, 463, 568; chairman of Politburo, 235, 239 *n.*; defends Opposition at Fourteenth Congress, 489-490; demoted by Stalin, 537; removed as alternate to Politburo, 570; ambassador to Rome, 582, 587; seeks to save legality of Bloc, 599-600; submits to Party, 601
 Kamkov, Boris, 34 *n.*, 654 *n.*
 KAPD. *See* Communist Workers' Party of Germany
 Kaplan, Dora, 45
 Kapp, Wolfgang, in Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch, 122
 Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch, 97, 642; army revolt against Ebert, 120-123; regional resistance to, 127-129; effects of, 129-134; Lenin's evaluation of, 139-140
 Karakhan, Leo M., 36
 Karelin, V. A., 654 *n.*
 Karl Marx School, 617
 Kars, 38 *n.*
 Karusseit, Gottfried, Red Ruhr Army commander, 133
 Katayama, Japanese Communist, 212
 Katz, Iwan, 507, 508; German delegate to Presidium, 420
 Katz, Rolf, 395
 Kautsky, Karl, Social Democratic theorist, 6, 11, 27 *n.*, 41, 272, 649; quoted on vehicles of science, 18; leader of Marxist Center group, 143 *n.*
 Kautsky, Luise, 10, 47
 Kemal Pasha, Mustapha, 633; leads Turkish nationalist movement, 274-277
 Kemmerer, Dr. E. W., 558
 Kerensky, Aleksandr, Lenin attacks government of, 274
 Khara-Chay Autonomous Region, 652
 Kiel, German revolution starts at (1918), 55-56
 Kienthal, Socialist conference at, 12
 Kiepenberger, Hans, 325; head of Party Intelligence Service, 510-511
 Kiev, 38; Poles seize, 135-136
 Kindermann, Karl, 325-326 *n.*
 Kingisepp, Victor E., Estonian Communist, 465
 Kirov, Sergei M., 234, 251, 598; assassination of, 539-540, 653
 Kisch, Egon Erwin, Czech journalist, 64 *n.*
 Klubsch, Emil, 605 *n.*
 Knief, Johann, 13, 207
 Kobetsky, Mikhail, Soviet Ambassador in Reval, 464
 Kolarov, Vasil P., Bulgarian Communist, 229, 310
Kolberg, German ship, 529
 Kollontai, Alexandra, leader of Workers' Opposition, 159; at Oslo embassy, 540, 587; transferred to Mexico, 568
 Kollwitz, Käthe, 387
 Komarov, head of Leningrad soviet, 537
 Kon, Felix, 136, 360
 Könen, Bernhard, 224 *n.*
 Könen, Wilhelm, 190, 371, 392
 König, Arthur, 371; treasurer of German party, 444-445
 Kopp, Victor, 197, 261 *n.*
 Korfanty, Wojciech A., 189
 Koritschoner, Franz, 64 *n.*
 Kornfeld, Charlotte, 207
 Kornilov, General, 32
 Korostelev, G. A., member of Central Control Commission, 236

- Korsch, Karl, 507, 508, 603; Thuringian cabinet member, 332; attacks German-Russian alliance, 527
- Kostrzewa, Vera, 361, 371
- Kotikov, General Alexander G., 179 *n.*
- Kötter, Paul, 603
- Koyev, Colonel, 467
- Kozlovsky, General, 167
- Krestinsky, N. N., 233; Soviet ambassador to Berlin, 264
- Krestintern, union of peasant organizations, 402-403, 477
- Krichevsky, 598
- Krise der Sozialdemokratie, Die.* See Junius pamphlet
- Kritzmann, L., plans labor army, 162
- Krivitsky, Walter, 589; organizes secret services of German party, 320; quoted on German intelligence service, 510-511
- Kronstadt, uprising at, 166-170
- Krupp incident, 257-258
- Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach, Gustav, arrest of, 258
- Krupskaia, Nadyezhda Konstantinovna, wife of Lenin, 240, 249, 595, 598; opposes Stalin, 478; appeals for spinning wheels, 591-592 *n.*
- Krzhizhanovsky, G. M., economic collaborator of Lenin, 162 *n.*
- Kuczynski, Robert, 522
- Kühlenthal, Colonel, 535
- Kühlmann, Richard von, German delegate to Brest conference, 32, 33
- Kühne, Otto, 447
- Kuibyshev, V. V., 234, 568 *n.*; heads reorganized Central Control Commission, 250
- Kulaks, 475, 481. See also Dekulakization
- Kun, Béla, Hungarian Communist leader, 109, 112, 553, 582, 647; in March Action, 175, 177; switches loyalty to Stalin, 493
- Künstler, Franz, 530
- Kuomintang, Chinese nationalist organization, 574-578 *passim*, 597
- Kuusinen, Ottomar V., 305, 308 *n.*, 312, 460, 571-572
- Labor, disillusion of, in Russia, 475-476
- Labor armies, formation of, in Russia, 160-162, 651
- Labor government, Communist views of, 213-214
- Labor movement, Lenin's theory of, 17-18. See also Proletariat, Trade-Unions, Working Class
- Labour Party, British, 78, 213-214, 457, 461
- Landauer, Gustav, 102, 107
- Landesjäger Freikorps, 98
- Landsberg, George, 86, 559
- Landsknecht*, 642
- Lange, Paul, 77, 78
- Langerhans, Heinz, 605 *n.*
- Larin, Mikhail Alexandrovich, plans labor army, 162; quoted on Leningrad Opposition, 486
- Lashevich, 489, 549, 564, 598; dropped from Central Committee, 568
- Lassalle, organizer of Rhineland socialists, 13
- Laufenberg, Dr. Heinrich, 118, 196, 207; proposes National Bolshevism, 92-93, 94, 96
- Lausanne Conference, 307
- Lausanne Treaty, 277
- Law, Bonar, 194
- League against War and Fascism, 613
- League of German Officers, 413; 659
- League of Large Families, 607
- League of Nations, 388, 410; Germany admitted to, 517, 525
- Ledebour, Georg, 7, 12 *n.*, 84, 87, 205
- Left Social Revolutionaries, Russian, propose war on Germany, 39, 40-44; abortive coup of, 44-45
- "Left-Wing" Communism (Lenin), 137
- Legien, Carl, trade-union leader, 7, 98, 118, 297, 308; in Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch, 123-126, 139
- Leipart, Theodor, 98, 124
- Leipzig, 99; in Kapp putsch, 128, 129; current government of, 226 *n.*
- Lenin, Nikolay, 4, 6, 12 *n.*, 13, 112, 174; theories of Bolshevism, 16-19; ideological dispute with Luxemburg, 17, 19-21, 22, 24-27; adversary of Trotsky, 20 *n.*; opposition to, 21-22; Bolshevik coup d'état, 29-31; and Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, 34-39 *passim*, 42, 44 *n.*, 45; evaluation of German revolution, 46-47; rejects National Bolshevism for Germany, 93-96; views on German Communism, 138-140; conception of Comintern, 142; at Second World Congress, 142-143; unites party and Red Army factions, 154, 155-156;

- interest in technical development, 160, 162 *n.*; concept of trade-unions, 165-166; Kronstadt uprising and New Economic Policy, 166-170; protests March Action, 176-177, 178; attacked by Left Communists, 182-183; seeks to amalgamate elements in German party, 185-186; concept of temporary blocs with hostile groups, 199; sickness, 235, 238, 249, 350; testament on Party leadership, 238-245; death of, 240, 358-359; last writings, 245-246; breaks with Stalin, 247-248, 354; attacks Kerensky government, 274; *Collected Works*, 482; law of uneven development of capitalism, 558-559; presidency and concepts summarized, 629-631, 634-636, 647
- Lenin School, founded in Moscow, 509-510
- Leow, Willi, Red front leader, 425
- Lequis, General, 86; commander of Brandenburg garrison, 72
- Lessons of October* (Trotsky), 376-379
- Levi, Paul, 48, 49 *n.*, 76, 77, 118, 119, 126, 147, 171, 209; rejection of KAPD, 137-138; at Second World Congress, 143-144; opposes March Action and Bolshevism, 176-179 *passim*; proposes alliance between Germany and Soviet Russia, 197; defends German-Russian alliance, 527 *n.*
- Levin, Max, 105, 106, 108, 398
- Leviné, Eugen, 100, 105-106
- Lichtstrahlen* ("Light Rays"), Socialist weekly, 13
- Liebknecht, Karl, 7, 30, 46, 53, 84, 184; background and early life, 8-9; in World War I, 12-16 *passim*; in November uprising, 57, 59, 60, 61, 65; demonstrations against, 69-70; conflict with Luxemburg, 73-74, 83, 118; at first Spartakusbund convention, 76-79 *passim*; assassination of, 87, 88
- Liebknecht, Theodor, 8, 325 *n.*
- Liebknecht, Wilhelm, founder of Social Democratic Party, 8, 10
- "Light Rays" (*Lichtstrahlen*), Socialist weekly, 13
- Linsingen, General von, 53
- Lipinski, Richard, Saxon Social Democrat, 262
- Lipp, Dr. Franz, 103-104
- Lisbon, bomb plot in, 457
- Litvinov, Maxim, 192
- Livonia, 36, 38 *n.*
- Löbe, Paul, president of Reichstag, 195, 406
- Locarno Pact, 515-516; Stalin quoted on, 480-481
- Lockhart, R. H. Bruce, quoted on Soviet Cabinet meeting, 37 *n.*; on Fifth Congress of Soviets, 43-44
- Lohmann, Major, 529
- Lokalanzeiger*, 63, 73
- Lominadze, "Besso," 446 *n.*
- Lomov, G. I., 37
- London Ultimatum, 190
- Lord Astor*, British trawler, 277
- Lossow, General von, in Kahr-Ludendorff plot, 343-346 *passim*
- Lozovsky, A., chairman of Profintern, 145, 198, 368, 370, 441
- Lubbe, Marinus van der, 308-309 *n.*
- Lübben Hussars, 58
- Lübeck, 57
- Lübeck, Gustav, 10
- Ludendorff, General Erich F. W., 15, 29, 54, 55, 329; joins Nazi movement, 292, 293, 523; Kahr-Ludendorff plot, 342-345
- Luisenbund, 608
- Lukács, György, 112, 113 *n.*
- Lunacharsky, 22
- Lüneburg, 57
- Lurye, Mikhail Alexandrovich. *See* Larin, Mikhail Alexandrovich
- Luther, Dr. Hans, Reich Finance Minister, 331
- Lutovinov, Yuri C., 181, 360; leader in Workers' Opposition, 261 *n.*
- Lüttwitz, General Walther von, 86, 130; leader of Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch, 121-123
- Lux Hotel, Moscow, 541-542
- Luxemburg, Rosa, 7, 8, 22, 41, 70, 184, 632, 649; background and early life, 9-11; in World War I, 11-12, 14; ideological dispute with Lenin, 17, 19-21, 22, 24-27, 47-51; Lenin quoted on, 27 *n.*; and founding of Communist Party of Germany, 73-78 *passim*; conflict with Liebknecht, 73-74, 76, 83, 118; quoted on Ebert and Scheidemann government, 74; assassination of, 87, 88; relations with Radek, 202-203, 205, 209
- Luzhenovsky, General, 43 *n.*

- MacDonald, Ramsay, 213, 410, 460, 461
 Machhaus, Hugo, 292 *n.*
 Mackensen, Field Marshal von, 413
 Mackwitz, Marie, 178
 McManus, Arthur, 460
 Magazines, German Communist, 219-221, 530-531, 612-613
 Magdeburg, occupation of, in civil war, 99
 Magnes, Judah L., 33 *n.*
 Maikäfer Barracks, 60
 Makhno, Nestor, Ukrainian peasant leader, 158
 Maltzan zu Wartenberg und Penzlin, Freiherr Ago von, 265
 Malzahn, Paul, 176
Man Is Man (Brecht), 617
 Mann, Heinrich, 615 *n.*
 Mannheim, Socialist convention at, 7
 Mansfeld, uprising in, 175
 Mantsev, V. N., 654 *n.*
 Manufacturers Association, German, 98
 Manuilsky, Dmitri Z., 309 *n.*, 652; heads Comintern mission to Germany, 392-395, 397, 417, 433, 499-500; struggle with German Left, 441-444, 602, 603-604, 643
 Mao Tse-tung, quoted on mobile peasant army, 40 *n.*; leader of Chinese Communist Party, 574-575 *n.*
 March Action, 174-178
March Action, The (Levi), 178
 Marchlewski, Julius, 9 *n.*, 136
 Märcker, General Ludwig, 94, 97, 98, 99
 Marcu, Valeriu, 535-536, 614 *n.*
 Marine Brigades, 122, 131
 Markgrafski, Colonel, 10
 Marks, Major, quoted on Reichswehr, 67
 Marloh, Oberleutnant, 99
 Marstall incident, 72-73, 79
 Martov, J. A., Russian Social Democrat, 12 *n.*, 22, 145
 Marx, Karl, 8, 24, 138; scientific socialism, 4-5; Communist Manifesto, 99
 Marx, Wilhelm, Reich Chancellor, 331, 425, 580
 Marxist Workers' School, 614
 Maslow, Arkadi, 224 *n.*, 229, 247 *n.*, 260, 312, 313, 371, 603; leader of Berlin Communists, 182, 184, 322-323; impressions of Russian Party, 359-360; investigation of, 361-364; interviews with Stalin and others, 365-370 *passim*; arouses resentment of Stalin, 398-399; arrest of, in Berlin, 400-401; elected to Comintern Presidium, 405; defense of the Republic policy, 416-418, 419, 432; Stalin explains Bolshevism to, 433-440; attacked in Open Letter to German party, 447-452 *passim*; trial of, 453-454, 493; memorandum on bourgeoisie, 532-533; released from prison, 565, 568; expelled from party, 568, 571; Zinoviev and Trotsky break with, 570
 Matthes, Joseph, separatist leader in Ruhr, 253, 254
 Maximovsky, 164
 Medved, F. D., 540 *n.*
 Medvedev, Baku Letter, 475-476
 Mehring, Franz, 8, 11, 12, 14
 Melcher, Erich, 509
 "Men of Confidence" (*Betriebsvertrauensleute*), 15
 Menshevik Party, 17, 45, 248, 401, 648; opposes Lenin, 21; influence in unions, 163; Indian summer of, 473
 Merker, Paul, 284 *n.*, 445 *n.*; participant in Moscow conferences on German party, 500
 Mexico City, Communists in, 284 *n.*, 660
 Meyer, Ernst, 12 *n.*, 57, 215, 443; establishes German NEP, 180-181, 184
 M-Group, Communist underground military apparatus, 173-174, 175, 319, 326, 511
 Michaletz, Karl, 587
 Michels, Robert, 16
 Mikhailov, L. M., 233, 607
 Mikoyan, A. I., Commissar of Trade, 568
Militarismus und Antimilitarismus (Liebknecht), 9
 Military Opposition, Russian movement for decentralization, 148, 154
 Millerand, Alexandre, 225
 Milyutin, V. P., 239 *n.*
 Minkov, Captain, 467, 468
 Minorities, status of, in Soviet Union, 651-652
 Mirbach, Count Wilhelm von, German ambassador to Russia, 42, 43, 44, 150
 Mirov-Abramov, OMS resident in Berlin, 320 *n.*, 365, 442, 445
 Moeller van den Bruck, Arthur, forerunner of Nazism, 283-284
 Molotov, V. M., 233, 573

- Monarchism, resurgence of, in Germany, 412-416
- Monatte, Pierre, 577
- Money, Russian, in revolutionary period, 152
- Monopoly, economic, and state machinery, 474
- Moor, Karl, 206-207
- Moscow, Bolsheviks shift capital to, 38
- Moslems, Soviet propaganda among, 275-276
- Mother, The* (Gorky), 615
- Mrachkovsky, Sergei V., 588, 589
- Mudra, General von, 53, 69
- Mühlheim, Communist uprising in, 258-259
- Mühsam, Erich, 101, 102, 108
- Müller, General Adolf, institutes Reich Executive in Saxony and Thuringia, 334-337, *passim*
- Müller, Richard, 60 *n.*; chronicler of German revolution, 14; quoted on Berlin uprising, 63
- Müller, Hermann, 195; demands surrender of arms in Ruhr, 132
- Munich, 100; reactionary movement in, 104-108; Kahr-Ludendorff plot, 342-345
- Münzenberg, Willi, 118; founder of Communist Youth International, 221 *n.*; career as propagandist, 610-614, 645
- Münzenberg Trust, 612, 613
- Muralov, N. I., 355
- Muranov, M. K., member of Central Control Commission, 236
- Murmansk, 38 *n.*
- Mussolini, Benito, 143, 270, 381, 538 *n.*, 633; March on Rome, 194
- My Life* (Trotsky), 357
- Myasnikov, Gabriel, 181; leader in Workers' Opposition, 246
- Naphtali, Fritz, director of Arbeiter-Bank, 519
- N-Apparat*, 513
- Narodnik (Populist) peasant groups, 34 *n.*
- Natanson, Mark, 12 *n.*, 34 *n.*
- National Association of German Import and Export Trade, 293
- National Bolshevism, movement for, in Germany, 92-96, 118, 196, 267-273, 280-287. *See also* Bolshevism
- National Committee to Win the Peace, 613 *n.*
- National Liberal Women, 303
- National Socialist Party, assimilates Left radicalism, 333; influence of Stalinist Party on, 644-645; and German Army, 657-658. *See also* Nazism
- National Union of Railwaymen, British, 579
- Nationale Bund Deutscher Offiziere* (National League of German Officers), 413, 659
- Nationalist-Communist Unity?* (Reventlow), 268
- Nazism, forerunners of, 282-286; German Communists resist, 286-287; rise of, 292, 343, 382-383, 520, 641, 643, 644, 656. *See also* National Socialist Party
- Near East, Soviet-British tension in, 273, 275, 276-277, 307
- Neo-NEP, Bukharin's theory of, 471-474, 476-477
- NEP. *See* New Economic Policy
- Neubauer, Theo, 603
- Neue Freie Presse*, 64 *n.*, 65 *n.*
- Neumann, Felix, 325 *n.*, 457
- Neumann, Grete Buber, 447 *n.*
- Neumann, Heinz, 325 *n.*, 326 *n.*, 405, 603, 605 *n.*, 614 *n.*; confidant of Stalin in Germany, 445-446, 447; attacks Maslow's memorandum on bourgeoisie, 532-533; sent to China by Stalin, 596-597
- Neumann, Paul, 176
- Neumünster, 57
- Neurath, Alois, 587; attacks Thalheimer's policy, 282
- New Course, The* (Trotsky), 356, 377
- New Economic Policy, German, 171, 180-183, 184, 212; Russian, 167-170, 185, 350-353, 396, 402, 472, 650-651
- Newbold, John Walton, 400
- N-Group, Communist underground intelligence, 174, 507
- Nicholas II, Tsar of Russia, 28-29
- Niedermayer, Ritter Dr. Oskar, 536
- Niekisch, Ernst, 92 *n.*, 103
- Nikolai, Colonel von, 54 *n.*, 528
- NKVD, 614 *n.*
- Nogin, V. P., 239 *n.*
- Nörpel, Clemens, 519
- "No-Sayer, The" (*Der Neinsager*), 617
- Noske, Gustav, 56, 67 *n.*, 70 *n.*, 203; background and politics, 79-82; heads military affairs in Ebert cabinet, 82-86

- passim*, 89, 93, 94, 99, 107, 133; declines dictatorship, 121-122
Nuremberg, 100
- Oath, The*, Soviet film, 472 *n.*
Oberkommando in den Marken, 59
October trend, toward local power in Russia, 148
Odessa, 38
Oerter, Sepp, 99
Okhrana, Tsarist secret police, 10
OMS, International Liaison Section of Comintern, 319-320 *n.*
Open Letter to Communist Party of Germany, 447-452
Oppel, von, Berlin chief of police, 62
Opposition. *See* Trotsky-Zinoviev Bloc
Orange Guard, of Bulgarian peasants, 307
Ordine Nuovo, L' ("The New Order"), 114
Ordzhonikidze, G. K., Stalin's agent in Georgia, 248, 354, 568 *n.*, 584
Organization Consul, 193, 196
Orgburo. *See* Central Control Commission
Orgesch. *See* Organization Consul
Osman dynasty, 274
Ossinsky, Valerian V., leader of Democratic Centralism, 156, 159 *n.*, 164, 355, 654 *n.*
Ossovsky, J. A., 566-567 *n.*
Ostleute, 80
Outlawed, The (Salomon), 90
- Pabst, Hauptmann, 121
Paderna, N. V., 465
Panitzza, Todor, 466 *n.*
Pannekoek, Anton, 202
Parabellum. *See* Radek, Karl
Parliamentary question, in German Communist Party, 118
Party organization, Lenin's and Luxemburg's theories of, 18-20
Parvus-Helphand, A. L., 9 *n.*
Paulus, Field Marshal Friedrich von, 659
Pavlov, Kyril, 467
Pawlowski, E. *See* Varga, Professor Eugen
Peasants, organization of, in Russia, 402-403; Bukharin's policy for, 471-473, 476-477; Stalin's policy on, 481-482, 647, 651
People's Anti-Japanese Dramatic Society, 609
People's Naval Division, 72, 84, 99
People's Party, Kemal organizes, in Turkey, 276
"People's Voice" (*Die Volkstimme*), 568
Pepper, John. *See* Pogany, Josef
Perón, Juan D., proletarian leader, 538 *n.*
Persia, Russo-British treaty, 274
Petrograd, 38
Petrovsky, D., Comintern delegate to Britain, 400, 543
Pfeiffer, Hans, 324, 327, 603
"Philosophy of an Epoch" (Zinoviev), 473
Pieck, Arthur, 663
Pieck, Wilhelm, 14, 57, 77, 84, 96, 119, 131, 224 *n.*, 228, 309 *n.*, 371, 373, 397, 442, 603; opposes labor government, 126; in German Communist uprising, 319; administers Moscow subsidy, 444, 445; organizes fight against Social Democratic Party, 663
Pilnyak, Boris, 489 *n.*
Pilsudski, Józef, attacks Ukraine, 135-136; establishes new government in Poland, 557-558
Piscator, Erwin, 608
Platform of the Eighty-Three; 589-591
Plekhanov, 22, 27 *n.*, 598
PM, New York, 614
Po and Rhine (Engel), 26
Poale Zion, Jewish socialist party, 175
Pogány, Josef, 113 *n.*
Poincaré, Raymond, French Premier, 191, 193, 194, 269; threatens to take over Ruhr industry, 256
Poland, independence of, 24; war with Russia, 135-137; Pilsudski coup, 557-558
Poles, German opposition to, 533-534; deportation of, 652
Polish-Russian war, 135-137
Political Bureau (Politburo), 94, 177, 182; establishment of, 156-157; intervention in German Communist Party, 231-232; disruption of (1923), 350; Trotsky breaks with, 352-359, 360, 373-376; reaction to Dawes Plan, 390-391; Zinoviev reports on, at Fourteenth Congress, 483-489
Political consciousness, Lenin's theory of, 18
Pollitt, Harry, 400
Popov, Blagoi, 308-309 *n.*
Potemkin, Soviet film, 613
Poverty Committees, 43
Preger, Dr. von, 103

- Preobrazhensky, E. A., 233, 355
Preussische Seehandlung, 414
 Price, Phillips, 559
 Production, Russian industrial, in 1920, 151 *n.*
 Profintern, Communist trade-union international, 145, 198
 Proletariat, Lenin's theory of, 18-19, 23. *See also* Trade-unions, Working class.
 Propaganda, Communist, in Germany, 606-615
 Prussian State Bank, 414
 Publications, German Communist, 219-221, 530-531, 612-613
Punitive Measure, The (Brecht), 618-625
 Purcell, Albert A., 559, 560
 Purges, of Workers' Opposition in Russia, 233; of Comintern, 602-603, 640. *See also* Terrorism
 Pyatakov, G. L., 37, 355, 361, 376; Lenin quoted on, 243
 Pyatnitsky, Ossip, 305, 320, 360, 371, 445
- Quadruple Alliance, 38 *n.*
- Rada, Ukrainian legislative assembly, 32, 35, 42
 Radek, Karl, 12 *n.*, 13, 31, 33, 118-119, 174, 180, 183, 192, 197, 260; at first Spartakusbund convention, 76, 77; supports policy of National Bolshevism, 92-93, 96, 267-273, 280-287; rejection of KAPD, 137; Open Letter on reparations, 171; develops theory of Germany as industrial colony, 198-200; early political career, 201-210; supports Trotsky, 211; campaigns for international united front, 211-218, 225-226, 229-230, 643; eliminated from Comintern, 216, 218; supports passive resistance in Ruhr, 259-266; Schlageter policy, 270-272, 277, 282-283, 286; supports Turkish nationalist movement, 275-276; in German Communist uprising, 305, 310-318 *passim*, 323, 331, 334, 336, 365, 369; quoted on coup d'état in Bulgaria, 310; supports Statement of the Forty-Six, 355; friendship for Maslow, 362; discussions with, 366; at Comintern Presidium session, 371-376 *passim*; quoted on splitting of German party, 509 *n.*; proposes German-Russian army collaboration, 528, 531; heads Sun Yat-sen University, 574
 Radical Democratic Party, program of, 181 *n.*
 Rákosi, Mátyás, 112, 113 *n.*, 393
 Rakovsky, Christian, 192, 205, 308, 376, 598
 Rapallo, Treaty of, 192-193, 199, 265, 456, 528
 Rasputin, Grigory, 28
 Rathenau, Walther, German Minister for Foreign Affairs, 191, 192, 193, 285
 Rausch, Johann, 325 *n.*
 Red Aid, 609
 Red Army, 145; formation of, 36, 39, 43, 45, 152-156; becomes labor army, 160-161; in German Communist uprising, 319-322; collaboration with Reichswehr, 527-536
 Red Army Day, 36
 "Red Construction" (*Der Rote Aufbau*), 612
 Red Corners, 585
 Red Directors, Club of the, 476
 "Red Flag, The" (*Rote Fahne*), 63, 83, 283, 612
 Red Front Fighters' League, 424, 508, 605 *n.*, 606-607, 645
 Red Guard, 64 *n.*
 Red Hundreds, German Communist shock troops, 294-296, 326; in Saxony and Thuringia, 313-314, 318
 Red Ruhr Army, 127, 128, 130, 133
 Red Shindigs (*Rote Rummel*), 609
 Red Terror, 45
 Red Women's and Girls' League, 608
 Reed, John, 31
 Reese, Maria, 309 *n.*
Reflections on Dictatorship, Freikorps pamphlet, 121
 Regional general assembly, in German party, 501-502
 Reich. *See* Germany
 Reich Printing Office, strike in money press, 300-301
 Reichstag, burning of, 308 *n.*; accepts Dawes Plan, 405-407
Reichsward ("Guardian of the Reich"), Reventlow's magazine, 283
 Reichswehr, German Republican army, 67 *n.*, 93, 130, 196, 253-254, 642-643; under Versailles treaty, 121; realignment with Ebert cabinet, 130-134; in March action, 176; prepares for armed

- conflict with France, 261-263; secret dealings with Red Army general staff, 263-265; revolt of, at Küstrin, 331; pro-Russian groups in, 315; occupies Saxony and Thuringia, 333-335, 336-338, 346; prepares revolt against Berlin, 329; Maslow proposes disbandment of, 416-417; collaboration with Red Army, 527-536
- Reichswehr Ministerium, 68 *n.*
- Reinhardt, Max, 608
- Reinhardt Regiment, 99
- Reiss, Ignatz, 589
- Remmele, Hermann, 339, 371, 392, 446 *n.*, 605 *n.*
- Rendsburg, 57
- Renn, Ludwig. *See* Vieth von Gelsseu, Arnold
- Reparation Commission (Repco), 189-190, 191, 227, 518
- Reparations, Radek's Open Letter on, 171; Communist policy on, 180; terms of, 190; conflict over, 190-194; France occupies Ruhr, 194-196; theory of Germany as industrial colony, 198-200; Stresemann reorganizes payments, 303; Dawes Plan, 388-391
- Reuter-Friesland, Dr. Ernst, 178-179 *n.*
- Reventlow, Count Ernst zu, 268, 283, 407; quoted on struggle of the masses, 197; defends Radek's policy of collaboration, 268
- Revolutionary, professional, Lenin's theory of, 19
- Revolutionary Communists, Russian, 34 *n.*
- Rhineland. *See* Ruhr
- Richter, Police President, 414
- Richthofen, General Freiherr von, 58-59
- Riga, storming of, 271
- Romanov dynasty, end of, 28
- Rosenberg, Arthur, 182, 406, 440, 443, 603; quoted on Ebert, 65-66 *n.*; on task of German Communism, 416; eliminated from Central Committee, 452-453; leads Ultra-Left opposition, 418
- Rosenfeld, Kurt, Maslow's lawyer, 212, 435, 439
- Rosmer, Alfred, 311, 577
- Rosta, Russian press agency in Berlin, 62
- Rote Fahne* ("The Red Flag"), 63, 83, 283, 612
- Rote Tribüne*, 609
- Rotheit, Rudolf, quoted on November uprising, 59
- Rudas, Vladislav, 109
- Rudin, Harry R., 56 *n.*
- Rühle, Otto, 7, 13, 77
- Ruhr, resists Kapp putsch, 127-128, 130; Reichswehr enters, 132-133; France occupies (1923), 194-196, 252, 293, 388; discussion of, at Leipzig convention, 227; passive resistance in, 252-253, 255, 259-260; separatist movement in, 253-255, 292-293; internationalist spirit in, 254; Krupp incident, 257-258; Communist uprising, 258-259; sabotage in, 292, 293; strikes in mine and metal industries, 303; Red Hundreds in, 314; end of passive resistance in, 330, 331; under Locarno Pact, 515
- Rumbold, Sir Anthony, 276
- Russia, Social Democracy prior to World War I, 21-22; Imperial expansionist drive, 23-24; Bolshevik coup d'état, 29-31; Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, 31-38; civil war in, 32. *See also* Soviet Union
- "Russian Messenger, The" (*Russky Vyesnik*), 30 *n.*
- Rykov, A. I., 239 *n.*, 573; attacks Opposition Bloc, 600
- SA. *See* Storm Troopers
- Saar, 515
- Sabath, Gustav, Berlin trade-union leader, 300
- Sabotage, in Ruhr, 292, 293
- Safarov, George Ivanovich, 586, 588, 599, 604
- Salomon, Bruno von, 284 *n.*
- Salomon, Ernst Friedrich Karl von, 90-91; quoted on German civil war, 98; on Russia, 284
- Sapronov, Timofei V., 355; leader of Democratic Centralism, 156-158 *passim*, 159 *n.*, 164
- Sauerland, Kurt, 614 *n.*
- Saxony, Red bloc in, 223, 225-226; Reformist Communist policy in, 295; Zeigner government in, 295-296, 331-335 *passim*; Red Hundreds in, 313-314, 318; occupied by Reichswehr, 333-335, 336-338, 346
- Schacht, Dr. Hjalmar, Reichsbank President, 143 *n.*
- Scharnhorst-Bund*, 413
- Scheidemann, Philipp, 82, 86, 184; quoted on proclamation of German Republic, 60-62
- Scher, Johnny, 447

- Schlageter, Albert Leo, 259, 270-272, 277, 293
- Schlageter policy, 282-283, 286
- Schlagewerth, Heinrich, 527
- Schleicher, General von, 122, 528
- Schleswig, 57
- Schloss, Berlin residence of Imperial family, 58-61 *passim*
- Schmidt, Robert, 370, 371, 519
- Schmidt, Vasily, Comintern delegate to Germany, 323, 324
- Schneller, Luise, 350 *n.*
- Schneller, Ernst, 447, 603, 614-615
- Schneller, Eva, 350 *n.*
- Schnepfenhorst, Bavarian War Minister, 104
- Scholem, Werner, 361, 371, 440, 443, 507, 605 *n.*; leads Ultra-Left opposition, 418; eliminated from Central Committee, 452; expelled from party, 568, 571
- Scholze, Paul, 84
- Schröder, Karl, 605 *n.*
- Schutzstaffel* SS, Security Guard, 430
- Schwann, Wilhelm, 447, 568; expelled from German party, 571
- Schwartz, Ernst, 527, 531, 603
- Schweinfurt, 100
- Schwerin, 57
- Scientific socialism, Marxian, 4-5
- Secret services, of German Communist party, 320
- Secretariat, Bolshevik, establishment of, 156-157
- Security Guard, 430
- Seeckt, General Hans von, 122, 262, 265, 325 *n.*, 329, 391; creator of Reichswehr, 67 *n.*, 130-134 *passim*, 528; orders dissolution of Communist Party, 346-347; in German-Russian military collaboration, 535
- Seidel, Richard, 519
- Seldte, Franz, founder of Stahlhelm, 413
- Self-determination, Socialist theories of, 24-27; question of, at Brest, 33-49
- Semard, Pierre, 579
- Semyonov, Juri, 536
- Senfft von Pilsach, General, 129
- Serebryakov, L. P., 233
- Serrati, G., Italian Socialist leader, 115, 116, 143
- Severing, Carl, Social Democratic leader, 127, 131, 132, 262, 303, 362, 415
- Sèvres, Treaty of, 276
- Seydlitz, General Walther von, 284 *n.*; heads Free Germany Committee, 659, 662
- Shevchenko, Ukrainian poet, 49
- Shkiryatov, M. F., member of Central Control Commission, 236
- Shklovsky, G. L., 564, 585-586, 605 *n.*
- Shlyapnikov, Alexander G., 181, 311; leader of Workers' Opposition, 159, 164, 168-169
- Shop Stewards (*Betriebsobleute*), 15, 57; collapse of, 70 *n.*; 83-87; program of, 79
- Simon-Katz, André, 614 *n.*
- Sklarek scandal, 518
- Skoblevsky, Alexis, 315, 371; Comintern delegate to Germany, 323, 325, 336; arrest of, 457
- Skoropadsky, Hetman, 42
- Slogett, Hy, 277
- Slovak Soviet Republic, 112
- Smeets, Joseph, separatist leader in Ruhr, 253, 292
- Smirnov, Vladimir M., 37, 157, 159 *n.*, 164, 584
- Sneevliet, Henryk, Dutch Communist, 574
- Snowden, Mrs. Philip, 559
- Sobranje, Bulgarian national parliament, 307
- Social Democratic Party, Austrian, 64 *n.*, 110-111, 211; Bulgarian, 307-308; German, prior to World War I, 3-6; in World War I, 12-16; split in, 13-14; in cabinets of Weimar Republic, 125 *n.*; in reparations conflict, 190; Leipzig formula rejected, 260; fears Communist uprising, 330; in Reichstag election of 1924, 399; in Dawes election, 410; offensive against, 414; strengthening of, after Locarno, 518-520; Kiel Convention, 1927, 519; Stalin splits, in Soviet zone, 663; Lettish, 22; Lithuanian, 10; Polish, 10, 22; Russian, 4; 17, 21-22. *See also* Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany
- Social Democracy and Colonial Policy* (Noske), 81
- Social fascism, Stalin's theorem of, 655-656
- Social patriotism, 533
- Social Revolutionary Party, Russian, 34 *n.*
- Socialism, Marxian scientific, 4-5; state industry and, 478-479, 485-489; Stalinist conception of, 637
- Socialist International, 4, 11

- Socialist Party, Italian, 3, 7, 113-116
- Socialist Unity Party, 663
- Society for the Advancement of Industrial Enterprises (GEFU), 529
- Sofia plot, 467-470
- Sokolnikov, G. Y., 37, 595; ousted by Stalin, 537
- Soldiers' Councils, 15, 71
- Sollmann, Wilhelm, Rhine Social Democratic leader, 195
- Solntsev, 587, 604
- Sommer, Joseph, 282
- Souvarine, Boris, 361; expelled from party, 577
- "Soviet Russia in Pictures" (*Sowjet-Russland in Bildern*), 612
- Soviet Textile Trust, 458
- Soviet Union, war with Poland, 135-137; October trend toward decentralization, 148, 153; nationalization of industry, 148-152; abrogation of Tsarist debts, 191-192; Treaty of Rapallo, 192-193; secret discussions of German alliance, 263-265; tension with Great Britain, 273, 275, 276-277; crisis in (1923), 350-360; receives news of German defeat, 355; recognition of, 456; foreign policy and Comintern, 456-459; trade negotiations with Britain, 458-459; and capitalist world, 474-476; treaty with Germany (1926), 524-527; trade-union alliance with Britain, 560-562; relations with China, 573-579, 596-597; status of national minorities in, 651-652; war with Germany, 658-659. *See also* Russia
- Spain, German Communists in, 500-501 *n.*
- Spartakusbriefe* (Luxemburg), 48
- Spartakusbund, 11, 14, 49 *n.*, 70, 73, 184, 205; first convention of, 74-79; in uprising of January, 1919, 83-87; underground convention in Heidelberg, 117-119; trade-union contempt for, 134; joins with USPD to form United Communist Party, 146-147; underground activities, 173. *See also* Communist Party, German; *Gruppe Internationale, Die*
- Spengler, Oswald, 4
- Spetsy*, Soviet specialists, 473
- Spinning wheels, 591-592 *n.*
- Spiridonova, Maria, 34 *n.*, 42, 43 *n.*
- SS. *See* Security Guard
- Stahlhelm (Steel Helmet), German military organization, 412-413, 602
- Stalin, Joseph V., 44 *n.*, 157; rise of, 154; writings, 157 *n.*; delegated as General Secretary of Russian Party, 234-236, 242, 304, 360, 633; Lenin breaks with, 240-241, 247-248, 354; Lenin quoted on, 243-244; quoted on Communists and Fascists in Germany, 306; growing influence of, 354-357; in Maslow investigation, 363; interviews with, 365-369; at Fifth World Congress, 404-405; intervention in German Communist affairs, 433-444, 454-455; Open Letter to German party, 447-452; consolidation of power, 452-453, 457, 470, 471, 490-491, 538-541, 551-555; supports Bukharin's peasant policy, 477-478; upholds Party monopoly in industrial management, 479-480; on organization of Russian workers, 482-483, 495; on Fourteenth Congress, 495; and German-Russian alliance, 532-533; seeks alliance with Nazi Germany, 536; plays role of proletarian leader, 537-538; changes membership of Russian Central Committee, 556; wins majority in party plenums, 570-571, 573; policy in China, 575-579, 596-597; collapse of foreign policy, 580-581; shatters Opposition, 594-597, 598-602; orders purge throughout Comintern, 602-603; rise and concepts summarized, 636-640, 647, 650
- Stamboliyski, Alexander, heads Bulgarian government, 307, 309-310
- Stamboliyski-Tsankov episode, 633
- State Party, tenets of, 634
- Statement of the Forty-Six, Trotsky submits, 355
- Stauffenberg, Colonel Klaus Schenk Graf von, conspires against Hitler, 660-661
- Steel Helmet (Stahlhelm), German military organization, 412-413, 602
- Stein, Freiherr von, 272
- Steinhardt, Karl, 100, 110
- Stern, Victor, 582
- Stinnes, Hugo, 191, 193, 325 *n.*
- Stockholm, Socialist conference at, 12 *n.*
- Stoecker, Walter, 140, 392
- Stojanowits, Yugoslav Communist, 211
- Stolzenberg Company, Hugo, constructs plant in Russia, 529
- Stolzenburg, Albert, 228

- Storm Troopers, 430
 "Story of the Unextinguished Moon, The" (Pilnyak), 489 *n.*
 Stratz, Heinz, 206
 Streseman, Dr. Gustav, 190, 195, 580; Reich Chancellor, 331; forms new coalition government, 301, 303; attacks on, 520; German Foreign Minister, 524-525
 Strikes, German, against World War I, 8; Vienna and Berlin (1918), 33; Berlin electric workers, 119-120; general, against Kapp-Lüttwitz putsch, 123, 125; March Action, 174-175; in reparations conflict, 193; miners and steel workers in Ruhr, 259; farmhands in East Prussia, 296; wildcat and official, 297; during inflation, 299 *n.*; money-press and subsequent, 300-303; general, in Great Britain (1926), 558, 561; British miners', 561
 Ströbel, Heinrich, 16 *n.*; quoted on November uprising, 60
 Strong, Anna Louise, quoted on mobile peasant army, 40 *n.*
 Strötzel, Max, 447
 Stuchka, Peter I., 361
 Stürgkh, Count von, Austrian Foreign Minister, 53
Sturmabteilung SA, Storm Troopers, 430
 Stuttgart, 8; International Socialist Congress at (1907), 21
 Subsidies, Moscow, to German party, 442, 444-445
 Sun Yat-sen, 573, 574
 Sun Yat-sen University, 574
 Supreme Soldiers' Council, 71
 Supreme Allied Council, conference on reparations payments, 191
 Supreme Council of National Economy, Russian, 156
 Süsskind, Heinrich, 603
 Swales, A. B., chairman of British Trade-Union Congress, 458
 Sylt, Wilhelm, Berlin labor leader, 119-120
 System Pieck, regroups German party organization, 501-510
 Szamuély, Tibor, Hungarian Communist leader, 109
 Szántó, Béla, 109, 113 *n.*
 Talaat Pasha, Turkish revolutionary, 275
 Tanev, Vasil, 308-309 *n.*
 Technical Emergency Squads, anti-labor organization, 120
 "Ten Commandments for Free Thinkers" (Hoffmann), 178
 Tenner, Albin, Thuringian cabinet member, 332, 333
 Terrorism, between two world wars, 468-469; in Russian Party, 653
 T-Groups, Communist underground terrorists, 174, 175, 513, 325 *n.*, 350 *n.*
 Thalheimer, August, 198; in Kapp putsch, 126; at Third World Congress, 176; relations with Radek, 201, 208, 209, 210, 216; quoted on revolutionary fight for power, 278; defends Cuno government, 281-282; on German Right and Trotsky, 374-375
 Thalheimer, Bertha, 12 *n.*
 Thälmann, Ernst, 229, 260, 328, 409, 447, 538 *n.*; at Halle conference, 146; in Hamburg uprising, 339, 340; elected to Comintern Presidium, 405; Communist candidate for president, 419-426 *passim*, 582; commander of Red Front Fighters' League, 607
 Thomas, J. H., 461; 579
 Thorez, Maurice, leader of French Communist Party, 538 *n.*, 500, 555
 Thule Society, 101, 107
Thüringen, German cruiser, 56
 Thuringia, Red bloc in, 223, 225-226; Reformist Communist policy in, 295; Red Hundreds in, 313-314, 318; Communists enter cabinet, 333, 334; occupied by Reichswehr, 333-334, 338
 Thyssen, Fritz, arrest of, by French, 195-196
 Tiedemann, Helmut, 53 *n.*
 Tillessen, Heinrich, Erzberger's assassin, 285 *n.*
 Tillett, Benjamin, 461
 Tirpitz, Admiral von, 399, 418
 Toilers of the Orient, University for, 574
 Toller, Ernst, 102, 106-107, 108
 Tomskey, Mikhail P., Russian trade-union leader, 165, 249, 324 *n.*, 370, 490, 560, 561, 573, 579, 647
 Topaldjikov, General, 467
 "Torch, The" (Die Fackel), 30
 Torgler, Ernst, 308-309 *n.*, 327, 534, 535, 608
 Totalitarianism, tenets of, 634
 Trade-union consciousness, Lenin's theory of, 17-18

- Trade-Union Division, of German Communist Party, 441
- Trade-Union Opposition, Russian movement for decentralization, 148
- Trade-Union University, founded at Bernau, 518
- Trade-unions, Lenin's theory of, 17-18; Communist antagonism to, in Germany, 118, 395; status of, in Weimar Republic, 120; under early Russian Communism, 163-166; Congresses, 164, 223, 434 *n.*, 458, 519; demand increased state control of heavy industry, 190-191; Communist membership, 223; lose to Russian Party, 237-238; farmhands', 296; effect of inflation on, 297-301; relation of, to Russian Party, 370; as basis for mass action in Germany, 433; infiltration of, 441-442; strengthened influence of, after Locarno, 518-520; Anglo-Russian alliance, 560-562; German, in years of Nazi ascendancy, 655-656. *See also* Labor, Proletariat Working Class.
- Tranmael, Martin, 217
- Trebizond, 38
- Treint, Albert, 582, 587
- Trilisser, Mayer A., GPU chief for Balkans, 468
- Troeltsch, Ernst, quoted on Radek, 267
- Troika, 211, 239 *n.*, 244, 249, 356, 376, 484. *See also* Kamenev, Stalin, Zinoviev
- Trotsky, Leon, 12 *n.*, 30 *n.*, 31, 39, 44 *n.*, 46, 183, 260, 636, 653; adversary of Lenin, 20 *n.*, 22; heads Russian delegation at Brest, 33, 34-36; resigns as Commissar for Foreign Affairs, 37; quoted on defeat before Warsaw, 137 *n.*; organizes Red Army, 152-156; militarizes labor, 160-162; opposes trade-unions, 164-165; report on world affairs to Third World Congress, 177; relations with Radek, 211; popularity of, 234; seeks to succeed Lenin, 235, 238-245, 249, 250; supports German Communist uprising, 312-323 *passim*, 364, 365; breaks with Politburo, 352-359, 373-376; flight to Sukhum, 360; views on Party and German uprising, 376-381; on violence in Estonia and Bulgaria, 469; consults Berlin specialists, 541; breaks with Maslow-Fischer group, 570; removed from Politburo, 570; expelled from Party, 596; exiled to Central Asia, 602, 647; banished to Turkey, 647. *See also* Trotsky-Zinoviev Bloc
- Trotskyism, campaign against, 403-404; Zinoviev reports on, 483-484
- Trotsky-Zinoviev Bloc, 645-647, 482-489, 538-551, 556-557, 562-570, 582-602; Bloc defeated, 482-483, 594-602
- Tsankov, Professor Alexander, leads Bulgarian army coup, 309, 465, 469-470, 633
- Tukhachevsky, Mikhail N., 536, 653
- Turkestan, 251; British in, 273
- Turkey, 54; nationalist movement in, 273-277, 307, 633
- Turov, 587, 595
- Twelve Days in Germany* (Zinoviev), 146
- Twenty-One Conditions, for entrance into Comintern, 115, 116, 140-144, 173-174
- Two Revolutions of the Year 1917, The* (Maslow), 449, 453
- Uglanov, N. A., 234
- Ukhanov, chairman of Moscow soviet, 537
- Ukraine, 38; civil war in, 32, 42; signs peace with Central Powers, 35, 36; German occupation, 42, 54; nationalism in, 49-50; Poland attacks, 135-136; Democratic Capitalism secures control, 158
- Ukrainian People's Republic, 38 *n.*; declaration of, 32
- Ulbricht, Walther, 224 *n.*, 230, 314, 372, 392, 603, 658; at Moscow conferences on German party, 500; organizes fight against Social Democratic Party, 663
- Ulbricht-Pieck system, regroups German party organization, 501-510
- Underground, Communist, in Germany, 173-174, 286
- Unemployment, reduction of, in Germany, 517
- Union of German Industrialists, 190
- Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. *See* Russia, Soviet Union
- United Communist Party. *See* Communist Party, German
- United States, subservience to, 481; role in European affairs, 553, 554-555
- Unschlicht, Joseph S., 22, 136, 202, 361, 363
- Unser Weg* ("Our Way"), 179
- Upper Silesia, Catholic opposition to World War I, 16; plebiscite of 1921, 189

- Urbahns, Hugo, 224 *n.*, 423, 603; expelled from party, 568, 571
- Uritsky, Mikhail, 37, 45
- USPD. *See* Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany
- Ustryalov, Professor, spokesman for *Spetsy*, 473, 482
- Vago, Béla, 113 *n.*
- Valtin, Jan, 224 *n.*
- Vandervelde, Emile, Belgian Social Democrat, 21, 27 *n.*, 212
- Varga, Professor Eugen, 112, 113 *n.*, 197-200 *passim*, 390; quoted on Communist line of struggle in Germany, 280; on economic stabilization in Germany, 315-316; on Europe and America, 555
- Versailles treaty, 276 *n.*, 642; opposition to, 90, 91, 93-94, 120-121; revision of, 410, 525
- Viator. *See* Radek, Karl
- Vienna, mass strikes (1918), 33
- Vieth von Golsenau, Arnold, 284 *n.*
- Vögler, Albert, Rhenish industrialist, 517
- Voikov, Peter, assassination of, 579, 581
- Volk, Karl, 603
- Völkische Beobachter*, 523
- Volkmann, Erich Otto, 65 *n.*; quoted on Reichswehr, 67 *n.*
- Volksmarine Division (People's Naval Division), 72, 84, 99
- Volodarsky, V., People's Commissar for Propaganda, 42
- Voroshilov, K. Y., head of Russian army, 489, 549
- Vorovsky, V. V., delegate to Lausanne conference, 277
- Vorwärts ("Forward"), Berlin Socialist daily, 8, 63, 82-83, 84, 86, 178, 180
- Vperyod* (Forward), Polish Social Democratic faction, 22
- Vuyovich, Vuyo, 582
- Vyshinsky, 265; trial of Bukharin, 654-655 *n.*
- Vyx, Colonel, 110
- Walcher, Jakob, 77, 126, 209, 216, 224 *n.*, 370, 371, 441, 603
- Walecki, 202, 371
- Walz, Oberleutnant, 57
- Wangenheim, Ernst, 609
- War, socialist attitude toward, 6-7
- Warsaw, Red Army defeated at, 136-137
- Warsaw group, Polish Social Democratic faction, 22
- Warski, Adolf, 9 *n.*, 12 *n.*, 17, 49 *n.*, 211, 360, 371, 373
- Watter, General Freiherr von, commander in Ruhr, 127, 132, 271
- Weapons, traffic in, 285-286
- Webb, Sidney and Beatrice, 559
- Weber, Hans, 603
- Weill, Kurt, 616
- Weimar Republic, 93; founding of, 97, 98, 117; Communist attitude toward, 118; legal structure of, endangered, 291-292; Maslow's policy of defense of, 416-418, 432. *See also* Germany
- Weinert, Erich, chairman of Free Germany Committee, 284 *n.*, 659; Communist Poet, 615 *n.*
- Wels, Otto, 300, 301
- Werner, Paul. *See* Frölich, Paul
- Westarp, Count von, 190
- Westarp, Hella Gräfin von, 107
- Weygand, General, 136
- Whampoa Academy, 574
- WIKO, 529
- Wilhelm II, Kaiser, 53, 66; abdication, 58, 59, 641; quoted on Berlin uprising, 58 *n.*; plebiscite on confiscation of property, 522-524
- Wilhelmshaven, 57
- Wilkinson, Ellen C., 400, 559, 613
- Williams, Robert, 559
- Wilson, Woodrow, proclaims Fourteen Points, 32
- Winnig, Social Democrat, 271
- Wirth, Dr. Joseph, Reich Chancellor, 190, 191, 194
- Witzleben, Field Marshal Erwin von, conspires against Hitler, 661
- Wolffheim, Fritz, 118, 196, 207; propose National Bolshevism, 92-93, 94, 96.
- Wolfstein, Rosi, 77, 78, 603
- Wollweber, Ernst, 224 *n.*
- Wolscht, Theodor, 325 *n.*
- Women's organizations, German, 607-608
- Workers, organization of Russian, 482-483, 485-486
- Workers' Bank, founded by German Federation of Labor, 518
- Workers' Correspondents, 512
- Workers' Councils, 15
- Workers' Group, Russian Party oppositionists, 250-251

- "Workers' Illustrated Review" (*Arbeiter Illustrierte*), 612
- Workers' Opposition, Russian movement for decentralization, 148, 156-159, 163, 164, 165; gains new strength, 352, 353, 355; views on Russia and capitalist world, 475
- Workers Party, American, 555
- "Workers' Politics" (*Arbeiterpolitik*), Socialist weekly, 13
- Workers' and Soldiers' Councils, 63, 65, 69, 77, 78; conferences, 70-72; in German civil war, 98
- Workers' Theater League (*Arbeiter Theater Bund*), 609
- Workers' Truth, Russian Party oppositionists, 159, 250-251
- Working class, Lenin's theory of, 17-18. *See also* Labor, Proletariat, Trade-unions
- "World in the Evening, The" (*Die Welt am Abend*), 613
- World War I, Social Democratic Party and, 3, 6-8, 12-16; Russian contribution, 28-30; Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, 31-38
- Yagoda, H. G., 44 n., 358-359, 540 n., 653, 654 n.
- Yakovleva, V. N., 654 n.
- Yanev, Petar, 467
- Yankov, Captain, 467, 468
- Yaroslavsky, E., 233
- Young Communist League, 250; refuses to abide by Fourteenth Party Congress, 539-540
- "Young Comrade, The" (*Der Junge Genosse*), 608
- Young, George, 461
- Young Men's and Women's Christian Society, 615
- Young Pioneers, 608
- Young Plan, 526 n.
- "Youth International" (*Jugend-Internationale*), 610
- Yudenich offensive, 93, 170
- Yugoslavia, Stamboliyski oppositionists in, 465
- Zadgorski, Peter, 467
- Zeigner, Dr. Erich, 225-226, 262-263; government of, 295-296, 331-332, 337; arrest of, 337, 338
- Zetkin, Clara, 8, 11, 14, 49 n., 79 n., 211, 224 n., 361, 371, 373, 397, 553 n.; protests March Action, 178, 179; relations with Radek, 202, 209, 216; at Leipzig convention, 227, 228; warns against adventurism in Ruhr, 256-257; reports on international Fascism, 270-271; at Comintern Presidium session, 371, 373, 374; rejected as presidential candidate, 419; at Fourteenth Party Congress, 492; president of Red Women's and Girls' League, 608
- Zeuschel, Walter, 341 n.; quoted on traffic in arms, 286; on police, 292
- Z-Group, Communist underground disruption group, 174
- Zietz, Luise, 58
- Zimmerwald, Socialist conference at, 12
- Zimmerwald Union, 12 n., 204
- Zinoviev, Gregory Y., 12 n., 22, 31, 37, 39, 159, 174, 183; at Halle convention, 145-146; in March Action, 175; Comintern chairman, 176, 177, 239-240; differences with Radek, 216-217, 218; seeks to coordinate Russian Party, 235; head of Politburo, 249-251 *passim*, 260, 369; delegate to Congress of Peoples of the Orient, 275; and policy of National Bolshevism, 280; supports anti-Fascist movement in Germany, 287; in German Communist uprising, 306, 312-318 *passim*, 322, 335, 364, 365; encourages party attack on Brandler, 348, 349; seeks to offset Stalin's influence, 354-356; relations with Maslow, 363; discussions with, 366, 544-548; at Comintern Presidium session, 371-376 *passim*; opposes independent party tendencies in Germany, 395-396, 398; quoted on tensions in Russia, 401 n.; joins condemnation of German Left, 444; Open Letter to German party, 447-452; letter to Communist Party of Great Britain, 459-463; attempts coup d'état in Estonia, 463-465; accused of terrorism, 468; strives for peasant's international, 477; definition of socialism, 479; presents minority report at Fourteenth Congress, 483-489; presides at Comintern plenum, 553-555; seeks Bolshevization of Communist parties, 557-558; dropped from Politburo, 568; breaks with Maslow-Fischer group, 570; removed as Chairman of Comintern, 571; expelled from Party, 596, 653; submits to Party, 601. *See also* Trotsky-Zinoviev Bloc

Continued from front flap

for her opposition to control from Moscow, and has fought the nationalist aims and terrorist methods of Communism ever since. She knew personally many of the current leaders of the Comintern, including Stalin and Wilhelm Pieck, the present German Communist Secretary. A leader in Germany of the Zinoviev-Trotsky bloc against Stalin, she was accused in the Moscow trial of 1936 of having conspired to assassinate Stalin.

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