

# Alexander Bogdanov and the short history of the *Kultintern*<sup>1</sup>

by

**John Biggart**

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To the extent that there was a mainstream view within the RSDRP before February 1917 as to the kind of political and economic system that would emerge in Russia in the event of the autocracy being overthrown, it was that the successor régime would be a democratic republic and that the role of the RSDRP would be oppositional, pending a transition to socialism. The general line of the Bolsheviks on the question was articulated in a resolution “On the present conjuncture and the tasks of the party”, adopted at the All-Russian Conference of the RSDRP held in Paris from 3 - 9 January 1909 (Western calendar)<sup>2</sup> and re-affirmed at the narrowly based conference convened by Lenin in Prague from 18-30 January 1912 (Western calendar).<sup>3</sup> In 1909, the first “task” of the “socialist proletariat” had been defined as being “the overthrow of Tsarism, the conquest of political power by the proletariat with the help of the revolutionary strata of the peasantry,<sup>4</sup> the outcome of which will be a bourgeois-democratic revolution brought about through

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<sup>1</sup> Revision of November 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The corresponding Russian dates were 21–27 December 1908. The conference was attended, for the Bolsheviks, by 6 local worker delegates (10 had been elected); 4 Mensheviks (three émigrés, including Fedor Dan and Paul Axelrod and one worker delegate from the Ukraine); 3 delegates nominated by the Bund; and 5 Polish Social Democrats who voted consistently with the “orthodox” Bolsheviks (as *Proletarii* described the Lenin group). Additionally, 5 members of the Central Committee and one member of the Social Democracy of Lithuania attended, with a “consultative” vote. See Section I of the report ‘Vserossiiskaya konferentsiya R.S-D.R.P’, *Proletarii*, No.42 (12 (25) February 1909.

<sup>3</sup> The Russian calendar dates were 5–17 January. The Prague Conference was attended by 14 delegates from inside Russia. These delegates, 12 of whom were Bolsheviks and 2 ‘Party-Mensheviks’ (members of the Plekhanov group) had ‘deciding’ votes. There were 4 delegates from the emigration: all had ‘consultative’ votes, with the exception of Lenin, who, according to police reports, was granted a ‘deciding’ vote. See *Konferentsiya RSDRP 1912 goda. Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow, 2008), p.18.

<sup>4</sup> In its report on this conference the newspaper *Proletarii*, editorially controlled by Lenin, pointed out that the preferred formula of the Bolsheviks had always been “by the proletariat and the revolutionary peasantry” and that the majority of their delegation had voted for this formula (two ‘Recallist’ Bolsheviks had not); they had accepted the formula “with the help of”, which had been proposed by the Polish Social Democrats, since they did not consider that it made any substantive difference. See Section III of the report, ‘Vserossiiskaya konferentsiya R.S-D.R.P’, *Proletarii*, No.42 (12 (25) February 1909.

the convening of a Constituent Assembly involving all of the people<sup>5</sup> and the formation of a democratic republic”.<sup>6</sup>

The Prague Conference, in its resolution ‘On the present conjuncture and the tasks of the party’ had explicitly confirmed the resolution of 1909 and had drawn particular attention to the fact that “as before, the agenda includes, as a priority (*“prezhde vsego”*), prolonged work in the socialist education, organization and consolidation of the advanced masses of the proletariat”.<sup>7</sup> The delegate for Baku, Sergo Ordzhonikidze, had objected to the inclusion of “prolonged” in the resolution, on the grounds that an emphasis on long-term education reflected the policy of the *Vpered* (*Forward*) group, which, he pointed out, had had a significant representation at the Conference of 1909, but was now “a thing of the past”.<sup>8</sup> Ordzhonikidze had been a student at Lenin’s Party school in Longjumeau in the summer of 1911 and his remark reflected the divergence that existed by this time between the ‘Leninist-Bolshevik’ conception of the transition to socialism and the theory of cultural revolution that had been developed by Alexander Bogdanov. However, given that the Prague Conference rejected Ordzhonikidze’s amendment, we are entitled to infer that the idea of socialism as a long-term objective, to be achieved not only by political and economic reform, but also through a transformation in the consciousness of the proletariat, was not confined to Bogdanov and his followers.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In the text, *“vsenarodnogo”* – “of all the people”.

<sup>6</sup> See *Izveshchenie Tsentral’nogo Komiteta Rossiiskoi S.-D. Rabochei Partii o sostoyavsheisya ocherednoi obshchepartiinnoi konferentsii* (Paris, n.d., probably 1909), p.4.

<sup>7</sup> See ‘O sovremennom momente i zadachi partii’, in *KPSS v rezolyutsiyakh i resheniyakh s’ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK 1898–1917* (8<sup>th</sup> edition, revised and augmented, Moscow, 1970), p.329–330.

<sup>8</sup> See *Konferentsiya RSDRP 1912 goda. Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow, 2008), p.448.

<sup>9</sup> Lars T. Lih has perceived in an article by Lenin and Zinoviev, “Several Theses”, written between 6–9 October 1915 and published in *Sotsial-Demokrat* No.47, October 13, 1915, a commitment to pursuing the democratic revolution “to the end”. For the Conference of the RSDRP of January 1909 and for Lenin’s Conference of 1912 the work of the “revolutionary government” ended with the convening of a Constituent Assembly. Lenin and Zinoviev pointed out that much depends upon who convenes the Constituent Assembly. In September 1915 the Zimmerwald Left, whose resolution had already been published in *Sotsial-Demokrat* No. 45–46 for 11 October 1915) had also maintained that the time was ripe for the “construction of socialism” (see Note 17 below). However, this policy had never been formally adopted in any RSDRP or Bolshevik forum. One can therefore speak, as of 1915, of a “new Leninism” or of a new “Maximalism”, in so far as not only Lenin contributed to the formulation of this policy. See Lars T. Lih, ‘The Ironic Triumph of Old Bolshevism: the Debates of April 1917 in Context’, *Russian History* 38 (2011) 199–242.

A co-founder, with Lenin, of the Bolshevik fraction of the RSDRP in 1904, Alexander Bogdanov, following his expulsion in June 1909 from the leadership of the Bolshevik Centre, had outlined his programme of cultural revolution to a cohort of party and worker-activists who had attended a Social Democratic Party School hosted by Maxim Gorky on the island of Capri in December 1909.<sup>10</sup> Cultural revolution became a component of the platform of the *Vpered* group that was formed that same month.<sup>11</sup> However, in December 1911, following a clash of policy and personality between his own group of cultural Marxists and a group around Grigor Alexinsky, who wished to revert to conventional tactics of political opposition and subversion, Bogdanov resigned from the *Vpered* group.<sup>12</sup> It was not only for Ordzhonikidze that by 1912, *Vpered* was “a thing of the past”: on 7 March 1912 Bogdanov declined an invitation to rejoin the group in the following terms:

Recently, in the course of my work, I have become increasingly aware of the enormous importance of our revolutionary task in the field of culture. I have resolved to devote myself to this task when the time is ripe, and when the right people and sufficient means are available I shall devote all my efforts to the organization of a ‘Union of Socialist Culture’ which, as I conceive of it, will not be a party faction and will not compete with specifically political organizations, although at the outset, of course, it will find support only in the revolutionary wing of social democracy....<sup>13</sup>

The idea that European revolutions, and, a fortiori, the Russian Revolution, could realistically only initiate the construction of socialism, and that this process needed to be as much cultural and educational as political and economic, was predicated upon a view of the working classes of both Russia and Western Europe as culturally backward.<sup>14</sup> The inability of workers and of

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<sup>10</sup> On the division of Bolshevism at this time, see my article “Anti-Leninist Bolshevism”: the Forward group of the RSDRP, *Canadian Slavonic Papers* (1981), No.2.

<sup>11</sup> On the Capri School and the formation of the *Vpered* group, see Jutta Scherrer, ‘Les Écoles du parti de Capri et de Bologne: La formation de l’intelligentsia du parti’, *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, 1978 (XIX), No.3; John Biggart, “Anti-Leninist Bolshevism”: the *Forward* Group of the RSDRP, *Canadian Slavonic Papers* (1981), No.2; and Vittorio Strada, *l’Altra rivoluzione. Gor’kij-Lunacharskij-Bogdanov. La “Scuola di Capri” e la “Constuzione di Dio”* (Capri, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Bogdanov to the Geneva Group of *Vpered*, in N.S.Antonova i N.V.Drozdova (eds.), *Neizvestny Bogdanov, Kn.2: A.A.Bogdanov i gruppa RSDRP “Vpered” 1908-1914* (Moscow, 1995), pp.208-209.

<sup>13</sup> Bogdanov to the Geneva Group of *Vpered*, 7 March 1912, *Vpered* Archive, Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire, Geneva. For the development of Bogdanov’s thinking on the “Union of Socialist Culture” during the war years, see James D. White, ‘Alexander Bogdanov’s Conception of Proletarian Culture’, *Revolutionary Russia* (2013), 26:1, pp.52–70.

<sup>14</sup> At the end of 1917 Bogdanov wrote that not only the Russian working class but all social strata in Russia, had, since February, provided ample evidence of their “low cultural level” (“malokul’turnost”). See ‘*Sud’by rabochei partii v nyneshnei revolyutsii*’ [‘Fortunes of the Workers’ Party in the Present Revolution’], *Novaya zhizn’*, No. 19 (26 January/8 February 1918). The second part of this article, which was based on a lecture delivered on 19 December 1917, appeared in *Novaya zhizn’*, No. 20 (27 January/9 February 1918).

socialist parties to prevent the outbreak of the First World War convinced Bogdanov of the need for a cultural revolution, the pursuit of which, like the political and economic revolution, he considered should be an international undertaking. During 1913 he had contributed articles to the Bolshevik newspaper *Pravda*, published legally in St. Petersburg, but when Lenin succeeded in persuading the paper's editors to terminate his position as a paid contributor (*sotrudnik*) he contemplated abandoning not only party politics but even publicistic work. In a letter to the editors of the Menshevik paper, *Novaya rabochaya gazeta*, in January 1914 he declared that he would now devote himself "to my scientific-educational task and pursue other activities where I shall be more free and, I hope more useful."<sup>15</sup>

However, following the revolution of February 1917, Bogdanov did engage in publicistic work. Employed as a lecturer in the Cultural-Educational Department of the Moscow Soviet of Workers' Deputies, he produced a significant number of signed articles and brochures. The line that he followed was consistent with the policy that had been adopted at the All-Russian Conference of the RSDRP of January 1909. In these writings, notably in *Problems of Socialism (Voprosy sotsializma)*<sup>16</sup>, Bogdanov predicted the spread of revolution throughout Europe, but his conception of these revolutions differed from that of the "Zimmerwald Left",<sup>17</sup> the "Zimmerwald Maximalists" or the "Maximalists", as he described them.<sup>18</sup>

In the left, Internationalist wing of our Social Democracy there currently prevails a so-called "Maximalist" view... The essence of this view consists in the idea that the time is ripe for the

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<sup>15</sup> Letter to the editors, *Novaya rabochaya gazeta*, 17 January 1914.

<sup>16</sup> *Voprosy sotsializma* (Moscow, 1918). References here will be to the re-edition of this text in *Voprosy sotsializma. Raboty raznykh let* (Moscow, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Lenin's 'On the defeat of one's own government in the Imperialist War' ('O porazhenii svoego pravitel'stva v Imperialisticheskoi voine') had been published in *Sotsial-Demokrat* (Geneva), No.43 for 26 July 1915. The resolution finally agreed by the left caucus at Zimmerwald is said to have been based on drafts by both Lenin and Karl Radek. It called for a "socialist reorganization of the leading capitalist countries" and claimed that "objective conditions have already ripened for the realization of this." This resolution was not accepted for discussion at the Conference but was published, together with the Manifesto and resolutions of the Conference in *Sotsial-Demokrat* (Geneva), No.45-46, 11 October 1915 under the title 'Vsemirnaya voina i zadachi sotsialdemokratii'. See *Leninskii sbornik XIV* (Moscow, 1930), pp. 165, 177 footnote No.1, and 196 footnote No.2. The transformation of the war in each country into a civil war was advocated at Kiental in April 1916 by 12 delegates around Lenin.

<sup>18</sup> For Bogdanov, the principal "Maximalist" was of course, Lenin. In *Voprosy sotsializma* he derided a commentary on the "Zimmerwald Maximalists" that had appeared in the journal *Letopis'* (1916), No.9, without naming the author, Lev Kamenev. In 1917 Bogdanov included Trotsky amongst the "Maximalists", specifically for his theory of "uninterrupted revolution". The economist, Yurii Larin, was also so labelled. See *Voprosy sotsializma. Raboty raznykh let* (Moscow, 1990), p. 320 [Kamenev]; pp.343-344 [Trotsky]; pp.347-348 [Lenin and Trotsky]; and pp.334, 342 [Larin]

realization of socialism and that the crisis being experienced at present by humanity is, in fact, a *crisis of the transition from capitalism to socialism*... the proletariat of Europe and America will first implement socialism in their own countries and will then assist the workers of backward countries, like Russia, to do the same.<sup>19</sup>

For Bogdanov, the social basis of the Russian revolution had been not proletarian but “popular” (“*narodnaya*”) and its appropriate outcome was a democratic republic.<sup>20</sup> The idea that socialism could be immediately introduced in Russia was a Maximalist utopia.<sup>21</sup> Nor would there be any immediate socialist revolution in Europe, though there were prospects for a number of “democratic” revolutions.<sup>22</sup> In an era of democratic revolution, the immediate task of the proletariat was to “direct its efforts towards mastering its organizational capacities and applying these to the tasks in hand”. This was its “cultural programme.”<sup>23</sup> The cultural programme for would require “a *global science of construction*” - a universal organization science.<sup>24</sup> The programme for cultural development would be supported in countries abroad through the agency of an International that would replace the institution that had been destroyed by the war.<sup>25</sup>

By the autumn of 1917, with the help of his erstwhile comrade in the *Vpered* group and now Commissar for the Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Bogdanov was able to put his project for a “Union of Socialist Culture” into practice: on 28 November 1917, following a Conference of Cultural Enlightenment Societies convened in Petrograd from 16-19 October (208 cultural-

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<sup>19</sup> *Voprosy sotsializma. Raboty raznykh let*, p.305.

<sup>20</sup> “The Constituent Assembly must ... lay the foundations of a popular régime (“*osnovy narodnogo stroya*”): a democratic republic, full civil liberties, equal status for all nationalities, abolition of the social estates.” *Zadachi rabochikh v revolyutsii* (Moscow, March 1917)

<sup>21</sup> *Voprosy sotsializma. Raboty raznykh let*, p.348.

<sup>22</sup> *Voprosy sotsializma. Raboty raznykh let*, p.343. Bogdanov here lists the changes that such revolutions would have to implement.

<sup>23</sup> *Voprosy sotsializma. Raboty raznykh let*, p.332.

<sup>24</sup> *Voprosy sotsializma. Raboty raznykh let*, p.310.

<sup>25</sup> A. Bogdanov, *Put' k sotsializmu* (Moscow, 1917), p.28. For other writings of Bogdanov on the subject of the International, see N. Maksimov, ‘Internatsional’ and A. Bogdanov, ‘Mezhdunarodnaya revolyutsiya’ [‘International revolution’], both in *Izvestiya of the Moscow Soviet of Workers’ Deputies*, No.38 (18 April) 1917; and ‘Na puti k Internatsionalu’ [‘Towards the International’], first published in *Izvestiya of the Moscow Soviet of Workers’ Deputies*, No.49, (2 May) 1917 and republished in *Uroki pervykh shagov revolyutsii* (Moscow, July 1917), p.19.

educational organizations had been represented), the “Proletarian Cultural-Enlightenment Organization” or “Proletkult” was founded.<sup>26</sup>

The history of the Proletkult and of Lenin’s hostility towards it have been well described in works by Zenovia Sochor and Lynn Mally and need not be revisited here.<sup>27</sup> What is less well known is the history of the attempt to place the ‘cultural revolution’ on an international footing. During the First Congress of the Communist International held in Moscow in March 1919, the leaders of the Moscow Proletkult, whose Second Conference was concurrently in session, took steps to introduce Comintern delegates to Proletkult ideas by inviting them to attend an exhibition of work produced in the Moscow Proletkult.<sup>28</sup> Simultaneously, the Moscow Proletkult journal, *Gorn*, advocated the formation of an International Proletkult: there was a need to publish brochures and conference proceedings and distribute the work of proletarian writers abroad; contacts should be established with activists in other countries; a permanent International Bureau should be formed; a common working language should be adopted and this language should be taught in all schools and used in international meetings and in all Proletkult publications.<sup>29</sup>

The convening of the Second Congress of the Comintern in Petrograd (19-22 July 1920) and Moscow (23 July-7 August 1920) provided the opportunity for putting these ideas into practice. On 12 August, at a post-Congress meeting of Comintern delegates and Proletkult leaders, a Provisional International Bureau of the Proletkult was formed under the Presidency of Anatoly

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<sup>26</sup> The only report of the proceedings of the conference of October appeared in *Rabochii put'*, 1917, No.38 (17 October). This was reprinted in *Oktyabr'skaya Revolyutsiya i Fabzavkomy*, II (Moscow, 1927), pp.89–90. For the formal announcement see I.Smironov, ‘K istorii Proletkul'ta’, *Voprosy literatury* (1968), No.1, p.113, citing the Petrograd journal *Proletarskaya kul'tura*, January 1918. This journal is not to be confused with the later Proletkult journal of the same name, which was published in Moscow.

<sup>27</sup> Zenovia A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture. The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy* (Ithica and London, 1988); Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future. The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1990).

<sup>28</sup> See report on the Second Conference of the Moscow Proletkult of 20–25 March 1919 in *Proletarskaya kul'tura* (1919), No.7–8 (April–May), p.72. The Comintern delegates who attended included Max Albert (Germany), Fritz Platten (Switzerland), and Henri Gilbeaux (France).

<sup>29</sup> *Gorn* (1919), No.2/3, p.33. Bogdanov did not favour artificial languages like Volapük or Esperanto. He envisaged that English, the language that dominated in international markets, and the language of the largest industrial proletariat, should provide the basis of the future “single language of humankind”. In the Proletarian University workers were to be encouraged to study foreign languages; “national-craft” (“*natsional'no-kustarnye*”) tendencies in language study were to be discouraged. See ‘Proletarskaya kul'tura i mezhdunarodny yazyk (Tezisy Doklada, 1919)’ [‘Proletarian culture and international language: Theses, 1919’], in A. Bogdanov, *O proletarskoi kul'ture* (Leningrad, Moskva, 1925), pp.328–332. In this text Bogdanov’s disparagement of “small and backward nations” bears the imprint of Marx’s own evolutionist attitude towards “non-historic peoples”.

Lunacharsky and the General Secretaryship of Pavel Ivanovich Lebedev-Polyansky (both had been members of *Vpered*).<sup>30</sup> On 14 August 1920 *Izvestiya* announced the formation of the Provisional International Bureau and published its declaration: ‘To brother proletarians of all countries!’ (*‘Brat’yam Proletariyam Vsekh Stran!’*).

Though Bogdanov was not a member of the Provisional International Bureau, the formation of the ‘Kultintern’ may well have been one of the reasons why Lenin, for whom almost all of Bogdanov’s ideas were anathema, decided to take action against the Proletkult in 1920, for in the same issue of 14 August *Izvestiya* had reported that the Russian Proletkult now claimed no fewer than 400,000 members, of whom 80,000 were actively participating in studio work; as many as sixteen journals were being distributed.<sup>31</sup> On 17 August 1920, during a meeting of *Sovnarkom*, Lenin enquired of the Deputy Commissar for Enlightenment, M.N. Pokrovsky:

1) What is the legal status of the Proletkult? 2) Who is in charge of it? and 3) How are they appointed? 4) What else is there of importance to be known about the status and role of the Proletkult and the results of its work?<sup>32</sup>

On Lenin’s initiative, Party policy towards the Proletkult was discussed at Politbureau meetings of 9, 11 and 14 October 1920, in the course of which he sought to have the Proletkult brought under the administration of a State Committee for Political Enlightenment (*Glavpolitprosvet*) that had been set up in September 1920 under the chairmanship of E.A. Litkens, former head of the Education Department of the Moscow Soviet.<sup>33</sup> On 14 October the Politbureau commissioned a report by Pokrovsky and Litkens on the relationship between Proletkult and *Glavpolitprosvet*, and on

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<sup>30</sup> The foreign members of the Provisional International Bureau were: Wilhelm Herzog and Max Barthel (Germany); John Reed (USA); Tom Quelch and the Manchester shop-steward, William McLaine (Great Britain); Karl Toman (Austria); War (Eduard) van Overstraeten (Belgium); Raymond Lefebvre (France); Nicola Bombacci (Italy); Haavard Langseth (Norway); Walther Bringolf and Jules Humbert-Droz (Switzerland). There was also formed an Executive Committee of Lunacharsky, Lebedev-Polyansky, McLaine, Herzog, Bombacci and Humbert-Droz. See *Proletarskaya kul’tura* (1920), No.17/19, pp.1–5. I am grateful to Fabian Thompsett for his precise identification of these individuals.

<sup>31</sup> *Izvestiya*, 14 August 1920.

<sup>32</sup> I.S. Smirnov, ‘Leninskaya kontseptsiya kul’turnoi revolyutsii i kritika Proletkul’ta’, in: *Istoricheskaya nauka i nekotorye problemy sovremennosti* (Moscow, 1969), p.71. In V.I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol.51 (Moscow, 1970), p.265 this document said to have been written “no later than 20 August”.

<sup>33</sup> Litkens was a friend of Preobrazhensky and a protégé of Trotsky, but his appointment, which represented a victory for the opponents of Lunacharsky in the Moscow Soviet, also served the purposes of Lenin. See E.B. Genkina, *Gosudarstvennaya deyatel’nost’ V.I. Lenina - 1921–1923* (Moscow, 1969), p.423; and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment. Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky* (Cambridge, 1970), p.176.

the basis of this report the Politbureau on 10 November 1920, in its resolution ‘On the forms of the merger of Proletkult and *Narkompros* (the People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment)’ decided to deny the Proletkult any educational role in politics and science and to place its other cultural activities under close Party and state control.<sup>34</sup> Grigory Zinoviev, Lenin’s chief collaborator in the ouster of Bogdanov from the Bolshevik Centre in 1909, and now Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, was asked to draft a circular letter of the Central Committee of the Communist Party on the Proletkult, and “at a suitable time to dissolve the International Proletkult”.<sup>35</sup>

Despite this instruction, and thanks, perhaps, to some support for Bogdanov within the Politbureau by Bukharin,<sup>36</sup> the Proletkult leadership was able during 1921 and 1922 to continue with its efforts to organize internationally.<sup>37</sup> At its Plenum of 15-20 May 1921 the Proletkult Central Committee, having received a report from Lebedev-Polyansky, resolved:

1. To convene a meeting of the International Bureau of the Proletkult with delegates of the Third Congress of the Comintern;
2. To raise with the International Bureau the question of work with Proletkults abroad and at international trade union congresses and congresses of Communist youth;
3. To raise the question of the formation of Proletkults abroad with the Central Committee of the RKP;

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Vypiska iz protokola No 13 (61) zasedaniya Plenuma TsK ot 10 Noyavrya 1920 goda (vecher) [‘Excerpt from Protocol No.13 (61) of the session of the Plenum of Central Committee of 10 November 1920 (Evening)’]’ in: *V.I. Lenin o literature i iskusstve*, (Moscow, 3rd edition, 1967), p.594.

<sup>35</sup> This instruction is not included in the ‘excerpt’ of the resolution of the Central Committee of 10 November 1920. It is cited, however, from documentation in Central Party Archives (RGASPI, f.17) by I.S. Smirnov in his ‘Leninskaya kontsepsiya kul’turnoi revolyutsii i kritika Proletkul’ta’, in *Istoricheskaya nauka i nekotorye problemy sovremennosti* (Moscow, 1969), p.82.

<sup>36</sup> On the affinities (but also disaffinities) between the cultural theories of Bogdanov and Bukharin, see my ‘Bukharin and the Origins of the Proletarian Culture Debate’, *Soviet Studies* XXXIX, No.2 (April 1987), pp.229–246 and ‘Bukharin’s Theory of Cultural Revolution’, in: Anthony Kemp-Welch (ed.), *The Ideas of Nikolai Bukharin* (Oxford, 1992), pp.131–158.

<sup>37</sup> See the claim of the Moscow Bolshevik, Dodonova, in June 1921, that the “hostile” (*sic*) attitude of the Moscow Soviet had changed completely thanks to support received from the Moscow Committee of the RKP (b). RGALI, f.1230.1.1302. Trotsky later described Bukharin as the Proletkult’s “protector”. See Protocols of a meeting convened by the Press Department of the Central Committee of the RKP(b), 9 May 1924, in: *Voprosy kul’tury pri diktature proletariata* (Moscow/Leningrad, 1925), p.101.



4. To consider sending a group of proletarian poets and representatives of the Proletkult to the West, including the Baltic states.<sup>38</sup>

We have no information on Proletkult initiatives during the Third Congress of the Comintern (22 June - 12 July 1921), but we do know that on 25 July the Presidium of the Proletkult resolved to convene a meeting of representatives of the International Proletkult and to attempt to form Proletkult Sections within an 'International Union of Communist Culture' (*Mezhdunarodny Soyuz Kommunisticheskoi Kul'tury*). On 8 August 1921 a meeting of the Proletkult Presidium under Valerian Pletnev further resolved that these Proletkult Sections should in due course convene an International Congress of Proletkults with a view to founding an International Proletkult.<sup>39</sup> During 1922 the Proletkult leaders continued with their efforts to expand outside of Soviet Russia. On 20 April 1922 *Izvestiya* reported that Bogdanov was attending to the formation of the Proletkult in Great Britain.<sup>40</sup> On 27 October 1922, members of the Central Committee of the Proletkult met in Moscow with delegates who had arrived for the Fourth Congress of the Comintern (5 November - 4 December 1922). Pletnev was unable to report any great progress in the international sphere: the sections that had been founded by Lunacharsky in 1920 were largely moribund; but delegates should re-launch and support this international venture.<sup>41</sup>

During 1922 and 1923 Proletkult journals reported from time to time on the formation of Proletkult-type institutions abroad: in *Gorn* No.1 for 1922, a certain V. Kolky reported on the activities of a German Proletkult which had apparently encountered only indifference from the majority of workers' organizations, including the German Communist Party.<sup>42</sup> In its issue No. 8 for

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<sup>38</sup> *Proletarskaya kul'tura* (1921), No. 20–21, pp.35–36.

<sup>39</sup> RGALI, f.1230.1.7. The meeting was attended by Pletnev, Ignatov, Blagonravov, Dodonova and Ozol.

<sup>40</sup> Bogdanov was in London from December 1921 to early 1922, advising the Soviet diplomatic and trade representative, Leonid Krasin, who had been appointed to lead the Soviet delegation to the Genoa Conference of 10 April–19 May 1922), See TsGA RSFSR, f.482, op.42, d.590, l. 1– 2 [this archive has now been incorporated into the State Archive of the Russian Federation - GARF]; and *Izvestiya*, 20 April 1922, cited in Annie Sabatier, 'Le Proletkult International', *Action Poétique* (1974) No. 59 (Septembre), p.296.

<sup>41</sup> RGALI, f.1230.1.9. The meeting was attended by, for the Proletkult, Pletnev, Faidysh, Kravchunovsky (Head of the Arts Department), Boris Arvatov (member of the Scientific Collegium) and Tumanov (of the Moscow Proletkult); and for the Comintern by Tasca, Gramsci, Marabini, Fersterlin (Germany) and Davidovich (Switzerland).

<sup>42</sup> Sabatier was unable to find any trace of the Proletkult in Germany, where the idea appears to have encountered the hostility of the KPD, which, following Lenin, favoured only the assimilation of bourgeois culture. See Sabatier, *op.cit.*, p.297. However, Fabian Tompsett has drawn attention to a group around the journal *Die Aktion*, edited by Franz Pfemfert, which was critical of the KPD and from 1920 increasingly supportive of the KAPD. In 1919 *Die Aktion* published a translation of Bogdanov's 'Science and the working class' (and as a booklet the following year). In May and

1923, *Gorn* carried a more positive report from Turin on the Professional Communist School of the Italian Communist Party, and on a Proletkult Institute which included Antonio Gramsci amongst its members (Gramsci had attended the Second Plenum of the Comintern in June 1922, and he and Angelo Tasca had been amongst the Comintern delegates who met with Pletnev and his colleagues on 27 October 1922 before attending the Fourth Congress).<sup>43</sup> In Czechoslovakia, according to one “K. Internsky”, following initiatives taken in 1920 and 1921 by the Czechoslovak Communist Party, there now existed 17 provincial and 67 local Proletkults. These enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy. An extensive lecture series on the question of socialism and culture had been organized in Prague and in the provinces. The Czechoslovak Proletkult had its own publishing house and a Communist University had been founded in Prague.<sup>44</sup> In the same issue of *Gorn* the worker-intellectual Tom Quelch reported that the Plebs League was the closest institution in England to the Proletkult; however, he and a group of like-minded colleagues had held a meeting with a view to founding a more exact replica. Quelch had sent to Russia a copy of Eden and Cedar Paul’s recent book, *Proletcult*.<sup>45</sup>

During 1923 the Central Committee of the Proletkult took stock of international developments in a report entitled ‘Proletkults in the West’ (*Proletkul’ty na zapade*). In addition to the reports described above, information had been received from comrades in Winnipeg in Canada

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June 1921 the journal published Bogdanov’s ‘What is proletarian poetry?’ See Fabian Tompsett, ‘Towards a Tektology of Tektology’ and his translation of Franz Seiwert’s ‘Open letter to comrade Bogdanov (1921)’, in *Culture as Organization in Early Soviet Thought*, edited by Pia Tikka et al. Helsinki: Aalto University, forthcoming 2016.

<sup>43</sup> See RGALI, f.1230.1.460. This report was supplied by Terracini. Gramsci and Zino Zini had attempted as early as 1920 to create ‘Institutes of Proletarian Culture’ and Sabatier notes their existence from January 1921. See Sabatier, op.cit., p. 297. On the relation of Gramsci’s thought to that of Bogdanov see Zenovia A. Sochor, ‘Was Bogdanov Russia’s answer to Gramsci?’, *Studies in Soviet Thought* 22 (1981), pp.59–81; and Craig Brandist, ‘The Cultural and Linguistic Dimensions of Hegemony: Aspects of Gramsci’s Debt to Early Soviet Cultural Policy’, *Journal of Romance Studies*, 13, 3: 24–43. According to Brandist, who is preparing, with Peter Thomas, an account of Gramsci’s time in Russia, Gramsci may have met Bogdanov in June 1922, and at a meeting with the Central Committee of the Proletkult in December 1922. See Craig Brandist, *The Dimensions of Hegemony: Language, Culture and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Leiden, 2016), p.9, footnote 32 and p.19, footnote 52.

<sup>44</sup> According to Sabatier, the Czechoslovak Communist Party took the initiative in founding a Proletkult in August 1921 under the direction of Stanislav Kostka Neumann, who was also the editor of a journal of the same name which was published from 1922 to 1924. Neumann in 1919 had founded the ‘Socialist Council of Cultural Workers’ the object of which had been a rapprochement between workers and intellectuals. See Sabatier, op.cit., p.297.

<sup>45</sup> See Tom Quelch, ‘Zachatki Proletkul’ta v Anglii’ [‘Embryonic beginnings of the Proletkult in England’], *Gorn* (1923), No.8. Quelch had been a member of the International Bureau of the Proletkult formed during the Second Congress of the Comintern in August 1920. For the membership of the International Bureau, see *Proletarskaya kul’tura* (1920), No.17/19, pp.1–5 and note 29. See also Eden and Cedar Paul, *Proletcult (Proletarian Culture)* (London, Leonard Parsons, n.d.). Intrinsic evidence suggests this book was published after February 1921.

and from a group of Russian proletarian writers in New York. In France some of the ideas of the Proletkult had found expression in Henri Barbusse's journal *Clarté*.<sup>46</sup> For England the Proletkult report refers to a journal edited by Tom Quelch and to the book of Eden and Cedar Paul.<sup>47</sup> The Pauls were, by this time, amongst the most enthusiastic supporters of the Proletkult idea outside of Russia. They were associated with the Labour College Movement and were members of the Plebs League as well as of the British Communist Party. They were familiar with some of the work of Bogdanov, Lunacharsky and Lebedev-Polyansky,<sup>48</sup> and had probably met Bogdanov during his visit to Britain in 1922. One of them, at least, had participated in the work of the Educational Commission of the Fourth Congress of the Comintern.<sup>49</sup>

The activism of the Pauls, against a background of growing participation in Labour Colleges in Britain, appears to have been an important factor in alerting the leadership of the Russian Communist Party to the dangers posed by the spread of Proletkult ideas.<sup>50</sup> In its issue of July 1923 the journal of the Plebs League, *The Plebs*, had published an exchange of correspondence between the Dutch socialist, Henrietta Roland Holst,<sup>51</sup> and the Pauls. In their response to the enquiry of Holst whether the Communist Party in Great Britain possessed its own educational organizations and, if so, how these were organized, the Pauls had replied that the British Communist Party had been in existence for only two and a half years and was very small, whereas "the re-education of the working class" had been in progress for fourteen years under the aegis of the Independent Labour Party, the Parliamentary Labour Party and a number of trade unions.<sup>52</sup> Eden and Cedar Paul

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<sup>46</sup> Founded by Henri Barbusse in September 1919, *Clarté* had from the very beginning aligned itself with the Comintern. Its objective was not working class education but rather the mobilization of the radical intelligentsia. Its founding committee included Thomas Hardy, Vicente Blasco-Ibanez, Upton Sinclair, H.G. Wells and Stefan Zweig. At various times Bernard Shaw, Rabindranath Tagore, Heinrich Mann, Bertrand Russell, Aldous Huxley and Rainer Marie Rilke were associated. See Sabatier, *op.cit.*, pp.299–300.

<sup>47</sup> RGALI, f.1230.1.460. This document is undated but must precede the change of policy of November 1923 (see below in text). It refers to the book of Eden and Cedar Paul.

<sup>48</sup> See the bibliographical appendix to Eden and Cedar Paul, *Proletcult (Proletarian Culture)*.

<sup>49</sup> See *The Plebs* (1923), No.7 (July).

<sup>50</sup> The Labour Colleges had 16,909 part-time students enrolled in 698 classes in 1923–24. By 1925–26 there were 30,329 students in 1,237 classes. See Jonathan Rée, *Proletarian Philosophers. Problems in Socialist Culture in Britain 1900–1940* (Oxford, 1984), p.141.

<sup>51</sup> Henriette Goverdine Anna Roland Holst-van der Schalk (1869–1952).

<sup>52</sup> "Numerically, the labour colleges were far more important than the Communist classes: in 1934 the NCLC claimed 11,993 students and by 1925 the figure had risen to 30,398; meanwhile the total membership of the Party was no more

favoured a united front in the field of revolutionary education. During the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in Moscow in November - December 1922 they had outlined for the benefit of the Educational Commission the special features of the movement for Independent Working Class Education in the Anglo-Saxon countries. In the spirit of the Russian Proletkult they had argued that “any effort to subordinate this movement at the present time to the direct control of the Communist Party is doomed to failure and would hinder not only the development of Communism but also Marxist education in these countries”.<sup>53</sup> For the Pauls, revolutionary education ought to be organized as a section of the Communist International, but this section should be “independent of the political wing”. “We insisted that, above all, the ECCI should call an international congress in which all organizations and individuals interested in the revolutionary-pedagogical movement from a Marxist and class point of view would take part and so facilitate the formation of an international organization similar to the *Profintern*.”<sup>54</sup>

By this time, however, the hopes of Eden and Cedar Paul for what one might describe as an ‘open Marxist’ approach to working class education were already doomed. During 1920 and 1921 the policy of the Communist Party of Great Britain had been that working class education should be “under the guidance and direction of those specialising in that particular field.”<sup>55</sup> In this period the Party newspaper, *The Communist*, had welcomed the formation of the International Bureau of the Proletkult and the Pauls’ publication, *Creative Revolution* (1919) in which they had proposed that the slogan of “dictatorship of the proletariat” be replaced by that of “ergatocracy” or “Workers’ Control”.<sup>56</sup> However, in 1922, the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in its resolution ‘On the Educational Question’ issued instructions that socialist education should be brought under Party control:

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than 5,000, of whom fewer than eight hundred attended educational classes”. Stuart MacIntyre, *A Proletarian Science. Marxism in Britain 1917–1933* (Cambridge, 1980), p.83.

<sup>53</sup> *The Plebs* (1923), No.7 (July).

<sup>54</sup> *The Plebs* (1923), No.7 (July). See also Eden and Cedar Paul, *Proletcult*, p.89. Bogdanov’s reference in a speech delivered in Moscow in late December 1922 or early January 1923 to the Pauls’ support of the idea of an independent educational international was one of the matters that aroused the wrath of the party leadership. See Ya. Yakovlev, ‘Menshevizm v Proletkul’tovskei odezhde’ [‘Menshevism dressed up as the Proletkult’], *Pravda*, 4 January 1923 and Bogdanov’s reply to Yakovlev in *Pravda*, 12 January 1923.

<sup>55</sup> MacIntyre, *op.cit.*, p.81, citing Party chairman Arthur MacManus, ‘Education towards Communism,’ *The Plebs* (1920), No.12.

<sup>56</sup> See Rée, *op.cit.*, pp.50, 150, citing *The Communist* (1920), Nos. 8, 10 and 13.

In the countries where the revolutionary education of the workers is carried on by special organizations outside the Communist Party, this goal is to be achieved by the systematic activity of the Communists in these organizations. It is desirable that Party educational committees be created in the Central Executive committees of the Parties to conduct this educational activity. All members of the Party who belong to educational institutions that are not controlled directly by the Party, such as the proletarian culture organizations, workers' educational clubs, proletarian universities, proletcult, labour colleges, etc., fall under the control of the Party and must follow its directives.<sup>57</sup>

The CPGB proceeded to apply this policy to the Plebs League and to the Labour Colleges. In that same year Harry Pollitt and Rajani Palm Dutte persuaded the CPGB to accept a 'Report on organization' inspired by the Comintern which recommended, inter alia, a more disciplined approach to education and propaganda, and called for *The Communist* to be replaced by a party newspaper for factory workers and a theoretical journal. In February 1923 *The Communist* was replaced by *Workers' Weekly*, a more narrow, 'political', publication which, under the editorship of Dutte, derided all preoccupation with socialist culture.<sup>58</sup> A new Party Training Department was founded, and by the end of 1923 "most leading Plebs figures had either left or were about to leave the Communist Party, while the majority of Communists left the League."<sup>59</sup>

These moves ran parallel with actions that were taken against Bogdanov and the Proletkult inside Russia. On 4 January 1923 Pravda published an article by Ya. Yakovlev, Secretary of the Agitprop Department of the Central Committee, entitled 'Menshevism dressed up as the Proletkult'. Yakovlev referred to a lecture delivered "recently" in the Club of Moscow University by "Citizen Bogdanov" and alleged an affinity between his ideas and those expressed by Julius Martov, Fedor Dan and Raphael Abramovich in the pages of *Sotsialisticheskii Vestnik*. Bogdanov had claimed the support of "certain English socialists" for his conception of a tri-partite labour movement - political, economic and cultural and of three Internationals ; logically, these ideas would lead to the formation of a new "group or party".<sup>60</sup> In March 1923 an extraordinary session of the Central

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<sup>57</sup> 'Resolution on the Educational Question', in *Resolutions and Theses of the Fourth Congress of the Communist International* (London., n.d.), p.87.

<sup>58</sup> Réé, *op.cit.*, pp.50-51.

<sup>59</sup> MacIntyre, *op.cit.*, 82. MacIntyre comments that "the split with the Labour Colleges undoubtedly weakened the educational influence of the Communist Party in the 1920s".

<sup>60</sup> Ya. Yakovlev, 'Menshevizm v Proletkul'tovskoi odezhde', *Pravda*, 4 January 1923. Yakovlev refers to Bogdanov's lecture having been given "a few days ago" ("*na dnyakh*"). In a reply to Yakovlev published in Pravda of 12 January 1923, Bogdanov pointed out that Eden and Cedar Paul were, in fact, members of the British Communist Party.

Committee of the Proletkult attended by representatives of fourteen Proletkults, of Agitprop and of *Glavpolitprosvet*, met to receive the report of an enquiry of Agitprop into its activities. This Plenum marked a turning point in the history of the Proletkult: it was obliged to abandon its pretensions to autonomy and to accept a subordinate role in the Soviet system of cultural-educational work.<sup>61</sup>

In November 1923 the Central Committee of the Proletkult (it was by this time little more than a mouthpiece of Agitprop) re-defined its attitude towards Eden and Cedar Paul and spelt out its attitude to the idea of a 'Kultintern'. The Pauls were guilty of "touching naivety". "The independent education of the working class (Proletkult), independent of the Communist Party, creates, let us make no bones about it, the real possibility of a front against the Communist Party". The position of the Russian Proletkult in the international education of the working class was to be understood as follows:

1. The Russian Proletkult regards the struggle for proletarian culture as an integral part of the process of revolutionary struggle, led by the Communist Party;
2. Every struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie, including the struggle for proletarian culture, which is waged independently of the direct influence of the Communist Party, is considered by us to be harmful and if such a situation comes to pass (cultural struggle against the influence of the Communist Party) then it is the task of the Communists to fight for that influence within those organizations in which the non-Communist masses are organized;
3. Every cultural development, every cultural initiative, and above all those inspired by opponents of the Communist Party (as is the case in England), where it leads to the formation of a united front, albeit only in the cultural sphere, outside and against the Communist Party, even if draped in a Marxist banner, is a development which saps the energy of the Communist Party and weakens its influence over the masses;
4. The organization of a 'Kultintern' in parallel with the Communist International and independently, or even "quasi-independently" of the Comintern and of its member parties offers the opponents of the Comintern the opportunity of organizationally mobilizing and strengthening their positions. The question of the construction of proletarian culture is one that has matured and that needs to be dealt with organizationally on an international scale.
5. Only one organizational form is possible and that is:

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<sup>61</sup> 'On the practical forms of the work of the Proletkult', resolution of the Central Committee of the Proletkult, cited in N.I.Demidov, 'Iz istorii bor'by Kommunisticheskoi Partii za chistotu sotsialisticheskoi ideologii v periode NEPa (1921–1925 gg.)', *Moskovskii Ordena Trudovogo Krasnogo Znameni Inzhinerno-Stroitel'ny Institut imeni V.V.Kuibysheva* (Moscow, 1960), p.27, from TsPA IML, f.17.1.425

a) Proletkults must be set up in countries where there is a Communist Party. These Proletkults must be placed under the direct ideological (general directional) leadership of the Communist Party (as in the Soviet Union).

b) There must be a Proletkult Section attached to the Comintern as an organ which coordinates and directs on an international scale the struggle for proletarian culture.

This last must be a Party matter, and we shall be obliged to carry out this work and wage this struggle within anti-Communist organizations, propagating within them our own quite clear and distinct line.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

The short history of the 'Kultintern' provides a case study in the evolution of a monolithic, 'Leninist-Communist', party-dominated model of the labour movement. Six years after the October Revolution and fourteen years after his removal by Lenin from the Bolshevik Centre, Alexander Bogdanov was still considered by Lenin and his supporters to be both an intellectual and a political threat. In September 1923, the Central Committee and Control Commission of the Communist Party set up an enquiry into opposition groupings under the chairmanship of Felix Dzerzhinsky. Bogdanov was arrested on 8 September 1923 on suspicion of being a leader of the *Rabochaya Pravda* group (Workers' Truth). Following interrogation by GPU officers and an interview with Dzerzhinsky, he was released over one month later, on 13 October 1923.<sup>63</sup> Following the death of Lenin in January 1924 the persecution of Bogdanov eased somewhat. With the support of Bukharin, Stalin, and the People's Commissar for Health, Nikolai Semashko, he was able to redirect his energies towards another of his interests, that of experimentation in exchange blood transfusion.<sup>64</sup> However, with the suppression of the Proletkult idea inside Russia and abroad, prospects for a diversity of approaches to the socialist education of the working class suffered lasting damage.

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<sup>62</sup> Document unanimously approved for publication by the Plenum of the Central Committee of the Proletkult of November 1923. RGALI, f.1230.1.1118.

<sup>63</sup> Documents relating to this episode, which will be the subject of a future article, have been published in *Neizvestny Bogdanov: A.A. Bogdanov (Malinovskii). Stat'i, doklady, pis'ma, i vospominaniya 1901-1928 gg. Kniga 1* (Edited by N.S.Antonova and N.V.Drozdoва, Moscow, 1995).

<sup>64</sup> On this aspect of Bogdanov's career, see *The Struggle for Viability. Collectivism through Blood Exchange*. Translated and edited with commentaries by Douglas W. Huestis, M.D. (Tucson, Arizona, 2001); and Nikolai Kremmentsov, *A Martian Stranded on Earth: Alexander Bogdanov, Blood Transfusions and Proletarian Science* (Chicago, 2011).