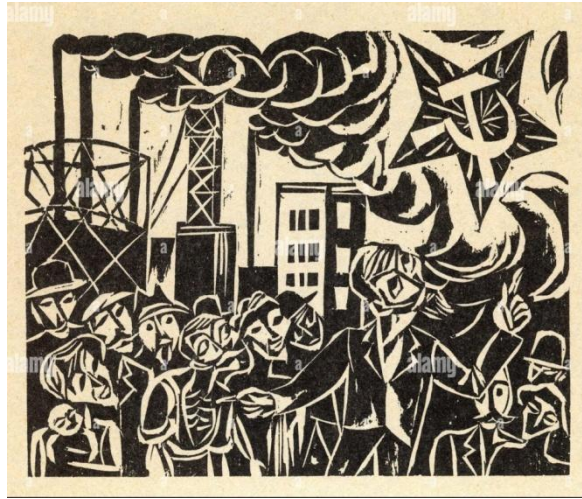


THE K.A.P.D.: A HISTORICAL EXAMPLE OF A COMBAT PARTY



"Die Aktion," Conrad Felix Müller. Woodcut, the Christmas star shines in the night of humanity

This text¹ is a project to re-expose and restore the historical importance of the Communist Workers' Party of Germany. This party is undoubtedly one of the best political expressions of the global revolutionary wave that began in 1917 and reached its general culmination in the late 1920s. Despite its importance to the revolutionary labor movement, this party and its actions have been caricatured, misrepresented, distorted, and condemned as "infantile" and "anarchist." But despite these various falsifications, *"the Communist Workers' Party of Germany (KAPD) is one of the most interesting currents in the German labor movement. It is the culmination of a process of rupture between the proletariat and social democracy that has been developing since the end of the 19th century and was amplified by the war and the Russian Revolution."* Le KAPD et le Mouvement Proletarien, June 1971, Invariance No. 1 series II.

In defense of the KAPD

The most debated issue in the Communist International was undoubtedly the KAPD's opposition to the various opportunist tactics inherited from social democracy and imposed by the CI and codified in its 21 conditions of affiliation. But also, its uncompromising defense of the need for an "ultra-formed" party that would act directly in the communist direction. This was summarized in its "Theses on the Role of the Party in the Proletarian Revolution," presented at the Second Congress of the CI in 1920².

"The appropriate historical form for the gathering of the most conscious, most enlightened, and most prepared proletarian fighters is the party. Since the goal of the proletarian revolution is communism, the party can only exist as a party whose program and spirit are communist. The party must be a programmatically elaborated whole, fused into a unified will, organized and disciplined from below. It must be the head and the weapon of the revolution." Thesis No. 7, Proletarier, July 1921.

¹Part of this contribution comes from an article entitled "The KAPD in Revolutionary Action," which we wrote in 1980 for the magazine Le communiste No. 7, the central organ of the G.C.I., before this group sank definitively into modernist revisionism and conspiracy theory.

²First published in French by the journal Invariance No. 8, October-December 1969.

This essential point of view, which refutes the legend of an anti-party attitude on the part of the vast majority of the KAPD, was vigorously confirmed during the debates on Radek's report on tactics at the Third Congress of the Communist International.³

"The proletariat needs a highly trained central party. It must be so. Every individual communist must be an unquestionable communist—that must be our goal—and must be capable of being a leader in the field. In these relations, in the struggles in which he is immersed, he must be able to stand firm, and what sustains him, what binds him, is his program. What compels them to act are the decisions that communists have made. And there the strictest discipline reigns. You cannot change anything, or you will be expelled or punished. It is, therefore, a party that is a nucleus, that knows what it wants, that is solidly established and has proven itself in battle, that no longer negotiates but is continually in struggle. Such a party can only be born when it has really thrown itself into the struggle, when it has broken with the old traditions of the trade union and party movement, with the reformist methods of which the trade union movement is a part, with parliamentarism." Speech by Hempel (pseudonym of Jan Appel)⁴.

The KAPD thus concentrated all the political advances of the time: anti-parliamentarianism, anti-trade unionism, the need for "unitary" class organizations, the need for a world party, internationalism, the rejection of "interclass" fronts and reformism, the assumption of military issues... but also the typical weaknesses of this first wave, which was purely working class and communist, but nevertheless dramatically minority. In Germany, most of the proletariat, exhausted by years of war, remained fundamentally reformist and did not want to embark on what it considered a dangerous adventure. Most workers wanted a return to peace and reforms compatible with the MPC⁵. The KAPD, although it was made up of thousands of militants (some 50,000) when it was founded in 1921, in order to survive in a situation that was no longer revolutionary (if it ever had been), it therefore had to become a small group that firmly defended the principles of revolution so that, in the event of a revolutionary outbreak, it could become the nucleus of the new communist movement.

"This position is quite similar to that of the Italian left after 1945, especially with regard to Bordiga. It also approximates that adopted by the 'working groups' advocated by Pannekoek." Note No. 4, p. 51, in Invariance No. 1, series II.

In this way, the KAPD was used as a "scapegoat" to discredit the entire left-wing communist opposition ("Italian," "Russian," "English," "Bulgarian," "Hungarian," "Belgian," etc.). It was mercilessly relegated to the dustbin of history, both in the Stalinist- n and Trotskyist traditions, by ideologues who agreed among themselves to "repeat" what the KAPD would have been, based solely on unfortunate formulations, hallway statements, slander, the bad reputation of some of its leaders, or even on what some individuals or tendencies later

³La gauche allemande, texts by the KAPD, the AAUD, the AAUE, and the KAI, notes and presentation by Denis Authier, p. 43, Invariance/La vieille taupe, 1973.

⁴Jan Appel, a worker at the Hamburg shipyards, made several trips to Moscow for the KAPD, including one with Franz Jung in 1920 in which he hijacked a fishing boat (described in F. Jung's book *Le chemin vers le bas*, Agone, Marseille, 2007). Appel participated in the Third Congress of the CI, where he fought a fierce battle against opportunism and the old, obsolete tactics that were gaining ground in the CI. After the breakup and disappearance of the KAPD, he continued his militant activity in various groups of the so-called "German-Dutch" communist left until the end of his life. In 1930, he was the main editor of the "Basic Principles of Communist Production and Distribution." Read on the website: Antonie Pannekoek archives: <https://aaap.be/Pages/Transition-fr-2014-Principes-Fondamentaux.html>

⁵On the situation of the proletariat in post-war Germany, read: S. Haffner, *Germany, 1918, A Revolution Betrayed*, Complexe, Brussels, 2001. For the general context of events, see: A. & D. Prudhommeaux, *Spartacus and the Berlin Commune, 1918-1919*, Spartacus, Paris, 1972.

became, ambiguous, even counterrevolutionary, among them the extremely minority, so-called "National Bolsheviks" of Wolffheim and Laufenberg.⁶ There was never any attempt to understand the KAPD as a product of the situation and an active factor that was courageously and uncompromisingly trying to change the increasingly unfavorable course of history.

“The first task of the Communist Party, both before and after the seizure of power, is—amid the confusion and oscillations of the proletarian revolution—to maintain clearly and unequivocally the sure compass of communism. The Communist Party must in all situations, tirelessly and without hesitation, show the proletarian masses the goal and the path, not only with words but with deeds. In all questions of political struggle before the seizure of power, it must most sharply drive home the separation between reformism and revolution. It must denounce any reformist solution as a patch, as a prolongation of the old system of exploitation, as a betrayal of the revolution, a betrayal of the interests of the working class as a whole. Just as there can be no common ground between exploiters and exploited, there can be no political link between revolution and reformism; the advent of social democratic reformism, under whatever guise it may hide, is today the greatest obstacle to revolution and the last hope of the bourgeoisie.” Thesis No. 8, Proletarier, July 1921.

The fact is that, with rare exceptions, there is almost no mention of the theoretical and, above all, practical importance of the KAPD and other organizations such as the workers' unions (AAU, AAUD, AAUD-E, and the "Men of Trust," revolutionary factory delegates) that constitute what is commonly referred to as the communist left in Germany⁷. Of course, many of today's "leftists" are content to repeat Lenin's incantations in his infantile disorder to feel formally connected to Lenin and, above all, to ignore the reality of the communist left in Germany in their texts and contributions.

"Lenin's 'infantile disorder' is the expression of the non-convergence of the revolutionary phenomenon in the Slavic area with that in the Western area; it is at the same time the rejection of the latter, which nevertheless finally broke with social democracy and was therefore more suited to communism.” Le KAPD et le Mouvement Prolétarien, p.8.

Herman Gorter,⁸ in his "Response to Lenin," was right to point out that Lenin did not attack the underlying arguments, but only the formulations, or worse, the private statements of this or that militant. Lenin could brilliantly criticize "libertarian" and democratic formulations such as the famous and false problem between "masses and leaders" and assert: *"Without a party hardened in struggle, without a party that enjoys the confidence of all that is honest in the class, without a party that knows how to observe the mood of the masses and influence them, it is impossible to wage this struggle (against the forces and traditions of the old society) successfully."* Lenin, *La maladie infantile du communisme* (Le "gauchisme"), p.34, Moscow editions, 1969. But who in Germany, apart from the KAPD, really tried to put such ideas into practice to organize a party of this kind? Contrary to all the preconceived ideas of the counterrevolution, it was undoubtedly the KAPD that made the most serious attempt to centralize and organize the revolutionary forces in Germany into a fully communist party, in accordance with Lenin's own orientation. On the other hand, the "official" party, the KPD and later the VKPD, had

⁶On this subject, see: Ph. Bourrinet, *Internationalisme contre « national-bolchevisme » : le deuxième congrès du KAPD*, 1er-4 août 1920, 'moto proprio', Paris, 2015.

⁷For more details, see: D. Authier & J. Barrot, *La gauche communiste en Allemagne ; 1918-1921*, Payot, Paris, 1976.

⁸For a biographical note on this important revolutionary activist, see: <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article216260>, note on GORTER Herman by Serge Cosseron, version posted online on June 23, 2020, last modified on May 2, 2022. Herman Gorter, *Réponse à Lénine* (Response to Lenin), Spartacus, Paris, 1979.

always maintained, since its origins in the SPD and USPD, an opportunist line without any real break with social democracy. Thus, it oscillated between an openly collaborationist policy under the leadership of P. Lévi and C. Zetkin and a short-term coup-mongering voluntarism when the IC leadership (Zinoviev) needed to show a fighting spirit for the occasion, as with the action of March 1921. Even then, it was no longer a question of defending a revolutionary policy from a global point of view, but of defending the specific interests of the Russian state, which was in the process of degeneration following the emergence within it of what would become the Stalinist counterrevolution.

Organic relationship between the Party and the Unions

One of the thorniest issues was undoubtedly understanding the relationship between the KAPD and other working-class associations that were organizing to defend their economic and historical interests. The process of class formation, and therefore party formation, is neither homogeneous nor linear. Therefore, as in the German example, there may be different types of associations working in the same direction, but not yet unified or centralized, because they do not correspond to the same level of class consciousness or the same formal program. These organizations are not "duplicates" of the party, as in the caricatured visions of formalist constitutionalism, both Leninist and anti-Leninist⁹.

"The anti-parliamentarianism and anti-unionism of the KAPD are complemented by unionism. The fundamental concept of this party's theory is unionism. The KAPDists want to unite the proletariat, but a revolutionary proletariat not infested with democracy, not brutalized by militarism." Le KAPD et le Mouvement Proletarien, p.16.

They are not yet centralized expressions of the process of workers' associationism that emerged heterogeneously and spontaneously from the soil of class struggle. It is essential to emphasize that all these organizations have overcome, **by their very rejection of trade unionism, parliamentarism, and reformism**, the bourgeois and disastrous separation between "economics and politics" typical of both social democracy and Stalinism and their degenerate descendants. As in all authentically proletarian organizations, the **program**, in the sense of **a social project**, is both political and economic, in the image and likeness of the proletarian revolution. That is why the criterion for membership in the AAUD is not to participate in wage struggles, but to act in favor of the dictatorship of the proletariat! It was Marx who said in "The Poverty of Philosophy": *"Do not say that the social movement excludes the political movement: there is never a real political movement that is not at the same time a social movement..."*¹⁰. This is exactly what the unions (AAU: Union Générale Ouvrière) will say: "The AAU is the unified political and economic organization of the revolutionary proletariat." Guidelines of the AAU-E, Die Aktion, No. 41/42, 1921¹¹. Similarly, the trade union tendencies, both that of the AAUD, which openly acknowledged its relationship with the

⁹On this question, see our text: "Leninism, or anti-Leninism, a sterile polemic" Matériaux Critiques No. 9, as well as on our website: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes>

¹⁰On the website: <https://www.marxists.org/francais/marx/works/1847/06/km18470615.htm>

¹¹The German Left, texts from the KAPD, AAUD, AAUE, and KAI, p. 110, Invariance/La vieille taupe, 1973. These texts and others presented by D. Authier & J. Barrot were republished by Les Nuits Rouges in 2003 under the title: "Neither Parliament nor Trade Unions: Workers' Councils."

party, and that of the AAUD-E, which advocated the "unitary" overcoming of these two "forms," were part of the totalizing project of the communist revolution.

"Unitary organization is the goal of the UCA. All efforts will be directed toward achieving this goal. Without recognizing the justification for the existence of political parties (since historical developments are pushing for their dissolution), the AAU does not fight against the political organization of the KAPD, whose objectives and methods of struggle are common to those of the AAU, and strives to progress with it in the revolutionary struggles." Programme of the AAU adopted at the Leipzig conference in December 1920, p. 89.

Its anchoring in the very heart of the class and its most conscious elements allowed the KAPD to adopt an appropriate attitude, neither sectarian nor opportunistic, to maintain unity of action against the bourgeoisie without making concessions in terms of boundaries or programs. It was this unique achievement that allowed the KAPD to overcome, both practically and theoretically, the disastrous separation between economic and political struggles. It is also the reason why, contrary to the Leninist fable, the unions waged a political struggle against the anarcho-syndicalism of the FAUD, with which they were unjustly associated in the controversy¹².

"Unitary organization is the goal of the UCA. All efforts will be directed toward achieving this goal. Without recognizing it if the AAUD is a living organization, its polemic against anarcho-syndicalism, which wants to return to organization by trade, has a real basis. It expresses the movement of radical proletarians who, organizing themselves around objectives common to the entire proletariat, also come into conflict with the forms that maintain the compartmentalization of workers into separate strata. As a defined ideology, revolutionary syndicalism played a reactionary role in this phase." D. Authier & J. Barrot, *La gauche communiste en Allemagne; 1918-1921*, p.122, Payot, Paris, 1976.

The reluctance to accept the need for a party form came mainly from the leading theorist of AAUD-E, Otto Rühle,¹³ for whom: "Revolution is not a matter for parties." This visceral rejection, although erroneous, can be explained by the automatic assimilation of "classical" political parties, even "workers'" parties, into parliamentarianism (parliamentary cretinism) and their total practical submission to the democratic and bourgeois order. However, this "anti-party" position did not correspond at all to the reality of the KAPD's activities and led to the exclusion of O. Rühle and his tendency. Once again, this debate focused too much on forms of organization (which would become the hallmark of the "council communists") and not on the economic, political, and social **content** that these different associations defended in practice. All of them were organs of the same living body, corresponding to essential functions that interacted with each other and had to move in the direction of unification and centralization.

"The conception of class preparation, upheld by the German Left, has often been attacked as 'enlightenmentism'. Although its position did not conform to the precise vision of the class-party characteristic of the Italian Left, the position of the German Left cannot be compared to the enlightenment of a Gorky, a Gramsci, or a Tasca (who wanted everything to be understood by every

¹²It is interesting to note the political and organizational proximity between the German left and the I.W.W., in which German activists participated when they emigrated to the US (such as Fritz Wolffheim, for example).

¹³On the website: <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article216549> notice RÜHLE Otto by Serge Cosseron, version posted online on June 23, 2020, last modified on May 14, 2020.

worker before action). Their concept of the supervision of the proletariat in the unions that had these "preparatory" functions under the leadership of the party does not contain elements of individualistic "educationalism"; in the early years, the German Left showed a sufficiently healthy instinct not to theorize too much about the form of the unions, but only about their content, thus leaving fair possibilities for the future revolutionary movement in terms of the creation of organs of struggle." La gauche allemande et la question syndicale dans l'IIIème Internationale, internal text of Kommunistisk Program, Danish split from the PCI-Programme communiste.

Furthermore, the KAPD has always insisted on the global nature of the revolution:

"The proletarian revolution is both an economic and a political process. Neither as an economic process nor as a political process can it be conducted within the national framework; on the contrary, the establishment of a world community is its vital and necessary goal. It follows that, until the definitive defeat of the power of capital on a global scale, the future triumphant factions of the proletariat also need political violence to preserve themselves and, if possible, to attack the political violence of the counterrevolution." Thesis No. 3.

To respond to this need, the KAPD (especially Gorter and the Essen tendency) attempted to form a new "Communist Workers' International," the KAI, with the aim of unifying the various communist lefts.

"The realization of such objectives requires as a first condition the anti-capitalist character (both in form and content) of its organization and the leadership of its entire struggle. Its supreme point of reference is not the particular interests of individual national workers' groups, but the common interests of the world proletariat as a whole: the world proletarian revolution." Ligne directrice de la KAI, La gauche allemande, p.127.

Unfortunately, without first conducting the necessary political evaluation or understanding the change of period,¹⁴ This energetic approach inevitably resulted in a resounding failure, which revealed and reinforced the attacks of the counterrevolution. A few years later, in 1926, in an even more degraded situation, Bordiga responded in this vein to Korsch in relation to a similar proposal:

"Today's ¹⁵issues are so serious that it would really be necessary to discuss them face to face and at length: but unfortunately, this is not possible for us at the moment. Nor is it possible for me to write to you in detail on all the points of your platform, some of which could give rise to a useful discussion between us (...). I believe that one of the shortcomings of the current International has been that it has been a 'block of opposition' at the local and national levels. We must reflect on this point, of course without exaggerating, but with the aim of learning from these lessons. Lenin stopped a lot of "spontaneous" work in the hope of bringing the diverse groups together physically, and only then merging them homogeneously in the heat of the Russian revolution. (...) In conclusion, I do not think we should make an international statement as you propose, and I do not even think it would be feasible in practice. I do believe, however, that it would be useful to make parallel ideological and political statements and declarations in different countries on the problems of Russia and the Comintern, without resorting to the pretext of a factionalist "plot," and with each country freely

¹⁴On the importance of the alternation and rupture between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary phases, see our text to be published shortly: "What is counter-revolution?" in the journal Matériaux Critiques No. 11 and on our website: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsie/textes>

¹⁵On the website: https://www.marxists.org/francais/bordiga/works/1926/10/bordiga_korsch_1926.htm

developing its own thoughts and experiences." Letter from Bordiga to Karl Korsch.

This response remains relevant today because, instead of rushing into things, we must first conduct **the essential work of clarification and evaluation**, without which any grouping will end up sinking into immediacy, organizational voluntarism, and tactical opportunism.

The military question and the Veterans Party

Another important lesson is how the KAPD dealt with the military question in practice in relation to the phases of violent confrontation between workers and capital and its counterrevolutionary armed forces. As in many other questions, the KAPD did not consider the military question as separate from the general tasks of the proletarian offensive¹⁶.

"This is what the offensive means: awakening the proletarian masses from their lethargy through action undertaken independently by the party, at the right moment, with the right slogans; tearing them away from their Menshevik leadership through action (organizational, therefore, and not only cultural); cutting through the heart of the ideological crisis of the proletariat with the sword of action." Die Internationale, 1921: Le KAPD et le Mouvement Prolétarien, p.19-20.

On this question, as on many others, the KAPD played its role as a consistent vanguard, through the emblematic figures of Max Hölz and Karl Plättner (military leader of the KAPD). Its armed groups always acted in liaison and agreement with the other revolutionary fighting forces, unlike in other historical situations.

"The groups of Hölz, Schneider, Lembke, and Thiemann were under a unified military leadership. Comrades from the KPD, KAPD, and AAU worked together, putting aside their organizational differences. They placed all armed revolutionary workers under their leadership." Max Hölz, *Un rebelle dans la révolution*, p.151, Spartacus, 1988.

These exemplary events were already rooted in the episode of the "Red Army of the Ruhr" that fought in 1920 in Vogtland against the Kapp Putsch.

"We agreed that while hundreds of thousands of workers and comrades were fighting in the Ruhr, we should do everything possible to support them by disarming the reactionary Reichswehr and the bourgeois volunteers of the Vogtland, while arming the workers." Max Hölz, p.84/85.

This proletarian army (made up of "workers' guards") put an end to the "Kornilovian" coup attempt, while the majority independent unions and social democratic parties, with the agreement of the democratic and Catholic parties, limited themselves to a peaceful general strike as their only opposition. At the end of 1920, Max Hölz organized an armed gang of about fifty men to free the militants imprisoned after the Ruhr uprising. But it was, of course, during the famous "March Action" in central Germany in 1921 that the IC leadership ordered a military operation (led by Béla Kun) in a hasty, irresponsible, and coup-like manner. Despite their political disagreement with this approach, the armed groups of the KAPD did not abandon their comrades and the workers in struggle, thus avoiding an even greater

¹⁶On this question, we refer interested readers to our text: "À propos de la violence révolutionnaire" in our journal *Matériaux Critiques* No. 9, as well as on the website: <https://materiauxcritiques.wixsite.com/monsite/textes>

catastrophe.

*"The chronological coincidence between the turning point of the NEP, the Kronstadt uprising, and the 'March Action' encouraged contemporaries to believe that the Bolsheviks might have wanted to force events in Europe a little in order to spare the Soviet regime the painful turning point of the NEP and erase the affront of the Kronstadt rebellion."*¹⁷ .

However, for the combative minority of the proletariat, this action represented their swan song, and the last serious attempt to "force" the course toward revolution.

"The 25,000 workers in Leuna are organized militarily, 2,000 of them belong to the AAUD. This is undoubtedly one of the strongest sectors of the KAPD-AAUD. The region had been besieged during the Kapp putsch in September 1920. Many weapons remained hidden. Thefts in factories increased. Above all, the workers demanded shorter working hours (for example, in the Leuna factories) and the abolition of private police in the factories, with whom they clashed violently." D. Authier & J. Barrot, p.166.

That is why the KAPD, despite its criticism of the putsch, unconditionally defended the March action at the Third Congress of the CI. But in the end, it was Herman Gorter who, on behalf of the KAPD and from a revolutionary point of view, drew up the bitter criticism of the procrastination and criminal vacillations of the KPD, which was already receiving orders from Moscow: *"This tactic of the putsch is the inevitable reverse of parliamentarism and infiltration, of the solicitation of non-Communist elements, of the replacement of mass or class tactics by the tactics of the leaders. Such a weak and internally rotten policy must inevitably lead to putschism."* H. Gorter, *Les leçons des "journées de mars" (1921), last letter to Lenin*¹⁸.

These entanglements, and the ruptures they caused, clearly marked the end of the illusions of an era that was no longer the bearer of the world communist revolution. The KAPD quickly sank into a "splinter group" phase, becoming, with A. Pannekoek¹⁹ , in the 1930s, the "left-wing councilist" ("Radenkommunisten") current. In the brief revolutionary effervescence of the early 1920s, the KAPD was one of the best historical examples of a genuine **fighting party**.

"Just as the Commune was the 'daughter' (Engels) of the IWA, so the German revolution was the daughter of that International Left which never had the strength to give itself a definitive unified organization-but whose great currents were the German Left, which in its struggle dared to support the programmatic leadership given by the revolutionary movement itself, and the Italian Left, which had the historic task of continuing the work of the International Left, completing it, and formulating it in its attacks on the victorious counterrevolution; it passed on to us those theoretical weapons... that will form the basis of the future revolutionary movement, which finds its great historical example in the practice of the German Left. The future revolution will not be a matter of banal "imitation"; it will be a matter of following the "thread of time" traced by the International Communist Left.com" The German Left and the Trade Union Question in the Third International," p. 40.

¹⁷J-F Fayet, "The German Communist Insurrection of March 1921: An Initiative of Moscow, Berlin, or the Masses?" *Relations Internationales*, no. 106, 2001, pp. 179–94. JSTOR, on the website: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45344187>

¹⁸Text published in the appendix, p. 321 of: D. Authier & J. Barrot, *La gauche communiste en Allemagne; 1918-1921*, Payot, Paris, 1976.

¹⁹On this important communist activist, see: <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article216508>, entry PannekoekantonparSerge Cosseron, version posted online on June 23, 2020, last modified on June 24, 2020.

2025: Fj, Eu, Ms & Mm.

Translated by IsaCR.

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