

If the Comintern had not been created, a Marxist even a Bolshevik Party would have existed in Great Britain. The Comintern did not create British Communism but it did give shape and form to the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). Post 1917 revolutionary socialism could easily have splintered into a variety of sectarian groupings. However, membership of the Comintern with its acceptance of democratic centralism and a higher international authority exercised a disciplinary force both from above and from within despite various changes in line and the internal argument and dissension that ensued. The Comintern represented the unifying force that held British Communists wedded to the shining beacon of the first workers' state. However, they also carried a legacy. British revolutionaries represented the stalwart tradition of the British Labour Movement, one of the largest in the world and who would not meekly kowtow to Moscow.¹

It has been argued that following the events of October 1917 British Marxists would have unified without the intervention of the Comintern.² The challenge of bringing together such a diverse collection of individuals would appear to be remote without some external factor.³ Of the five British groups originally invited to join the Communist International, only one, the British Socialist Party, became a founder of the CPGB.⁴ John Maclean, possibly the only Marxist known by reputation by Lenin, 'felt banished by the London gang' and only his early death may have prevented the formation of a strong Scottish Bolshevik Party.⁵ To posit that a Bolshevik Party would arise from natural affinity would appear unlikely without the driving force of the Comintern and its agents in Britain.⁶ With

the exception of the Labour Party and the tiny Socialist Party of Great Britain, the Left in Britain is a story of constant fracture and sectarianism. External pressure applied to British Marxists to the point of personal intervention by Lenin gave the CPGB its 'unity' and consequently a degree of leverage.⁷ Allegiance to the Comintern maintained the unity of the fledgling organisation but those who joined invariably did not stay for very long and only a handful broke away to form new insignificant sectarian groups.⁸ That unity was sealed with a generous handout of 'Moscow gold' to those who were willing to acquiesce to the authority of the supranational body.⁹

From the founding Conference in July 1920 the new Party was not wholeheartedly behind Lenin's assessment that it should work in accommodation with the unique British Labour Party.¹⁰ The Labour Party overwhelming and regularly rejected requests for affiliation from the CPGB the 'intellectual slaves of Moscow'.¹¹ If Bolshevisation represented 'an effort to separate the communist parties from their social democratic roots'¹² then the rejection of Moscow's demand for the CPGB to affiliate to Labour caused it to be severed from the whole British Labour Movement.¹³ Communists were like no other group, left-wing sympathisers like John Stracey commented that the discipline they exercised resulted in their divorce from the working class and their 'doctrinaire preaching of an utterly unintelligible creed in jargon was divorced from all reality.'¹⁴ Communist Party discipline came easy to trade unionists reared in the traditions of the British Labour movement with its emphasis on unity and inclusiveness.¹⁵

Connection with the Labour Party carried the malodour of revisionism for many of the comrades in the new CPGB; young men like trade unionist Harry Pollitt.¹⁶ The toughening of the Comintern line during 1924-25 towards co-operation with the revisionist leadership received a warm reception with Communists totally disillusioned with the first Labour Government of 1924 and the 'sell out' by the Trades Union Congress (TUC) of the Miners during and following the General Strike of 1926. Events in Britain also influenced the development of the Comintern line in Moscow¹⁷ who were pleased that the CPGB was 'one of our best Parties... carrying out the instructions of the Communist International most conscientiously and successfully'.¹⁸ Communists drew the line at external criticism of British trade unions¹⁹ and even a fervent international revolutionary like George Hardy was prepared to openly defend Communist union officials from the imposition of too tight a party rein.²⁰

If young communists were delighted to sever ties with the Labour Party, Willie Gallacher and other leaders were not and contested the position at the Comintern.²¹ If contact with the Labour Party was controversial for a communist, working within the trade unions was almost *de rigueur* despite the necessity for exposure of reformism. The official CPGB historian has suggested that as Communist influence waned in the Labour Party it gained strength in the trade unions.²² The 'reformist lackeys' of the leadership of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) responded by purging individual communists or limiting the influence of the Party.²³ The Comintern line of the United Front from below was applied with great enthusiasm using the vehicle of the National Minority Movement (NMM) to co-ordinate and lead industrial

militants.²⁴ The application of this line was perhaps most successful amongst the miners.²⁵ Working class militants like Pollitt found themselves happily working for both the Comintern line and on natural home territory, following the 'road to workers power' through the trade unions.²⁶ So successful was Party recruitment within the mining communities that the ECCI Plenum of May 1927 criticised the CPGB for creating a membership imbalance.²⁷

As other revolutions failed to follow upon the Russian one, the Soviet party came to dominate the Comintern, at first through its prestige as the only party that had successfully carried through a socialist revolution. However, as time went on, this prestige was increasingly abused. The affinity and commitment to the British Labour movement by industrial militants like Pollitt and Arthur Horner would have its repercussions after 1927 as the Comintern turned into the tool of the Soviet party.²⁸

The Third Period or 'class against class' policy line of the Comintern that was given official approval by the Sixth World Congress in 1928 is considered to be a 'disaster' for the CPGB according to a broad range of opinion.²⁹ It 'brought the Communist Party to such a pass that, but for Soviet subventions, it would have virtually collapsed.'³⁰ Although the CPGB adopted the new line it did so slowly, without great enthusiasm,³¹ but the outcome was not the disaster that is commonly perceived to be.³² There was mild resistance but the toughening of the Party position in relation to the Labour Party was most welcome for many British communists.³³ The Labour Party by 1927 was hated, not content in excluding Communists from the top

it was actively purging them from within local parties even where links had been very strong.³⁴ The change in line also heralded a change in personnel at the top of the party. The CPGB November 1929 Congress accepted the criticism of its leadership and agreed to choose its leadership from a list of approved nominees. Many of the founders of the CPGB were removed and Pollitt a 'dyed-in-the-wool Stalinist' and Palme Dutt surrounded by a host of leftists on the new Central Committee took over.³⁵

If any British Communist had a dilemma about the 'class against class line' there was no doubt that by 1930 all the leadership were publicly singing to the tune of social-fascism and accepted the Comintern decision that they had to commit themselves to the task of resourcing a daily newspaper.³⁶ Abandoning the Labour Party was popular but to do the same with the trade unions was controversial and anathema to Pollitt and others.³⁷ The class against class period was only fully in operation for two years.³⁸ The policy forced the withdrawal of the CPGB into a shell, militants were isolated from the mainstream of the movement. The South Wales miners strike of 1930-31 exposed the ridiculous position of the party in an area that it once had strength and undermined the authority of the leading Communist trade unionist Horner.³⁹ For Horner, the maintenance of the unity of the mineworkers was more important than the Communist Party.⁴⁰ The line was not strictly enforced and *King Street* operated a policy of discretion where possible.⁴¹ However, a different reading of the third period suggests that after the Tenth Plenum of ECCI in 1929 the Comintern line was inherently flexible.⁴² Perhaps it was more to do with British confusion over the detail and the nuance of Moscow's interpretation together with leadership rivalries

at both ends of the axis. The Comintern also had difficulty understanding the British and accused them of 'excessive insularity'.⁴³ Pollitt had yet to firmly establish his position as leader and the Stalinist usurpers of Bukharin had yet to consolidate control in Moscow.⁴⁴ Finally, the revolutionary pragmatism of Pollitt overcame direct obedience to Moscow and the CPGB decided in June 1932 that 'to work in the reformist unions was a major task of the party' although Otto Kuusinen on behalf of the Comintern soon gave his assent and a potential clash was averted.⁴⁵ The policy line of the third period cannot be described as monolithic, multiple layers of practical interpretations were expounded around the theory that allowed the CPGB to establish its own destiny.⁴⁶

From 1932, with Pollitt firmly ensconced in the leadership, the CPGB entered a phase of growth during the 1930s. Day to day Comintern management relaxed and the British, hardly ever at the forefront of Moscow concern, were allowed to pursue their own version of a Popular Front position three years before it received the official seal of approval at the last Comintern Congress in 1935. In actuality, it was a united front from below policy with heavy emphasis on anti-fascism work.⁴⁷ Communist influence within the trade unions grew particularly gaining new ground outside the mining industry.⁴⁸ Covering the transition from one Comintern line to another, between 1930 and 1934, Communists were leading the campaign against mass unemployment. The CPGB organised the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) led by Wal Hannington and together with a growing culture around the party started to

develop its own unique identity beyond that of the local arm of a world revolutionary party.⁴⁹

The 1930s up until the Moscow trials witnessed improved public perception of the Soviet Union. Many influential non-communists like the Webb's looked favourably upon Soviet planning and anti-fascist work had practical application in relation to the civil war in Spain that appealed to a number of young intellectuals. The CPGB consequently appeared less the implacable tool of Moscow and more the temple of progressive thought and home to all who wished to struggle against fascism, it certainly boosted party membership and greater financial independence from Moscow.⁵⁰ Then again, the CPGB may have just benefited in a wider fashionable turn to the left in 1930s Britain while the Left Book Club became the 'nearest thing to a popular front movement'.⁵¹ In a significant step, the CPGB felt strong enough to amend the binding between itself and the Comintern in 1939 when it drafted changes to its rules.⁵² Harry Pollitt was also in a much stronger position and survived an attempt to liquidate him.⁵³

One event alone demonstrates that the Soviet Union did not feel the same loyalty to British communists as they did to Moscow. When Britain and France declared war in September 1939 against Nazi Germany the response of the CPGB was to argue that it must be won.⁵⁴ News from Moscow in the wake of the Nazi-Soviet Pact shattered that, the new Comintern line directed the Party to desist from anti-fascist work and named imperialism as the cause of the war. Any pretence at the Comintern being a world Party was now a sham, the decision was taken by a

commission of three of what was left of the Secretariat of the ECCI. Within the British Party only a handful led by Pollitt questioned the about turn, but as Palme Dutt argued at the Central Committee, 'the duty of a Communist is not to disagree but accept'.⁵⁵

If the Nazi-Soviet Pact was a little difficult to swallow for some in the Party, there were others on the left who took it in their stride and with some doubt tried to justify the actions of the Soviet Union. *Tribune* declared that the Red Army march into Poland from the east was 'welcomed by peasants'.⁵⁶ The Soviet invasion of Finland failed to dislodge the backbone of support for Moscow from non-communist sympathisers,⁵⁷ which even three decades later Gallacher was to describe as the Finnish invasion of Russia!⁵⁸ In 1941, after the German invasion of Russia, communists were free to be anti-fascists again, although in truth the overwhelming majority of them always were, Pollitt resumed his post as General Secretary and the episode was whitewashed from the official memory. The incident clearly exposes Communists to the charge that they were 'slaves of Moscow.' The latest Comintern line was interpreted with differences here and there but never was it repudiated. Communists were not slaves but true believers and when asked to affirm their faith were able to say, as Central Committee member John Cornforth did, 'I personally have got that sort of faith in the Soviet Union ... because ... if one loses anything of that faith ... one is done for as a Communist.'⁵⁹

It is difficult to understand the total devotion that motivated members of the party and like religion, the strength they drew from being soldiers of an international proletarian army following a single goal, world revolution. British Communists were not slaves of Moscow they were free to walk away; few of the leadership did although many of the rank and file did. The British Party leadership exercised its criticism of Moscow if the Comintern threatened to overwhelm its belief in the core values of the British Labour Movement however in finality they paid homage to the supremacy of Moscow. As believers in the concept of the international revolution allegiance was due to the Comintern not to the Soviet Party, inauspiciously the Comintern became the puppet of the Soviet Union increasingly under the control of Stalin. What was never in very much doubt was the loyalty of British Communists to the spirit of the Comintern.

NOTES

- ¹ See comment by Harry Pollitt quoted in Andrew Thorpe, 'The Communist international and the British Communist Party', in Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe (eds.), International Communism and the Communist International, (1998), p.68. Andrew Thorpe, The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43, (2000), p.7.
- ² Andrew Thorpe, The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43, (2000), pp.22-23 and Andrew Thorpe, 'The Communist international and the British Communist Party', in Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe (eds.), International Communism and the Communist International, (1998), p.68.
- ³ Francis Beckett, Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party, (1995), p.11.
- ⁴ Raymond Challinor, The Origins of British Bolshevism, (1977), p.227.
- ⁵ Raymond Challinor, The Origins of British Bolshevism, (1977), pp.244-246. John Maclean, 'A Scottish Communist Party', *The Vanguard*, (December 1920) and 'Open letter to Lenin,' *The Socialist* (30 January 1921) both reprinted in John Maclean, In the Rapids of Revolution, (1978), pp.224-229.
- ⁶ Francis Beckett, Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party, (1995), pp.11-12. *Willie Gallacher gives significance to the role of Russian émigré Theodore Rothstein in* William Gallacher, The last memoirs of William Gallacher, (1966), p.141 and also by Raymond Challinor, The Origins of British Bolshevism, (1977), pp.225-226 see also Andrew Thorpe, The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43, (2000), pp.42-43 for details of the role of Comintern representatives in Britain.
- ⁷ *In Sept. 1920 Gallacher returned from meeting Lenin promising to do everything to obtain unity.* Raymond Challinor, The Origins of British Bolshevism, (1977), p.248. Francis Beckett, Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party, (1995), pp.15-16. and William Gallacher, The last memoirs of William Gallacher, (1966), p.153.
- ⁸ *For details on CPGB membership turnover see* Andrew Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', The Historical Journal, 43, 3, (2000), pp.795-797. For a discussion of the departure of J.T.Murphy and later the Balham Group see pp.192-201.
- ⁹ *For 1922 Francis Beckett has estimated that the CPGB received £60,000 see* Francis Beckett, Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party, (1995), p.21.
- ¹⁰ Andrew Thorpe, The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43, (2000), pp.28-31. *For the assessment of the British situation by Lenin see* V.I.Lenin, "'Left-Wing" Communism in Great Britain,' in Left-Wing Communism, an infantile disorder, reprinted in The Essentials of Lenin, Selected Works, Vol.II, (1947), pp.615-624. *The United Front from above line was pursued by the CPGB in terms of Labour Party affiliation see transcript of meeting with a sub-committee of the National Executive of the Labour Party held on 29th December 1921 in* Roydon Harrison 'Communist Party affiliation to the Labour Party, Labour History, 29 (1974), pp.16-33.
- ¹¹ *The first request was rejected by 4,115,000 votes to 224,000.* Labour Party Annual Conference Report, (1921), p.167. *Intellectual slaves description from* Frank Hodges, Labour Party Annual Conference Report, (1922), p.198.
- ¹² Jürgen Rojahn, "A matter of perspective: some remarks on the periodisation of the history of the Communist International", in M.Narinsky and J.Rojahn, Centre and Periphery: the history of the Comintern in the light of new documents, (1996), p.44
- ¹³ "Any political organisation that hopes to influence the mass of the working class in this country in any particular direction in dissociation or in a detached form from the existing Labour Party, would simply be futile". Arthur MacManus quoted in Roydon Harrison 'Communist Party affiliation to the Labour Party, Labour History, 29 (1974), p.19.

- ¹⁴ Michael Newman, John Strachey, (1989), p.21.
- ¹⁵ Kevin Morgan, 'Harry Pollitt, the British Communist Party, and International Communism', in Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds.), Communism: National and International, (1998), p.186 and 196.
- ¹⁶ Kevin Morgan, Harry Pollitt, (1993), p.13.
- ¹⁷ *The General Strike of 1926 influenced Bukharin and the development of the 'Class against Class' line* Matthew Worley, 'The Communist International, The Communist Party of Great Britain, and the 'Third Period', 1928-1932', European History Quarterly, Vol.30(2),(2000), pp.188-189.
- ¹⁸ *Speech of Zinoviev, Dec 1925, to Russian Party Congress quoted in* Kevin Morgan, 'Harry Pollitt, the British Communist Party, and International Communism', in Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds.), Communism: National and International, (1998), p.188.
- ¹⁹ Kevin Morgan, 'Harry Pollitt, the British Communist Party, and International Communism', in Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds.), Communism: National and International, (1998), p.189.
- ²⁰ Kevin Morgan, 'Harry Pollitt, the British Communist Party, and International Communism', in Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds.), Communism: National and International, (1998), p.193.
- ²¹ *Harry Pollitt found a 'stigma of reformism' surrounding the Labour Party see* Kevin Morgan, Harry Pollitt, (1993), p.20. *On changing to anti Labour electoral tactics, Willie Gallacher told the political secretariat of ECCI on 18 November 1927, 'It is entirely out of the question'. Quoted in* Kevin McDermott, 'Bolshevisation 'From Above' or 'From Below'?: The Comintern and European Communism in the 1920s', in Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds.), Communism: National and International, (1998), p.107.
- ²² James Klugmann, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1925-1926, (1969), p.13.
- ²³ Matthew Worley, 'Left Turn: A Reassessment of the Communist Party of Great Britain in the Third Period, 1928-33', in Twentieth Century British History, Vol.11, 4, (2000), p.359.
- ²⁴ Ralph Miliband, Parliamentary Socialism: A Study of the Politics of Labour, 2nd edition, (1972), p.122.
- ²⁵ Hywel Francis and David Smith, The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the twentieth century, (1980), p.52.
- ²⁶ Kevin Morgan, Harry Pollitt, (1993), p.21
- ²⁷ Andrew Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', The Historical Journal, 43, 3, (2000), p.787.
- ²⁸ Kevin McDermott, 'Bolshevisation 'From Above' or 'From Below'?: The Comintern and European Communism in the 1920s', in Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds.), Communism: National and International, (1998), p.110.
- ²⁹ *As diverse as CPGB 'official historian' Noreen Branson* History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941, (1985), p.17. *and* Kevin McDermott, 'The history of the Comintern in the light of new documents', in Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe (eds.), International Communism and the Communist International, (1998), p.33.
- ³⁰ Kevin Morgan, 'The CPGB and the Comintern Archives', Socialist History, Autumn, (1993), p.19.
- ³¹ Noreen Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941, (1985), p.28.

- ³² Matthew Worley, 'The Communist International, The Communist Party of Great Britain, and the "Third Period", 1928-1932', European History Quarterly, Vol.30(2), (2000), p.187. *Subject of theses by Matthew Worley see Matthew Worley, 'Class Against Class: The Communist Party of Great Britain in the Third Period, 1927-32,' Communist History Network Newsletter, No.7, April (1999), <http://les1.man.ac.uk/chnn/CHNN07CAC.html>, [Accessed 14 October, 2001].*
- ³³ Kevin McDermott, 'The history of the Comintern in the light of new documents', in Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe (eds.), International Communism and the Communist International, (1998), pp.32-33.
- ³⁴ see Wayne David, 'The Labour Party and the "exclusion" of the Communists: the case of the Ogmores Divisional Labour Party in the 1920s', Llafur, III, 4, (1983), pp.5-15.
- ³⁵ Kevin Morgan, 'Harry Pollitt, the British Communist Party, and International Communism', in Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds.), Communism: National and International, (1998), p.187; Kevin Morgan, Harry Pollitt, (1993), p.65. and Francis Beckett, Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party, (1995), pp.40-42. *For the Congress and its aftermath see Andrew Thorpe, The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43, (2000), p.148-149.*
- ³⁶ E.H.Carr, The twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935, (1982), p.208.
- ³⁷ Kevin Morgan, Harry Pollitt, (1993), p.66. *see also* Noreen Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941, (1985), pp.40-43.
- ³⁸ Andrew Thorpe, The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43, (2000), p.156.
- ³⁹ Hywel Francis and David Smith, The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the twentieth century, (1980), pp. 150 and 154. *See also* E.H.Carr, The twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935, (1982), pp.210-211.
- ⁴⁰ Kevin Morgan, 'Harry Pollitt, the British Communist Party, and International Communism', in Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds.), Communism: National and International, (1998), p.192.
- ⁴¹ Kevin Morgan, 'Harry Pollitt, the British Communist Party, and International Communism', in Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds.), Communism: National and International, (1998), p.192.
- ⁴² Matthew Worley, 'The Communist International, The Communist Party of Great Britain, and the "Third Period", 1928-1932', European History Quarterly, Vol.30(2), (2000), p.194.
- ⁴³ Noreen Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941, (1985), p.45.
- ⁴⁴ Andrew Thorpe, The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43, (2000), pp.161-163.
- ⁴⁵ Matthew Worley, 'Left Turn: A Reassessment of the Communist Party of Great Britain in the Third Period, 1928-33', in Twentieth Century British History, Vol.11, 4, (2000), pp.372-373 and E.H.Carr, The twilight of the Comintern, 1930-1935, (1982), pp.219-220.
- ⁴⁶ Matthew Worley, 'The Communist International, The Communist Party of Great Britain, and the "Third Period", 1928-1932', European History Quarterly, Vol.30(2), (2000), p.201.
- ⁴⁷ Noreen Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941, (1985), pp. 209-215.
- ⁴⁸ Andrew Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', The Historical Journal, 43, 3, (2000), pp.787-788
- ⁴⁹ Matthew Worley, 'The Communist International, The Communist Party of Great Britain, and the "Third Period", 1928-1932', European History Quarterly, Vol.30(2), (2000), p.187.

- ⁵⁰ Andrew Thorpe, 'The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1945', The Historical Journal, 43, 3, (2000), pp.794-795. *For financial counterweight to Moscow see also* Kevin Morgan, 'Harry Pollitt, the British Communist Party, and International Communism', in Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds.), Communism: National and International, (1998), p.200.
- ⁵¹ Kevin Morgan, 'Harry Pollitt, the British Communist Party, and International Communism', in Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola (eds.), Communism: National and International, (1998), p.194. *The Labour Left also gained in popularity, Tribune launched in 1937 climbed to a certified weekly sale of 30,000 by 1939. Tribune*, 28 April, 1939.
- ⁵² Andrew Thorpe, The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43, (2000), p.249.
- ⁵³ Noreen Branson, History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941, (1985), pp. 246-247. *see also* Andrew Thorpe, The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43, (2000), pp.228-229 and 239-240.
- ⁵⁴ John Callaghan, Rajani Palme Dutt, (1993), p.180.
- ⁵⁵ Francis King and George Matthews, About Turn: The British Communist Party and the Second World War, (1990), p.35 and 86. *See also* John Callaghan, Rajani Palme Dutt, (1993), p.183.
- ⁵⁶ Tribune, 3 October 1939.
- ⁵⁷ Tribune, 8 December 1939.
- ⁵⁸ William Gallacher, The last memoirs of William Gallacher, (1966), p.272.
- ⁵⁹ Francis King and George Matthews, About Turn: The British Communist Party and the Second World War, (1990), p.130.

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