

"Nina Ponomareva's Hats": The New Revisionism, the Communist International, and the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1930

John Mclroy and Alan Campbell

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“Nina Ponomareva’s Hats”: The New Revisionism, the Communist International, and the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-1930

John McIlroy and Alan Campbell

DESPITE ITS DESCENT into barbarism and catastrophic political failure, official Communism constituted one of the major social movements of the 20th century. It remains of engrossing interest to historians, particularly to scholars who, despite everything that has happened since 1917, still aspire to understand and learn with an eye to the troubled future of human emancipation. In both Europe and North America, studies of Communist parties flourish and their relationship with the USSR and the Communist International (Comintern) — the subject of this paper — remains a major historiographical issue. In itself an important historical problem, it touches on issues at the heart of comprehending Communism. Interrogation of centre and periphery, dependence and autonomy, can enrich our understanding of discipline and democracy in international ideology and organization as well as desired outcomes, the replication of the USSR across the globe or more democratic national variants, political responsibility, the complicity or otherwise of foreign Communists in the crimes of Stalinism, and the relationship Comintern affiliates had to their national polity and national cultures.

The literature is extensive, burgeoning, and contested. It is most developed in the USA. From the 1950s, the work of “the traditionalists” (among which the studies

John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, “‘Nina Ponomareva’s Hats’: The New Revisionism, the Communist International, and the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-30,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (Spring 2002), 147-87.

by Theodore Draper, and Irving Howe and Lewis Coser are of enduring interest) depicted the American party as undemocratic, subordinated to Stalinism, and incapable of relating creatively to American society. Exploiting the opening of the archives in Moscow, Harvey Klehr and his colleagues vigorously affirmed Russian domination.¹ In contrast, from the 1980s, "revisionists" sought to transcend the institutional frame of earlier work. Utilizing social history they presented a home-spun Communism aligned with a positive view of the work of activists in community, trade union, and cultural struggles in studies that often decentred Stalinism and the Soviet connection. Among notable work is Maurice Isserman's account of the party, 1939-46, Mark Naison's study of Communists in Harlem, and Edward Johanningsmeier's biography of party leader William Z. Foster.²

In Canada, there has been less polarization and polemic. The traditional approach is represented by William Rodney's study of the first decade of Canadian Communism follows Draper in its "top down" treatment of a party brought to heel by the Comintern, Stalinized by 1930, and thereafter "a mere satellite in the orbit of the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union]."³ Neither Ian Angus in his Trotskyist-inflected examination of the early years of the party, nor Ivan Avakumovic, substantially dissented. The focus of these studies was on the party leadership and high politics, and both emphasized Comintern control over party policy. Norman Penner's *Canadian Communism* took the story into the 1980s but did not transcend these parameters.⁴ There has been some reaction, as researchers such as Ruth Frager, Mercedes Steedman, and John Manley have repaired the absence of

¹Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York 1957); Theodore Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia: The Formative Period* (New York 1960); Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party, A Critical History: 1919-1957* (Boston 1957); Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, *The American Communist Movement: Storming Heaven Itself* (New York, 1992); Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Fridrikh Firsov, *The Secret World of American Communism* (New Haven 1995); and Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill Anderson, *The Soviet World of American Communism* (New Haven 1998).

²Maurice Isserman, *Which Side Were You On? The American Communist Party During the Second World War* (Middletown 1982); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana 1983); and Edward P. Johanningsmeier, *Forging American Communism: The Life of William Z. Foster* (Princeton 1998). See also James G. Ryan, *Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism* (Tuscaloosa 1997), which attempts to integrate both approaches; and James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Radicalism* (Urbana 1999).

³William Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919-1929* (Toronto 1968), 160.

⁴Ian Angus, *Canadian Bolsheviks: The Early Years of the Communist Party of Canada* (Montreal 1981); Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada: A History* (Toronto 1975); and Norman Penner, *Canadian Communism: The Stalin Years and Beyond* (Toronto 1988).

party activists and their struggles from broader histories, but without challenging their political conclusions.⁵

There have been similar tendencies in Britain. More than 40 years ago, Eric Hobsbawm chided partisan party historians for diminishing the role Moscow played in British Communism.⁶ His insistence on the need to balance international and indigenous factors was echoed by Perry Anderson. Anderson emphasized that membership of the Comintern, a world party strikingly more centralist than democratic, entailed compliance with its directives: each national branch “lacked ultimate political autonomy in its major strategic orientations.” Latter day celebrations of national identities ensured that “some of the official histories have been tempted to play down massive interventions by the Soviet bloc in the early life histories of these parties.” Conversely, some Cold War monographs presented each party as if it were “just a puppet whose limbs were manipulated mechanically by strings pulled in Moscow.”⁷

As in Canada and the USA, the early academic work focused upon the formal policy of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) and demonstrated its subordination to Russian imperatives.⁸ Later work shifted to “history from below” and the social and cultural aspects of Communist activity.⁹ As in Canada and the USA, compartmentalization and relative lack of synthesis is noteworthy. If early work neglected the experience of “ordinary” members, later work tended to neglect the broader context, the politics on which activism was based, and the supervisory role of a leadership committed to those politics. What is different in Britain is that

⁵See for example: John Manley, “Preaching the Red Stuff: J.B. McLachlan, Communism, and the Cape Breton Miners, 1922-1935,” *Labour/Le Travail* (hereafter *L/LT*), 30 (Fall 1992), 65-114; Ruth Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939* (Toronto 1992); Mercedes Steedman, “The Promise: Communist Organizing in the Needle Trades. The Dressmakers’ Campaign, 1928-1937,” *L/LT*, 34 (Fall 1994), 37-73; and John Manley, “Does the International Labour Movement Need Salvaging? Communism, Labourism, and the Canadian Trade Unions, 1921-1928,” *L/LT*, 41 (Spring 1998), 147-80.

⁶Eric Hobsbawm, “Problems of Communist History,” reprinted in Eric Hobsbawm, *Revolutionaries* (London 1973), 3-11.

⁷Perry Anderson, “Communist Party History,” in Raphael Samuel, ed., *Peoples’ History and Socialist Theory* (London 1981), 150.

⁸Notably: Henry Pelling, *The British Communist Party: A Historical Profile* (London 1958); Leslie J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development Until 1929* (London 1966); and Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain, 1900-21* (London 1969).

⁹Kevin Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935-41* (Manchester 1989); Nina Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933-45* (Aldershot 1995); and Geoff Andrews, Nina Fishman, and Kevin Morgan, eds., *Opening the Books: Essays on the Social and Cultural History of the British Communist Party* (London 1995).

the latest work largely eschews "history from below" in favour of revisionist political history. It returns to an examination of "the line" and reinterprets its provenance. Unlike social history approaches which, through focus on local narratives and individual biography, avoid or downplay Moscow control, this is a distinctive project which explicitly confronts and revises the relationship of Moscow and London through the prism of formal policy.

In a series of papers, an edited collection, and a monograph, Andrew Thorpe asserts that the opening of the Moscow archives justifies revision of existing accounts. It permits "a clearer focus on the exact relationship between these bodies" and reveals an alternative to the orthodox conclusion that Moscow's politics were the decisive influence on CPGB policy. Thorpe's central thesis is that the "Comintern's influence over the development of British Communist politics has been exaggerated by most observers." Rather, "the party was, to a large extent, the master of its own fate." The conventional picture is mistaken. The Comintern "did not hinder [the CPGB] too much, most of the time, in providing its own solutions to the problems it faced."¹⁰

Matthew Worley endorses Thorpe's political analysis and conclusions: "International policy was regularly adapted to suit national conditions and for the most part the CPGB was indeed 'the master of its own fate'." Worley's main concern is with the Third Period, between 1928 and 1934, when the Comintern broke from the United Front and espoused predictions of capitalist crisis, impending revolution, and ultra-left politics. Almost all historians in Europe and North America have seen this as a disastrous imposition by Moscow. Worley, in contrast, emphasizes its indigenous roots and its relative success, portraying the Comintern as "sensitive to national circumstances."¹¹ Thorpe in turn echoes Worley: the new line was ratified

¹⁰ Andrew Thorpe, "Comintern 'Control' of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-43," *English Historical Review*, 113 (June 1998), 637-62; Andrew Thorpe, "Stalinism and British Politics," *History*, 83 (October 1998), 608-27; Andrew Thorpe, "The Communist International and the British Communist Party," in Tim Rees and Andrew Thorpe, eds., *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919-43* (Manchester 1998), 67-86; Andrew Thorpe, "The Membership of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920-45," *Historical Journal*, 43 (September 2000), 777-800; and Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43* (Manchester 2000). Thorpe, "Comintern 'Control,'" 662; Thorpe, "Communist International," 68, 81.

¹¹ Matthew Worley, review of *International Communism*, by Rees and Thorpe, *Labour History Review*, 65 (Spring 2000), 128; Mathew Worley, "Reflections on Recent British Communist Party History," *Historical Materialism*, 4 (1999), 241-61; Matthew Worley, "For a Proletarian Culture: Communist Party Culture in Britain in the Third Period, 1928-35," *Socialist History*, 18 (2000), 70-91; Matthew Worley, "Class Against Class: The Communist Party of Great Britain in the Third Period," PhD thesis, Nottingham University, 1998; and Matthew Worley, "The Communist International, the Communist Party of Great Britain and the 'Third Period', 1928-32," *European History Quarterly*, 30 (April 2000), 203. While Thorpe's approach is pervasively top down, Worley's incursions into social history are limited and pallid.

by British considerations, it was far from a disaster, and “would probably have come about ... regardless of ‘orders from Moscow’.”¹²

The value of this work lies in its rehabilitation of the primacy of politics in analyzing a political party and its deployment of new evidence. Failing to adequately appreciate existing research, it undervalues and at times caricatures its conclusions. Consequently, its own interpretations and judgements are flawed. Any analysis of “centre-periphery” relationships must accord due emphasis to domestic factors, particularly in the implementation of policy if it is to provide a nuanced account. In these studies, the nuances, the adaptations, and the impediments to realization of Comintern policy are inflated, the big picture, the dominance of the Comintern, blurred. The evidence presented fails to justify revision of conventional verdicts. Critique of this literature is essential if we are to properly comprehend Communism; it also provides a cautionary study in revisionist methods.

The following account should be of interest to students of Communism in Canada, the USA, and other countries where similar historiographical trends prevail. Because of the importance of providing a detailed, properly furnished critique, it is restricted to examination of the first ten years of British Communism. It is divided into four sections. The first provides an overview of existing literature. This is followed by critical examination of the new revisionism’s estimation of the literature and a critique of its model of the relationship between the Comintern and the CPGB. A third section discusses that relationship between 1920 and 1930. A brief conclusion provides an overall assessment.

The Comintern and the CPGB in the Literature

In August 1956, the year of Khrushchev’s secret speech, the invasion of Hungary, and turmoil in the CPGB, the Soviet athletics team withdrew from the White City Games in London in protest against the detention of Nina Ponomareva, a Russian discus thrower. She had been arrested for stealing hats from a store in Oxford Street. In a path-breaking verdict, the *Daily Worker* condemned the decision to withdraw from the games as “regrettable.” It was the first time the paper had ever editorially criticized a Soviet action. Hobsbawm complained in relation to the party crisis: “We tell them that we do not give the USSR ‘uncritical support,’ but when they ask us when we disagreed with its policy, all we can point to is Nina Ponomareva’s hats.”¹³

The conclusion that the CPGB only ever differed from the Russians on the minor and the inessential characterized the first wave of writing about British Communism. Henry Pelling’s pioneering work, published in 1958, reflected its time and its author’s values. In a “top down” engagement with Communist politics, Pelling

¹²Thorpe, “Stalinism,” 626.

¹³Eric Hobsbawm, “Letters,” *World News*, 4 (1957); and Alison Macleod, *The Death of Uncle Joe* (London 1997), 104.

conceived the CPGB's acceptance of international democratic centralism as the decisive factor in its policies. Accepting that decisions of the Comintern were binding, "the British party gave up its political initiative to the International." As Russian dominance of the Comintern became institutionalized, "blind loyalty" to the socialist fatherland and the party which had created it ensured willing compliance in every change of line. Each new strategic phase of policy, from United Front, to Third Period, to Popular Front, was initiated in Moscow and accepted in London, regardless of its application to British problems. Pelling registers differing degrees of Comintern intervention in different periods, although he concludes that by 1930 the CPGB "was reduced to an almost slavish submission to Moscow."¹⁴

At times Pelling's emphasis on political subservience leads to excess, as when he writes of the CPGB's "transformation into a military apparatus of the USSR," or when, striving to assert the party's foreignness, he exaggerates the cosmopolitanism of its founding cadre. He wrote as a political historian and social democrat, and within firm constraints as to primary sources. To describe him simply as a "Cold War historian" is to overlook both the troubling complexities of the Cold War and the enduring democratic critique of the CPGB espoused on both the left and right of the British labour movement. Against the suggestions of at times intemperate criticism, which rarely burdens itself with citation or quotation, his healthy suspicion of Stalinism falls within the bounds of historical probity.¹⁵

Pelling's account is not without nuance. He notes the difference between establishment of policy by the Russians, its transmission to the party leadership, and its problematic implementation so remarked upon by later writers: "instructions were passed down but they were not effectively obeyed."¹⁶ He registers internal dissent. He observes in relation to the Third Period: "there was opposition among the British leadership to the line of the Comintern," and he documents the heresy of the Miners' leader Arthur Horner. Pelling also touches on the mechanisms of Comintern control. It is mistaken to state that he ignores the *raison d'être*s of British Communists, however unsatisfactory his explanation of their motivations. He places responsibility for failure not in Moscow but in Britain: "the major responsibility must rest with those who, though actually facing objective circumstances which had no comparison with those in Russia, still attempted to impose on those circumstances an alien code of political action."¹⁷

The main problem with Pelling is his one-sidedness. His emphasis is almost completely on formal policy and the leadership: the membership is reproduced, as Leslie Macfarlane remarked, one-dimensionally, as simply soldiers in the service

¹⁴Pelling, *Communist Party*, 18, 54.

¹⁵Pelling, *Communist Party*, 15, 107. For unevicenced dismissals see Morgan, *Against Fascism and War*, 7-8; and Willie Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism, 1920-91* (London 1992), 12.

¹⁶Pelling, *Communist Party*, 47-9.

¹⁷Pelling, *Communist Party*, 183.

of Stalinism. This leaves out their struggles against British capitalism, struggles with which many ordinary socialists could identify. But, Macfarlane's examination of the CPGB in the 1920s does not disturb Pelling's estimate of subordination: where there was significant disagreement, the British party was "required to conform." But he insightfully emphasizes that the majority of members did not perceive the Comintern as a foreign, external controller. They conceived it as a wise, experienced guide whose decisions were "in the main accepted by the British party without question."¹⁸ The Comintern relied on authority not coercion. Macfarlane expands Pelling's canvas, chronicling the interaction of the Comintern and the CPGB and problems in applying Communist policies in the unions and the Labour Party. He demonstrates empathy with CPGB members, who were, he believes, neither puppets nor dupes. Workers joined the party for the same reasons they joined the Chartists. Many of their struggles were exemplary and kept alive the spirit of anti-capitalism. Nonetheless, his verdict is unequivocally negative. By 1924, an initially relatively relaxed if ultimately dominant Comintern was becoming more directive. The Third Period reflected Stalinism in Russia and Stalinized the CPGB. By 1929, "the direction of the Communist International's policies was largely determined by the internal needs of the Soviet state." The "tragedy of the Communist Party" was that while it stimulated struggle, it "misdirected" it.¹⁹

This was emphatically the position of Walter Kendall, who painstakingly documented the role the Comintern played in terms of prestige, ideology, and money in establishing the CPGB and developing its politics. There is no need to accept Kendall's conclusions as to the potential of the pre-CPGB revolutionary tradition nor his belief that the destiny of the party was determined in 1921 to agree, as his sharpest critics have, that the Comintern was decisive in realizing British revolutionaries' desire for a Communist Party.²⁰

Other historians turned towards the application of Communist strategy in the trade unions. In his study of the CPGB-sponsored Minority Movement (MM), Roderick Martin evoked the tensions inherent in collaboration between Communist and non-Communist activists, and the problems party members experienced when union responsibilities conflicted with political goals. But, he concluded that "ideological, organizational and emotional pressures were strong enough to enforce Communist conformity to the Comintern policy"²¹ Writing from a Trotskyist perspective, James Hinton and Richard Hyman corrected earlier work in this vein. They demonstrated the extent to which the CPGB's application of United Front tactics in the mid-1920s veered to the right of Comintern prescriptions and, in

¹⁸Macfarlane, *Communist Party*, 11, 278, 276.

¹⁹Macfarlane, *Communist Party*, 275, 287.

²⁰Kendall, *Revolutionary Movement*, 296-302. See James Hinton's review in *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*, 19 (Autumn 1969), 42-9.

²¹Roderick Martin, *Communism and the British Trade Unions, 1924-33: A Study of the National Minority Movement* (Oxford 1969), 189.

contrast to Pelling and Macfarlane, they questioned the efficacy of Comintern policy from a revolutionary perspective.²²

Stuart McIntyre's studies of revolutionary autodidacts, Marxist philosophy and pedagogy, and the development of local Communist strongholds reflected the impact of "history from below." Within the constraints of conventional political history and party orthodoxy, Noreen Branson's third volume of the official history of the CPGB represented an advance on James Klugmann's earlier volumes. Where Klugmann downplayed the political impact of the Comintern, it was a major, if fleeting, presence in Branson's work. Its primary and deleterious influence in the Third Period was given full weight; but once the Popular Front liberates indigenous factors, it receded, re-emerging only in 1939.²³

Without questioning the formal domination of Comintern politics, Kevin Morgan insists on going beyond official pronouncements to integrate orthodox political history and "history from below." Scrutinizing the period 1939-41, he usefully documents the reticences, evasions, and silences of CPGB activists in implementing the anti-war line and depicts the concessions made to economism, pacifism, and populism. Morgan observes that "the broad lines of Communist policy were determined not by a rational appraisal of what was possible in British conditions but by the erratic directives of the distant heads of world Communism who could not have cared less about the British working class" He provides a formally balanced view of international and national pressures: "if the CP [Communist Party] was unquestionably a genuine British working-class party responsive to the British political situation, it was also, from another aspect, an 'agent' of Soviet foreign policy: possibly the main problem in writing Communist Party history is to comprehend the sometimes complex relationships between the two."²⁴

Allowing for complexity, the fundamental, if difficult, historical question remains and is evaded here: which was *primary* in the party's policies, the national or the Russian? The extent to which the CPGB could be a genuine British party and

²²James Hinton and Richard Hyman, *Trade Unions and Revolution: The Industrial Politics of the Early British Communist Party* (London 1975), criticizing Mike Woodhouse and Brian Pearce, *Essays on the History of Communism in Britain* (London 1975). See also Hugo Dewar, *Communist Politics in Britain: The CPGB from its Origins to the Second World War* (London 1976).

²³Stuart Macintyre, *A Proletarian Science: Marxism in Britain, 1917-33* (Cambridge 1980); and Stuart Macintyre, *Little Moscows: Communism and Working-Class Militancy in Inter-War Britain* (London 1980). See also Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London 1980); Richard Croucher, *Engineers at War* (London 1982); James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Vol. 1: Formation and Early Years, 1919-1924* (London 1969); James Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Vol. 2: The General Strike, 1925-26* (London 1969); Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-41* (London 1985); and Noreen Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1941-51* (London 1997).

²⁴Morgan, *Against Fascism*, 51, 116-17.

respond effectively and authentically to the situation in Britain was restricted by Comintern hegemony of its politics: deviations from policy in practice were never sufficient to challenge that judgement. The changes in line which Morgan chronicles are explained by pressure from Moscow, not pressure from British workers. What unified the national and international moments of British Communism and resolved the tensions between defence of the "workers' state" and the struggle for its extension to Britain was, as Macfarlane demonstrated, the legitimacy of the Russian leadership as the final arbiter. The record discloses that, at every conjuncture, Russian considerations came first. This was appreciated by contemporary workers if not modern academics. It generated the CPGB's justified reputation as the "zig zag party," the "picture palace party" (where the programme changed twice weekly) and "not a party of the left."²⁵

Limited refusal by members to implement party policy was an impediment on policy, not a positive alternative to it. Morgan is documenting fragmented resistances, not principled political opposition to the Comintern line. The CPGB's acceptance of Moscow's insistence that it oppose the war in 1939-1941 is more remarkable than the fact that, given its unpopularity, some activists failed to implement it. Yet without reaching any explicit resolution of the tensions between Comintern and national pressures, Morgan emphasizes the latter. Where Macfarlane connected admirable struggles with their ultimate subordination to the Russian state and returned a negative verdict, Morgan, neglecting to adumbrate the criteria he is utilizing, passes a positive judgement: the Stalinized CPGB, which enthusiastically responded to every disturbing twist and turn of Soviet policy, is favourably contrasted with the rest of the British left.²⁶

A similar emphasis on indigenous factors pervades much of Nina Fishman's study of the CPGB and the unions between 1933 and 1945. Against the weight of evidence, British leaders are depicted as steering the CPGB away from the excesses of the Third Period, espoused only by a coterie of zealots, and empowering the native pragmatism of the party cadre. Once the Third Period is negotiated, the Comintern and even the party become peripheral actors: the Moscow trials, the Gulag, and the Hitler-Stalin pact, cast no shadow. The emphasis is on autonomous activists whose primary loyalty is to trade unionism. There are few connections or tensions in this text between the Comintern, the party, and the unions. Relying heavily on testimony from participants, the book purveys a novel, cosy, and very

²⁵Co-operative Party, *The Zig Zag "Left": An Exposure of Communist Tactics* (London 1948); *New Leader*, 16 November 1942; and John McIlroy, "The British Communist Party: From World War to Cold War," *Labour History Review*, 63 (Winter 1998), 357-64. The present article neglects, as does the literature it discusses, the internal fissures and contradictions in the alleged "Britishness" of a party whose strongest bulwarks, certainly outside London, were Scotland and Wales.

²⁶Morgan, *Against Fascism*, 309: "... the balance will be found rather in the CP's favour than against it."

British “model of democratic centralism ... highly derivative of working-class non-conformism. It relied on individual consciences to interpret the real world.”²⁷ Real sources of motive and constraint, the class-struggle in workplace and union, the temptations of economism, are highlighted. But other significant sources of motive and constraint — the Stalinist party, its discipline, its leadership, and its policies — are under-investigated and under-emphasized. The Popular Front period permitted a relative flowering of “national Communism,” but there were always limits.

Predilection for the Popular Front and emphasis on the relative autonomy of party activists imbues Willie Thompson’s *The Good Old Cause*, its title assimilating the CPGB to the British republicans of the 17th century. Thompson writes political history, but the party’s politics are at their healthiest the further they travel from the original revolutionary imperatives and the more they adapt to the national terrain. The Comintern is viewed in Thompson’s text as an episodically intrusive and usually malign influence on the politics of British Communism. The CPGB’s dramatic moves to the left, at Moscow’s behest and in Moscow’s interests, as in 1928 and 1947, are portrayed as “reversals” of the party’s natural trajectory towards the mainstream of bourgeois politics in Britain.²⁸

In contrast, McDermott and Agnew’s *The Comintern*, the first work by British historians to explore the newly opened archives, corroborates the primacy of Moscow while taking cognisance of the impact of “history from below.” The Comintern, they conclude, was transformed into “a bureaucratic mouthpiece for the Soviet state” and after 1929 “whoever controlled the Russian party apparatus controlled the Comintern.” Over the Comintern’s history “the tension felt by foreign Communists attempting to balance fealty to Moscow with responsiveness to indigenous realities was invariably resolved in favour of the former.”²⁹ A weakness of social history is its “propensity to underestimate the mechanisms of control employed by the Comintern ... and by the party leaderships at national level.” After 1929, “Stalinist discipline demanded that members loyally fulfil the party line, deviations were rarely tolerated for long and space for debate and discussion was severely restricted. While scope for regional, local or industrial initiative and adaptation did exist and should be recognized, it must be treated with a fair degree of circumspection.”³⁰ Overall, the Comintern has to be evaluated negatively in relation to the Third Period, “social fascism,” the Stalinist terror, and the Nazi-Soviet pact.

²⁷Fishman, *Communist Party*, 333; and John McIlroy, “Rehabilitating Communist History,” *Revolutionary History*, 8, 1, (2001), 195-226. Alan Campbell and John McIlroy, “Reflections on the Communist Party’s Third Period in Scotland: the case of Willie Allan,” *Scottish Labour History*, 35 (2000), 33-54.

²⁸Thompson, *Good Old Cause*, 9, 89; McIlroy, “World War to Cold War,” 359-61.

²⁹Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (Basingstoke 1996), 44, 214.

³⁰McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, 118.

On the whole, the literature affirms, although it expands and nuances, Pelling's judgement that the CPGB surrendered its political initiative to the International. To emphasize local struggles and committed lives in particular countries, divorced from the political framework which governed them, and on this one-sided basis, to treat the movement with approbation, is to write Communist history with the Communism left out.³¹ There were conflicting interpretations of the line propounded by the Comintern. The strategic axes determined in Moscow required adaptation when inserted into the different political formations of Canada, China, the USA, and Britain, or even the different Labour parties in Manchester or Glasgow, the miners' union in Wales, and the engineering union in Liverpool. It is commonplace and commonsense that there was debate and dissension. What remains striking is the enduring conformity of the CPGB to Comintern directives, despite differences in the degree of intervention in different periods. It is important to document national adaptations inherent in the nature of an international project. To suggest that such secondary factors equalled political autonomy or qualified loyalty to the Russians is to trivialize politics and fail to do justice to Communists' grievously mistaken commitment to internationalism.

The literature demonstrates that the CPGB was always subordinate and that control sharpened in the Third Period. Even when the Comintern was at its most extreme, after 1928 and in 1939-41, there was only fleeting, individual defiance. There was no sustained political opposition of any scale and the evanescent individual resistances of Arthur Horner, 1929-1931, and the party leaders Harry Pollitt, J.R. Campbell, and Willie Gallacher in 1939, were swiftly followed by recantation and self criticism. In sharp contrast with other Comintern affiliates, in Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Canada, or the USA, — and this point is often evaded — this was, from the beginning, a distinctively conformist party: there was no factionalism with the solitary exception of the tiny Trotskyist Balham group. All we can find is a handful of protests like the CPGB's criticism of the Colonial Thesis at the Comintern's 1928 World Congress "which could not be maintained once the decision had been taken."³² If the socio-historical approach enriches our knowledge of how Communists thought and worked, and suggests the limits of a not very democratic centralism and the problems the CPGB confronted in implementing agreed policies, it does not change this assessment. Finally, although the criteria for judgements are sometimes unclear, the majority verdict is that with some differences over the early period 1920-23, the Comintern exercised a detrimental impact upon British revolutionary politics.

³¹ McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, 214. See Geoff Eley, "History with the Politics Left Out — Again?," *Russian Review*, 45 (1986), 385-94.

³² Macfarlane, *Communist Party*, 209; Pelling, *Communist Party*, 58-61, 110-13; and Sam Bornstein and Al Richardson, *Against the Stream: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1924-38* (London 1986), 62-90.

The New Revisionism and its Methods

With different emphases and qualifications, this verdict has hitherto gone unchallenged, although some have urged that greater weight be accorded to the social and cultural aspects of CPGB activities in view of its political weaknesses.³³ Thorpe, whose approach is commended by Worley, has now sought to categorize British historiography, following the American example, as *justification de texte* in re-specifying the relationship of the Comintern to the CPGB. He delineates “three main schools.” The first, “associated particularly with Henry Pelling,” argues that the CPGB “rapidly became the slaves of Moscow.” It is peopled by Cold War warriors and Trotskyists, but, apart from Pelling, the only other author cited is Hugo Dewar. The second school, “the revisionists,” are influenced by the “new labour history” and end up “dismissing the importance of what might be called the ‘high politics’ of the International and its parties.” The only British scholar cited as revisionist is Macintyre. The third school, the “post-revisionists,” are defined with imprecision as rejecting on the one hand, the idea that British Communists were “slaves of Moscow” and, on the other, the view that they were “utterly unaffected by the Comintern and the leaders of their national parties.”³⁴ Despite the fact that most would commend this proposition, if question its crippling inexactitude, no British writer is cited as a member, although Thorpe clearly sees his own work as governed by this rubric.

This categorization is artificial, yet it pervades Thorpe’s work, much of which is dominated by a synthetic contest with the “slaves school.” The idea “that a flick of the lever in the Kremlin led to immediate and complete changes” in CPGB policy, he tells us, is the product of “myths and legends.” At the Congress which established the CPGB, “the mood was not slavish.” In 1921 the party was not “cravenly submissive”; by 1923 “the party was not slavish to Moscow’s every whim”; Communists were not “marionettes being manipulated by a Kremlin puppet master”;

³³Kevin Morgan, “Harry Pollitt, the British Communist Party and International Communism,” in Tauno Saarela and Kimmo Rentola, eds., *Communism National and International* (Helsinki 1998), 184-6.

³⁴Thorpe, “Comintern ‘Control’,” 637-9. Worley shares Thorpe’s judgements and his “on the one hand, on the other” evasiveness. Pelling is dismissed “as a relic of a bygone age with its incredulous overtures to ‘unEnglish’ reds under the bed.” While the dubious Stalinist, James Klugmann provides “a valid introduction,” iconoclastic accounts from the non-CPGB left have “sought political advantage rather than historical integrity.” On the one hand, “The limitations of Comintern control have been recognised” (emphasis in original) and the view that the Comintern was “a tool of the Soviet state and subsequently Stalin” have been superseded. On the other, reassessment “has not led historians to dismiss the centrality of either the Comintern or the Soviet Union to the Communist perspective.” Worley, “Reflections,” 241-4.

“the characterization of British Communists as ‘slaves of Moscow’ during this period is utterly misleading.”³⁵

This contestation is a central organizing device for Thorpe’s analysis. Yet it is based on caricature as the absence of citation suggests. He claims, in prose parading as precise but which is in fact parodic, that this school posits a model “whereby an order was made in Moscow; was then transmitted with total clarity; and was then followed with complete obedience by the party leadership. The latter, in turn, transmitted the order to its members, again with total clarity; it was then followed, again with complete obedience, by party members.”³⁶ Such exact characterization surely merits specific reference to the work of those so characterized, particularly in the case of Pelling who, as we have seen, recognized the problems of implementing Comintern directives. Yet in Thorpe’s extensive *oeuvre* there is only a single quotation from Pelling, his reference to Comintern control in the Third Period assuming a “quasi-military character.”³⁷ At the highest, this is metaphoric exaggeration. It is relevant that Thorpe nowhere quotes Pelling on slavery, for in the almost 200 pages of Pelling’s book there is only one such reference. Pelling writes that at the zenith of the Third Period, the CPGB was “reduced to an almost slavish submission to Moscow.” Pelling’s image, which impressionistically but effectively evokes one facet of the CPGB’s predicament, is translated by Thorpe so that “almost slavish” becomes “the epitome of slavishness.”³⁸ There is a difference and an infidelity to the sources being criticized. If in the most rigorous terms, “almost slavish” still smacks too much of coercion when the CPGB’s subordination was self-willed. Thorpe is constructing and demolishing a straw man based on one sentence in a pioneering text 40 years old, a text long supplemented by other work which vindicated its message of Comintern domination of the CPGB.

“Many historians,” Thorpe insists, “have seen the British party as the epitome of slavishness to Moscow.”³⁹ The only one of the “many” he mentions in addition to Pelling is Dewar. But, if we read Dewar we find no reference to “slaves of Moscow,” “marionettes,” or the rest of the paraphernalia of automaticity. Dewar insists upon the hegemony of the Comintern while distinguishing different degrees of intrusiveness from Moscow at different times: “The rein may have at first not

³⁵Thorpe, “Communist International,” 73; Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 31, 44, 62; and Thorpe, “Comintern ‘Control’,” 638, 662.

³⁶Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 4. Cf. again tilting at windmills: “In short, the idea of a solid, unbreakable chain of command from Stalin’s office in the Kremlin to the most minor CPGB member is not one that can be sustained.” Thorpe, “Comintern ‘Control’,” 662.

³⁷Thorpe, “Comintern ‘Control’,” 643. Thorpe quotes only half Pelling’s sentence, eliminating the first half’s reference to “an *almost slavish* submission” (emphasis added). See Pelling, *Communist Party*, 54.

³⁸Thorpe, “Comintern ‘Control’,” 642. Thorpe’s claim, taken from Fishman, that Pelling remains more influential than Macfarlane, is based on little evidence. See Fishman, *Communist Party*, 45, n. 34, 35.

³⁹Thorpe, “Comintern ‘Control’,” 642.

been tight, not even felt by the members but it was nonetheless there."⁴⁰ Until the Third Period, Dewar stresses, the Comintern took account of indigenous factors and problems of implementation. In the early years "there was exhaustive discussion" and "national peculiarities were recognized and tactical flexibility accepted within the framework of the strategic 'general line'."⁴¹ Both Pelling and Dewar suffer from imperfections but they deserve considered criticism not caricature.

Similar weaknesses inform Thorpe's construction of the revisionist school. The one British writer who has explicitly aligned herself with American revisionism, Fishman, is not included. Instead the burden falls completely on Macintyre. Yet if, as Thorpe suggests, "the new labour historians have suggested that we should not get interested in this relationship [between the Comintern and the CPGB]: it made no real difference to what Communists did in their daily lives," then Macintyre is an unlikely and unwitting revisionist, for he has nowhere asserted this. When Thorpe inveighs against revisionists: "it will simply not do to argue that we can take the politics out of political history," he is ascribing to Macintyre arguments the latter has never made.⁴² The work Thorpe refers to is focused on CPGB ideas and activists: it nowhere dismisses the importance of "high politics." Macintyre seeks to go beyond political history, not replace it; he is extending and supplementing political history, not rejecting it. His analysis of the transformations in Marxist thought in Britain, for example, takes full account of the influence of "official Communism" and the CPGB's active attempts to impose a new order in revolutionary philosophy and pedagogy. Macintyre, moreover, has written elsewhere, and in some detail, about the institutional politics of Communism and the relationship between the Australian party and the Comintern.⁴³

Thorpe's final category, "the post-revisionists," is embarrassed by the absence of a single British historian. The only exemplar cited is Maurice Isserman, conventionally considered a leading light of American revisionism. This categorization of the literature is brittle. It provides a fragile basis for the re-examination of issues. If Thorpe's work is to proceed on this flabby basis — "the CPGB was not a slave of Moscow; but neither was Moscow completely irrelevant" — and is to assert its novelty by its distance from two parodic "slaves" and "anti-politics" schools, one approaches it with trepidation. Moreover, while the only basis for a serious post-revisionism is the very difficult project of a total history, which yokes together history from above and history from below, Thorpe is resolutely wedded to "high politics."

⁴⁰Dewar, *Communist Politics*, 41.

⁴¹Dewar, *Communist Politics*, 42.

⁴²Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 4-5; Fishman, *Communist Party*, 18.

⁴³Stuart Macintyre, "Dealing with Moscow: The Comintern and the Early History of the Communist Party of Australia," *Labour History*, 67 (November 1994), 128-43; and Stuart Macintyre, *The Reds: The Communist Party of Australia from Origins to Illegality* (St Leonards 1998).

Nevertheless, he states that he wants not only to add detail to existing knowledge but “to do much more than that ... to address the nature of the relationship between the CPGB and the Comintern” and “explain how power was negotiated and shared out in the Communist movement during the Comintern period.”⁴⁴ This would suggest the need for explicit formulation of the factors involved, of the power, interests and motivations of the parties, their goals when pursuing key issues, an account of outcomes, what influenced them, and how they changed in different periods. It would benefit from some comparisons between the relationship of the Comintern and the CPGB and that which Moscow enjoyed with other parties. Yet despite his dissatisfaction with existing work and ambitious desire for greater exactitude, Thorpe elaborates no alternative model. On the contrary, his account of relationships is narrative, empirical, and impressionistic.

Characterization of the institutional relationship between the Comintern and its constituents is an essential beginning in determining how power was shared out. For it demonstrates that, formally, the CPGB was not independent. Through 250 pages of his monograph, Thorpe makes only two brief references to this. He tells us, somewhat haltingly, that the CPGB was “part of a worldwide network of Communist parties; indeed the CI [Comintern] was conceived as a world party of which the national parties were only branches.” Twenty pages later, he briefly rehearses the 21 conditions of membership which subordinated the CPGB to the Comintern.⁴⁵ Thorpe’s lack of emphasis contrasts with that of the CPGB itself, which stressed proudly and publicly, at least before 1935, that it was a subsidiary unit in an international party. Throughout his book, moreover, there is no analysis of the decreasing democracy in the Comintern and the increasing formal powers of its executive (ECCI) which by the end of the 1920s had the right to ensure that its decisions were “promptly and strictly” carried out by all sections, cancel or change national decisions, dissolve national parties, expel their members, even fix their contributions. By that time, the practice and culture of the Comintern was rigidly centralist, not democratic centralist.⁴⁶

In terms of formal legitimacy, this is important to the negotiation of power. But it is subsidiary to the actors’ ability to mobilize resources, sanctions, and

⁴⁴Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 4-5. For important discussions of decision making and power relevant to the Comintern but absent from the work under discussion here, see Robert Dahl, *Who Governs?* (New Haven 1961), Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London 1977), and Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (London 1979).

⁴⁵Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 13, 38.

⁴⁶See Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International, 1919-43. Documents, vol. 1* (London 1971), 309-16; Jane Degras, ed., *The Communist International, 1919-43. Documents, vol. 2* (London 1971), 188-200; and Grant Adibekov and Eleonora Shakhnazarova, “Reconstructions of the Comintern Organisational Structure,” in Mikhail Narinsky and Jürgen Rojahn, eds., *Centre and Periphery: The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents* (Amsterdam 1996), 57-73.

ideology. Here we must add to the calculus the overwhelming resources the Russians could deploy in Comintern transactions. From 1920, the Russian party's wielding of state power, its prestige as maker of the revolution which eluded other parties, and its relative monopoly of material resources, ensured an undemocratic disequilibrium within the Comintern. This must surely qualify Thorpe's idea of negotiation, certainly if the term carries connotations of even a rough balance of bargaining power. If it suggests, rather, dependence on the part of the national branches, then the increased tempo of "Bolshevization" from 1924 sealed the fate of the ECCI as an instrument of the Russian party. Reviews of the literature conclude that even in the early 1920s "any major decision" was taken by the Bolshevik leadership: "The ruling would be communicated to the Russian party delegation to the ECCI which then ensured its passage through the Comintern executive. This practice evolved under Lenin, was consolidated during the interregnum and became set in stone under Stalin."⁴⁷

The assimilation of the Comintern into the Russian state decisively aligned Comintern directives with Russian foreign policy. This is central to any assessment of the centre-periphery relationship. It is simultaneously an essential explanatory device for understanding Comintern decisions, an important qualification of the idea of negotiation, and an indispensable starting point for assessing "how power was shared out in the Communist movement." Yet these developments are scarcely touched upon: in the whole of Thorpe's lengthy monograph, there are only a handful of scattered and superficial references to political changes in Russia. Thorpe provides no explicit assessment or periodization of the Comintern, apart from vague references to intervention in national parties being greater in one period than another. The rich literature, which, for example, in one strand distinguishes a primitive period, 1920-23; the Zinoviev period, 1924-27; the increased tempo of intervention in the Third Period; and the more controversial changes from 1935, is not deployed.⁴⁸

Rather than inserting the CPGB into this kind of analytical framework, Thorpe opts for a relentlessly British approach. His unstated but pervasive model focuses largely and empirically on the CPGB and its responses to Comintern decisions. He has little to say about CPGB initiatives on issues outside its own province of Britain and the colonies. That these were negligible, even in comparison with other national parties, is very clear. By the end of 1924, the CPGB was being lectured: "The Communist Party of Great Britain should follow actively and discuss systematically the problems of the Communist International and of brother parties. Previously that had not been done in a satisfactory manner."⁴⁹ Zinoviev's subsequent commenda-

⁴⁷ McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, 44.

⁴⁸ For the literature, see Narinsky and Rojahn, *Centre and Periphery*; McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, xxi-v.

⁴⁹ Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, Moscow (hereafter RGASPI), Comintern Archive (hereafter CA), 495/100/135, ECCI to CPGB Politbureau (PB), December 1924.

tion of the CPGB's position on the controversy in the Russian party is well known. It is also instructive that Comintern representatives found party leaders' understanding of the issues questionable and were directly involved in drafting the CPGB resolution condemning the Russian Opposition.⁵⁰ The CPGB's neglect of the, admittedly and increasingly circumscribed, democratic moment in world democratic centralism, the fact that even in the 1920s its positive input into Comintern decision making was derisory, bespeaks insularity and deference: it therefore requires registering.

Instead, Thorpe concentrates upon assessing dependence and independence through the prism of decision making inside the CPGB. If he dispenses with the essential Comintern context, his analytical framework is also devoid of criteria of measurement. He provides not even a rudimentary means of ranking political issues and their significance to the two parties. He provides no criteria at all for distinguishing the depth and quality of disagreements or failures by the CPGB to meet Comintern imperatives. Yet we need to weigh very differently a vote against an issue at a Congress and sustained opposition by the party leadership to the Comintern position. We need to discriminate between a simple omission to raise something in a union branch through lack of conviction or fear of criticism and, further up the line, protest and the formation of a faction. We need to differentiate refusal to send a delegate to a not particularly important Comintern meeting through lack of funds, at one extreme, from opposition to a new strategic line, motivated by political disagreement, at the other, if we are to arrive at a sharper estimation of the relationship. We need to know how, in whose favour, disputed issues were resolved. In the absence of such yardsticks, conflation of a wide range of issues and disagreements can lead to judgements that magnify independence, even though in reality it is matters such as Nina Ponomareva's hats that are contested while important issues such as the Soviet invasion of Hungary are accepted.

So, for example, Thorpe asserts sweepingly, "British Communists' approaches to politics varied to such an extent that the idea of party members simply following 'orders from Moscow' is untenable. At every turn of the line there was dissent and this did not disappear once the line had been changed."⁵¹ We have to ask: what was the nature, quality, and depth of the "dissent" to each major strategic orientation, how many people were involved, who were they, how long did their disagreement last and how were matters concluded? Thorpe provides four examples of dissent: when the embryonic party moved towards parliamentary action and affiliation to the Labour Party, at the inception of the United Front, during the move to the Third Period, and during the Popular Front. In the first case, Thorpe provides no evidence. There was vocal opposition over these issues but it was defused by the Comintern and really belongs to the party's pre-history. While problems continued — several

⁵⁰RGASPI, CA, 495/100/173, Albert Inkpin to Bennett, 3 December 1924; and RGASPI, CA, 495/100/156, Ramsay to Comintern, 3 December 1924.

⁵¹Thorpe, "Communist International," 74.

branches in Glasgow left the CPGB in 1922 over the decision to withdraw Communist candidates, an incident Thorpe omits to mention — opposition was transitory and small scale.

The only evidence produced for dissent over the United Front and the Popular Front is that in the first case twenty per cent of the votes at the 1922 Congress were cast against it; and in the second case that Pollitt had to stress that, in espousing the Popular Front, the party was not rejecting socialism.⁵² (We deal with the Third Period later.) Twenty per cent of delegates voting against the United Front as part of the policy process in the party's second year is mild dissent. No organized opposition emerged and the strategy was strongly supported, despite differences over tactics, until 1927. Thorpe's evidence for his assertion of differences over the Popular Front raises fundamental questions as to his methodology. He cites only one example of dissidence without quotation or paraphrase. The conscientious student who follows up this solitary reference — it is to the London District Congress of 1938 — will find only a bare statement from Pollitt that the Popular Front represented no retreat from socialism. There is no reference to dissent. There is no evidence in the report that Pollitt made this statement because he was facing opposition. Thorpe imaginatively, but in terms of historical method, illegitimately, *infers* discord. In this specific case, Thorpe's data is non-existent.⁵³ Overall, he inflates minor into major disagreement and provides slender and superficial evidence for his sweeping revisionist conclusions.

Demonstrating similar lack of proportion, he cites a number of minor omissions by the CPGB to carry out Comintern directives: such as failure to donate £50 to *Inprecorr*, or send a delegate to a farmworkers' conference, as well as a "strongly worded" protest over Comintern criticism. On this tenuous basis he again concludes sweepingly: "The party clearly believed that CI decisions were negotiable, therefore."⁵⁴ The distinctions between a farmworkers' conference and the strategic political line, between protest and opposition, between major and minor, are dissolved by a *non sequitur*. Thorpe goes on to assert "[the party] extended this even so far as to call for Radek's inclusion in the British Commission at the time of the fifth world congress despite the fact that he was now falling out of favour in Moscow."⁵⁵ His unwitting juxtaposition of this respectful request to overlook Radek's political unreliability, given his knowledge of Britain (written at a time when the CPGB failed to understand the seriousness of the factional struggle in Russia), with "on the other hand, the party and Moscow were at one over Trotsky" highlights the problems with Thorpe's lack of discrimination between issues. The Radek letter, a relatively minor entreaty, is conflated with what for Zinoviev and

⁵²Thorpe, "Communist International," 74-5; Macfarlane, *Communist Party*, 101.

⁵³CPGB, *Communist Party London District Annual Congress, June 1938: For Unity in London* (London 1938), 18.

⁵⁴Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 62-3.

⁵⁵Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 63.

the Russian leadership of the Comintern was a life and death issue of primary significance.⁵⁶

Analytical promiscuity can only produce inexact and unbalanced judgement, a problem emphasized by the absence of international comparisons in Thorpe's work. Yet, such comparison over an issue such as the factional struggle in Russia can provide the beginnings for developing at least a rough and ready calculus of conformity and independence. The CPGB in 1924-25 — Thorpe tells us there were "a handful of expulsions," when there were none, might be usefully contrasted with other national parties. The Belgian party, where the leadership carried on a sustained opposition to the Comintern, might be fruitfully compared with the Polish party, where the leadership sought to intervene to support Trotsky but were quickly and coercively quashed; and both might be usefully compared with the French party, where prominent leadership figures were expelled; and with the Canadian party which refused to condemn Trotsky; and finally with the CPGB where, if we dispense with the magnifying glass, dissent from the leadership's loyal support for the Comintern anathema was negligible.⁵⁷

Finally, in suggesting the limits of the Comintern's dominance of the CPGB, Thorpe provides a list of alternative influences: "Pressure from below, factional and individual rivalries, the stance of the State, the Labour Party and the trade unions, and working class responses, all played their part in determining party strategy."⁵⁸ Once again this is evasive. It unhelpfully conflates different kinds of factors, and different orders of explanation as well as strategy and its tactical adaptation. Moreover, Thorpe once more fails to provide even a rudimentary ranking of these factors. Is he arguing that the policies of the British state or "pressure from below" took precedence over Comintern policy in determining CPGB strategy? How do we rank "pressure from below" against the policy of the state and the Labour Party? Thorpe does not even begin to separate out and assess the influence of different factors from Comintern policy to trade union pressures and to differentiate the primary from the secondary. His only essay in asserting the predominance of indigenous factors relates to the Third Period to which we return below.

⁵⁶Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 63. See McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, 44-54.

⁵⁷Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 63; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/265, Report of Control Commission on the Case of A.E.E. Reade, 25 April 1925; "Maria Koszutska: 'Spineless People are Dangerous,'" *World Marxist Review*, 8 (1989), 82-5; Helmut Gruber, ed., *Soviet Russia Masters the Comintern* (New York 1974), 28-33; Catherine Legien, "A Contribution to the History of the Belgian Trotskyists, 1928-35," *Revolutionary History*, 7, 1, (1998), 4-34; and Rodney, *Soldiers of the International*, 95, 121.

⁵⁸Thorpe, "Comintern 'Control'," 662.

Mechanisms of Control

Any model seeking to transcend existing literature would elaborate the factors in the relationship between the Comintern and the CPGB making for unity and consensus on the one hand and dissension and conflict on the other: disparities between the imperatives of Soviet foreign policy and the requirements of class struggle in Britain are obvious examples. Thorpe does not explore this theme but he does examine a range of "control mechanisms" intended to overcome "severe obstacles" and "keep foreign Communists on the right lines." Obstacles listed are the legality of the CPGB which diminished dependence on Moscow; the British state's curtailment of the activities of Comintern agents and problems in using coercion against CPGB members; the distance London lay from Moscow and difficulties of travel and communication. In the face of these obstacles, ideology and identification with the USSR were "not deemed sufficient to keep foreign Communists on the right lines."⁵⁹ Thorpe, therefore, starts from an unelaborated but commonsensical nationalist model where political differentiation rather than political identification between the Comintern leaders and the CPGB is inherent and assumed; for the nature and wellsprings of potential conflict are left unexplored. In accordance with this inexplicit differentiation, he assumes a reluctance on the part of British Communists to accept Comintern directives and a need for the Comintern to impose policies on the CPGB through the use of "control mechanisms."

The mechanisms are "surveillance and supervision," monitoring of CPGB documents, reports from members of other parties, surveillance of British visitors to Moscow, maintenance of a Comintern representative in Britain, and a CPGB representative in Moscow. A second set of mechanisms are termed "concrete assistance," notably financial subsidies and deployment of foreign Communists in Britain. A third avenue was the provision of propaganda material, though the scale of this varied and was greatest in 1924-1935. The Comintern could also sponsor individuals and factions, manipulate the youth movement, privilege students returning from the Comintern's International Lenin School (ILS) in Moscow, and, finally and rarely, fall back on "coercion and intimidation." Thorpe concludes that external compulsion was "not sufficiently powerful to force the CPGB, over sustained periods, to do what it did not itself wish to do."⁶⁰ This is important because the failure of mechanisms of control provides, in Thorpe's analysis, the guarantee of the party's autonomy from Moscow.

The fundamental problem with this is that there were no "sustained periods" when the CPGB had to be "forced" by the Comintern "to do what it did not itself wish to do." The CPGB typically wanted to do what the Comintern wanted it to do. There were occasional doubts and at times grumbling and whinging. There were periods, such as 1928 or 1939, when there was some resistance. These were largely, although not completely, resolved by the large degree of consensus between

⁵⁹Thorpe, "Comintern 'Control'," 641.

⁶⁰Thorpe, "Comintern 'Control'," 640.

London and Moscow, and the legitimacy London accorded to the Comintern as the ultimate arbiter of Communist truth, not by “control” or coercion. That legitimacy was the preponderant and ultimate factor cementing the CPGB to the Comintern. Thorpe’s cursory treatment of the CPGB’s identification with the USSR leads him to underestimate the party’s essential identification with the politics of “the workers’ state” and the Comintern. Contrary to Thorpe, this allegiance was primary in explaining Comintern domination. Comintern hegemony was largely forged in Britain not Moscow. It was largely the product of a voluntary impulse on the part of British Communists. In the end, compliance stemmed from the beliefs and values of party members projected onto the Comintern and the USSR. It was freely chosen, not coerced; control mechanisms were important but they were secondary, reinforcing factors, more relevant to British comprehension of Comintern policy and the supervision of its implementation than to its acceptance or rejection.

Thorpe’s scrutiny of this fundamental, defining issue runs to a brace of quotations about Russia from CPGB leaders prefacing peremptory rejection of the view that identification with the USSR adequately bonded the CPGB to the Comintern. This is to underestimate the internationalism of British Communists and their blending of the socialist fatherland, the Russian party, and the Comintern to constitute the fulcrum of that internationalism. It was not simply the belief that Russia, not Britain, was “the workers’ country:” a choice most decisively affirmed in the winter of 1939; or that to criticize the USSR was “to sin against the Holy Ghost;” or even the CPGB’s self-declared “*implicit faith* in the Communist Party of Russia and the Executive Committee of the Communist International” (Emphasis added).⁶¹ Faith and emotion were melded with scientific Marxism and the pivotal belief that:

a sufficient degree of homogeneity pertained in the international workers’ movement to admit of its central direction. The logical corollary of this — which outsiders could never understand — was the conviction that the right tactic to adopt locally was determined by international considerations. This was internationalism — so grievously lacking in August 1914 — and its organisational expression was subordination of the national sections to the centre.⁶²

This was the ABC of the CPGB. Its first leader, Arthur MacManus, responded to accusations of foreign domination: “The social forces are worldwide. They know no nationality.”⁶³ Cadres like Palme Dutt were perplexed that comrades could consider pushing dissidence so far as to attract the wrath of the Comintern: there was no salvation outside it. Far from conceiving of the Comintern as some external

⁶¹Thorpe, “Comintern ‘Control,’” 640-1; Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *No Mean Fighter* (London 1978), 184; and Sehri Saklatvala, *The Fifth Commandment: A Biography of Shapurji Saklatvala* (Salford 1991), 131; *Workers’ Weekly*, 23 January 1925.

⁶²John Callaghan, *Rajani Palme Dutt: A Study in British Stalinism* (London 1993), 287.

⁶³Quoted in Pelling, *Communist Party*, 18.

controller, the CPGB cadre regarded it as “our party”, “our leaders.”⁶⁴ This was expressed by Macfarlane long ago: “The most important point of all to grasp is that the ordinary party member did not see the relationship in terms of ‘outside control’ and ‘Moscow gold’. He saw himself as a member of a great working-class international movement guided by outstanding Marxist revolutionaries who were making Russia into a land of socialism.”⁶⁵ For such party members, the Comintern and its politics were internal and immanent.

The documents are replete with statements from CPGB leaders, such as: “The Communist International must give the Party its best political assistance and help in coping with the big tasks that lie before the Party.”⁶⁶ The CPGB attempted to instil the spirit of Comintern membership at all levels. The syllabus of party schools announced: “Task of the course: To understand, absorb and correctly put into practice the general line of the CPGB and the Comintern.”⁶⁷ The leadership urged that “every Party speaker do his utmost to carry out the instructions of the Central Executive Committee of the Communist International If every one of our speakers carries through this instruction they will be a living part of the Communist International’s worldwide May Day Campaign.”⁶⁸ Pollitt expatiated: “The biggest lesson of the whole of this discussion to me is the value of being a section of an international party,” and asserted against internal pressure: “The Comintern represents the leadership of revolutionary struggle and its criticisms were stronger than London or Tyneside.”⁶⁹ J.T. Murphy recorded: “Many times I heard the remark, ‘We are getting living proof of the value and importance of belonging to the CI.’” And he pronounced: “We dread to think what would have happened had we not belonged to the International and received their guidance and authority.”⁷⁰ Members felt that in a crisis: “The International was a tower of strength and sound judgement.” In all eventualities, “the Party must have a leadership which gives the guarantee to the membership and the CI that the line will be carried out.”⁷¹

In terms of theory, the CPGB had a clear conception of its dependence on the Comintern: “We have a good practical leadership in the British Party but none of us with the exception of Dutt can make much claim of theoretical Marxism,”

⁶⁴National Museum of Labour History, Manchester (hereafter NMLH), CPGB Archive (hereafter CPGBA), CP/IND/HUTT/1/2, Rajani Palme Dutt to Max Eastman, 1 July 1925.

⁶⁵Macfarlane, *Communist Party*, 276.

⁶⁶RGASPI, CA, 495/10/596, Statement by Comrade T. Bell on the Congress of the CPGB, 17 December 1929.

⁶⁷RGASPI, CA, 495/100/696, Report of New Party School, n.d., 1930.

⁶⁸RGASPI, CA, 495/100/118, PB to District Party Committees, 26 April 1923.

⁶⁹RGASPI, CA, 495/100/598, CC, 7-11 August 1929.

⁷⁰RGASPI, CA, 495/100/596, J.T. Murphy, Eleventh Congress CPGB, 10 December 1929.

⁷¹RGASPI, CA, 495/100/685, Summary of Correspondence on the Question of Comrade Homer, 11 April 1930; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/596, J.T. Murphy, Eleventh Congress CPGB, 10 December 1929.

Gallacher informed the Russians.⁷² Reports to Moscow reminded the Comintern of “the general theoretical backwardness of our membership” and noted that “our Party workers have not always the time to read.”⁷³ In comparison with the Belgians, the Canadians, the French, the Germans, the Spanish, the CPGB stood out in the 1920s as one of the parties most politically dependent upon the Comintern. One historian sympathetic to the party concluded that, by the 1950s: “Intellectually undistinguished and bereft of even the capacity for independent Marxist thinking, the entire British party leadership had for more than three decades demonstrated uncritical deference to the Soviets.”⁷⁴

If all this was fundamental and necessary to Comintern domination and CPGB compliance, it was not sufficient. Despite the shared commonality of politics, it is inherent in Marxism, as a method of analysis, that analysts can reach very different conclusions as to the nature of a conjuncture and the strategy required in it. It is natural and inevitable that in Marxist organizations there will be differences of opinion; despite their “implicit faith” in the Comintern, this was true of the CPGB.⁷⁵ This is where control mechanisms did play a part, although here again Thorpe’s touch is uncertain. It is typified by his treatment of the vexed problem of financial subsidies. Kendall’s conclusions on the important role Moscow gold played in the party’s formation have stood the test of time. It is now clear that significant subsidies continued through the 1920s and 1930s. The newly opened archives disclose substantial allocations running from at least £60,000 in 1921–22 to £45,000 for 1927 and £36,000 for 1928. They paid for almost all aspects of CPGB activity: between 1920 and 1922, membership subscriptions constituted less than three per cent of total income. In 1924 Inkpin told the Comintern — we cannot, of course, completely discount an element of self-interested exaggeration — that the CPGB’s own income was approximately £1000 and its liabilities £400. Thorpe himself calculates that by 1927, Comintern subsidy to the CPGB (with a membership of less than 7,000) was equal to two-thirds of the income of the mass-membership Labour Party. It is therefore difficult to accept his summation: “The extent of the Russian subsidies can also be exaggerated.”⁷⁶

⁷²RGASPI, CA, 495/100/440, The British Party and the Lenin School, Speech by William Gallacher, n.d., 1927.

⁷³RGASPI, CA, 495/100/366, CPGB Agitprop to ECCI Agitprop, 19 January 1926; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/524, CPGB Agitprop to ECCI Agitprop, 1 December 1927.

⁷⁴Morgan, “Harry Pollitt,” 188.

⁷⁵Hence the triviality of an approach which questions Comintern domination because some CPGB members accepted it.

⁷⁶Kendall, *Revolutionary Movement*, 249–56; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/61, The Party Commission, First Report, n.d., July 1922; 495/100/69, Inkpin to Arthur MacManus, 14 December 1922; 495/100/166, Budget for 1924; 495/100/277, Inkpin to Petrovsky, 8 June 1925; 495/100/507, unsigned letter to “Dear P,” 15 December 1927 (filed in 1928); 495/100/171, Inkpin to Comintern Secretariat, 12 June 1924; 495/100/173, Inkpin to Bob Stewart, 6 March 1924; and Thorpe, “Comintern ‘Control’,” 649, *Communist Party*, 29.

Thorpe goes on to claim that it is “plausible to argue that the money, while gratefully received, made little real difference.”⁷⁷ This is unsustainable: without the subsidy the CPGB in all probability would have ceased to exist at some point in the 1920s, like Sylvia Pankhurst’s organization, or at best been consigned to the shadowy existence of the Socialist Labour Party and its successors. This was the considered view of Murphy, intimately involved with the subsidies from their inception: without them the party would “have probably gone out of existence within a year or two of formation.”⁷⁸ Keeping the CPGB alive, subsidies enabled it to build its organization and compete with rivals in a fashion quite out of proportion to its membership: by 1931, it financed 41 full-time staff, representing one full-timer for every 165 members.⁷⁹

As early as 1921, the CPGB decided that Politbureau members should be paid £5 a week, other functionaries £4 a week. This was referred to as “the trade union rate,” but was more than most trade unionists and CPGB members earned. The general secretary, Albert Inkpin, insisted that party staff “must be guaranteed a livelihood,” but this was a generous livelihood when at times the majority of party members were unemployed. These salaries could not be paid without Comintern subsidies and, not surprisingly, the documents suggest that a return to the factory or the dole was regarded with something short of enthusiasm. There were further benefits such as trips abroad and opportunities for journalism: a Comintern representative explained to Dutt, who received a salary direct from Moscow, that the Russian press paid 80 gold roubles for long articles, 15-20 for short pieces, and that 4 or 5 articles could be placed each month. Moreover, a range of employment was offered and was sometimes seen as attracting the inefficient and politically undesirable: “Willie McLaine, another incompetent is living on the Famine Fund. Whitehead, with his wicked associations with women and wine in Berlin is worse than incompetent, is also living on the Famine Fund. When Comrade T. A. Jackson is proved incompetent as Editor of *The Communist*, a position must be found for him in the Information Bureau.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 29. Cf his emphatic, contradictory claim “the party’s very existence depended utterly on money from the International.” Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 66.

⁷⁸Quoted in Kendall, *Revolutionary Movement*, 417.

⁷⁹RGASPI, CA, 495/100/737, Report no. 9 by “Tappy”, 25 August 1931.

⁸⁰RGASPI, CA, 495/100/28, EC, 2 April 1921; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/103, CC, 2 February 1923; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/166, Party Organisation, 1924; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/171, Inkpin to Comintern, 12 June 1924; and RGASPI, CA, 495/100/351, Organising Bureau, 24 February 1926. In 1924, average wages were £2.30 per week; for miners and skilled engineers, the CPGB’s largest occupational groups, the figures were £3.46 and £3 respectively. From 1921, unemployment benefit for adult males was 15 shillings (75p) plus 5 shillings (25p) for a wife and 1 shilling (5p) for each child; by 1930, 40 per cent of party members were unemployed. Derek Aldcroft, *The Inter-War Economy: Britain, 1919-39*,

Comintern subsidy permeated key aspects of party organization in the 1920s. When the Comintern agent Borodin, despatched to secure the reorganization of the CPGB, was arrested in Glasgow in August 1922 and asked for his passport: "he slapped his trouser pocket and said that 'this — meaning money — had been his passport.'" Some party leaders, it seems, had to be literally bought: after Murphy's expulsion in 1932, Gallacher recalled how Murphy had quit the CPGB ten years earlier because his salary was stopped, returning only after he was assured of its restoration. Quite apart from the institutionalized annual allocations, when the CPGB encountered difficulties, whether over wages, in by-elections, in the Fife miners' union, in the United Mineworkers of Scotland, or in the Clothing Workers' Union, its reflex was to ask Moscow for more money. Requests for special funds to bale out the party-controlled Clothing Workers' Union, led by CPGB member Sam Elsbury, were headed in the interests of secrecy but with some justification in view of the organization's remorseless search for customers and hard cash: "Sam's Business." The organization of party education was inextricably bound up with securing Russian money to resource it. Disputes over the party's national school were resolved in the Comintern's favour, but it had to pay a price, being landed with a bill of £700, including £5 a week wages for the tutors. When Moscow purged the party leadership in 1929, wages, so important at the start of the decade, once again became a bone of contention. The response of full-timers dismissed their employment was to appeal against the party to the cornucopian Comintern; several solicited paid employment for their families in Moscow.⁸¹

Asserting naively that: "Clearly, such levels of financial support cannot have been without an impact. Yet it is difficult to see precisely what the impact was," Thorpe fails to confront how subsidy was utilized as a "control mechanism."⁸² Between 1920 and 1923, dispensation of largesse, relatively uncontrolled by the Russians provided a control mechanism for the CPGB leadership. Mikhail Borodin, then Comintern representative in Britain, paid tribute to the influence money could exert when he informed his superiors in 1922:

Any authority which has heretofore been exercised was due not to the quality of the Centre but to the fact that the means which we allocated to the Party were all at the disposal of one

London 1970, 357; John Stevenson, *British Society, 1914-45*, Harmondsworth 1984, 121, 274; Thorpe, "Membership," 789. RGASPI, CA, 495/100/212, John Pepper to Rajani Palme Dutt, 26 August 1925; and RGASPI, CA, 495/100/113, W.R. Stoker to Nikolai Bukharin, 23 February 1923.

⁸¹Dan N. Jacobs, *Borodin, Stalin's Man in China* (Cambridge, MA 1981), 104; NMLH, CPGBA, CI 3, Political Bureau, 7-8 May 1932; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/524, A. Clarke to A.J. Bennett, 10 February 1928; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/491, To the Presidium of the AUCTU from Tom Bell and Harry Pollitt, 28 Nov 1928; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/585, Bell to Inkpin, 14 June, 10 October 1929; and RGASPI, CA, 495/100/738, Robin Page Arnot to Alexander Lozovsky, 2 January 1931.

⁸²Thorpe, "Comintern 'Control'," 649-50.

or more individuals who thus had economic power rather than the power derived from organization and efficient leadership. Naturally, the moment such financial means were withdrawn or became scanty, there came an end to the economic power wielded by the individuals and the whole business began to crumble and disintegrate.⁸³

The view of the Comintern and its supporters in the Dutt-Pollitt "nucleus" was that MacManus' control of the sinews of patronage was disorganizing the party. There were arguments over who had authority over subsidies and disputes over payments to MacManus and Gallacher while the CPGB Control Commission wrote directly to the Comintern seeking clarification of the position. The subsidies played a role in the internal party crisis of 1922-3 and Dutt later claimed his group wanted their termination, but they were maintained for the Comintern's own purposes, subject to closer regulation. The new Comintern control mechanism, after cutbacks in 1923, was driven by and sought to drive Bolshevization and secure loyalty to the *troika* of Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Stalin. It required more detailed accounts of expenditure, targeting specific ventures such as the *Workers' Weekly* and work in the districts.⁸⁴

Comintern subsidy had a clear impact in keeping the party in being, and enabling it to live beyond its own means. Within that perspective it might be argued that disputation over the issue directed effort away from building a dues-paying membership and political tasks in Britain. After 1924, it became a mechanism through which the Comintern could influence which work the CPGB did and which work it prioritized. There is no need to dispute Thorpe's claim that the CPGB regarded such funding as legitimate to question his estimation that it had no impact: "It is," he asserts, "a peculiarly crude interpretation which argues that finance equalled control."⁸⁵ It is also another straw man. Finance did not *equal* control. In conjunction with other factors such as political and ideological conviction, it lubricated and facilitated Comintern domination. Material factors, a living wage, economic security, aligned with other motivations, being paid for what activists felt was important, and rewarding, plausibly reinforced political allegiances. The pleadings of Inkpin, Jock Wilson, Nat Watkins, and other CPGB leaders when removed from their employment certainly suggests the importance they attached to working full-time for the party. On this matter, the conclusions of other students of the Moscow archive carry greater conviction than Thorpe's simple dismissal of the significance of subsidy:

⁸³RGASPI, CA, 495/100/53, Mikhail Borodin to Presidium, Comintern, 24 June 1922.

⁸⁴RGASPI, CA, 495/100/123, Control Commission to EC, 1 January 1923; Control Commission to Comintern, July 1923; Palme Dutt, letter to *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 May 1966; and RGASPI, CA, 495/100/173, Inkpin to Bob Stewart, 6 March 1924.

⁸⁵Cf: "continual worry over matters of finance naturally prevents the party officials from devoting as much time to political things as might otherwise be," RGASPI, CA, 495/100/23, Report to the Executive Committee regarding the Communist Party of Great Britain, 31 December 1921 by J. Friis; and Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 278.

Leaving the movement meant finding a new job and starting a new life. Loyalty to Moscow on the other hand brought economic security. A break with Moscow was not merely ideological it was financial. The Soviet subsidies helped ensure economic and psychological loyalty to the Soviet Union. We do not claim they were the primary source of that loyalty; many party cadres were talented people who sacrificed a great deal for communism. But the financial ties made it easier for dedicated Communists to remain committed to the movement.⁸⁶

Finance was not a primary or autonomous factor in bonding London to Moscow. It played its part, together with other "control mechanisms." They were secondary to what Studer and Unfried term the ideological-political nexus, the personal nexus and the "cultural attachment forged by an emotional and intellectual identity with a Stalinist 'way of life'."⁸⁷

The Politics of the Comintern and the CPGB, 1920-30

Scrutiny of CPGB policies between 1920 and 1930 discloses no instance where political strategy was initiated by the CPGB and no case where the CPGB opposed Comintern policy (Table 1). The provenance of the strategic decisions, sealing the break with ultra-leftism embodied in the orientation towards Parliament and the Labour Party, the United Front, recognizing the retreat from the immediate conquest of power and prescribing critical alliances with other working-class parties, the Third Period, involving characterization of the Labour Party and unions as "social fascist" — all lay in Moscow and were accepted by the British. The major matter in contention was not acceptance but implementation, not strategic orientation but tactical application.⁸⁸

So, for example, at an ECCI meeting in July 1923, the Comintern criticized the CPGB's "inadequate and aimless" application of the United Front and called for a more critical approach to the Labour Party while maintaining entry work and the campaign for affiliation.⁸⁹ An ECCI meeting the following year corrected the party's over enthusiastic response to Labour's December 1923 election success: it would not, as the CPGB believed, sharpen class struggle, but defuse it by reforms which would strengthen capital. In consequence, detailed instructions were despatched from Moscow on the conduct of the 1924 General Election campaign. In December 1924, an ECCI commission recommended a firmer orientation to working with and criticizing the Labour left. Given the nature of the strategy there was intensive

⁸⁶RGASPI, CA, 495/100/688, letters from Inkpin, J.R. Wilson, 7 January 1930; and Klehr *et al.*, *Soviet World*, 162-3.

⁸⁷Brigitte Studer and Berthold Unfried, "At the Beginning of a History: Visions of the Comintern After the Opening of the Archives," *International Review of Social History*, 42 (December 1997), 434.

⁸⁸See, for example, Macfarlane, *Communist Party*, 60-2, 94-101.

⁸⁹Macfarlane, *Communist Party*, 103-5.

Table 1. Examples of CPGB compliance with or resistance to Comintern policies and directives, 1920-1930

| Date | CI Policy/Subject of Directive | CPGB position | Outcome |
|-------------|---|---|---|
| 1920 | <i>Parliamentarianism</i> | Some opposition | Acceptance |
| 1920 | <i>Affiliation to Labour Party</i> | Some opposition | Acceptance |
| 1920 | Establish covert "illegal" organization | Lack of understanding | CI agents established CPGB "Supplementary Department" |
| 1921 | <i>United Front</i> | Initial lack of understanding; some opposition when implications unfolded | Acceptance |
| 1922 | <i>Adopt democratic centralist structure</i> | Acceptance | Implemented |
| From 1922 | <i>Establish daily paper</i> | Refusal until granted financial support | <i>Daily Worker</i> established 1930 with financial support |
| 1922 | Maintain vanguard role in United Front | Acceptance | Party admitted mistakes in weakening independent agitation |
| 1923 | <i>Establish Minority Movement</i> | Acceptance; | Delays but MM established 1924 |
| 1923 | Postpone CPGB conference | Acceptance | Implemented |
| 1923 | Publish CI proceedings | Refusal | Not implemented |
| 1923 | Sharpen criticism of Labour Party | Acceptance | Implemented |
| 1923 | <i>Reorganization of leadership</i> | Acceptance | Implemented |
| 1923 | Maintain central grants to CPGB districts | Grants ended | Grants resumed in early 1924 |
| 1924 | Establish International Class War Prisoners' Aid on individual membership basis | Initial refusal | Put on individual basis in 1925 |
| 1924 | "Sharp principled criticism" of Labour Government | Acceptance | CPGB increasingly critical |

| | | | |
|------|--|---|---|
| 1924 | <i>Re-organize CPGB on basis of factory nuclei</i> | Acceptance | Failure to implement adequately due to objective circumstances |
| 1924 | Pollitt to replace Gallacher as head of British Bureau of RILU | Acceptance | Implemented |
| 1924 | Conduct of election campaign | Acceptance | Implemented |
| 1924 | <i>Condemnation of Trotsky's Preface to Lessons of October</i> | Acceptance | Implemented |
| 1924 | Develop links with Labour lefts | Initial resistance | Links developed 1925; National Left Wing Movement, 1926 |
| 1925 | Abolish probationary membership | Acceptance | Implemented |
| 1926 | <i>Comintern refusal to discuss developments inside CPSU</i> | Acceptance | Comintern decision endorsed |
| 1926 | Sharpen criticism of trade union leaders, left and right | Acceptance | Criticism increases in party press |
| 1926 | Move <i>Worker</i> from Glasgow to London | Acceptance | Implemented |
| 1926 | CI Commission of Investigation on General Strike concentrates attack on left trade union leaders | Acceptance | Further criticism. in party press |
| 1926 | Publish manifesto on General Strike by Central Council of Soviet Trade Unions | Protest | Implemented; PB later accepted that it made "a political error." |
| 1926 | Campaign to dissolve Parliament | Acceptance | Implemented |
| 1926 | Change plans for Party School | Refusal | Rejected on grounds of lateness |
| 1926 | Publish article by Arnot and Murphy criticizing CPGB's "vacillations to the right" | Protest against publication | Article published with reply |
| 1927 | Campaign on China | Acceptance | Implemented |
| 1927 | Communists should fight to remain in unions and Labour Party | Accept disaffiliation of trades councils from NMM under threat of disaffiliation from TUC | Petrovsky stated PB had committed "a very serious political mistake." |

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|------|--|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1928 | <i>Left turn against Labour Party and campaign for a "revolutionary workers' government"</i> | Acceptance after initial resistance | CC unanimously accept ECCI resolution as "complete change of policy." |
| 1928 | Establish "red" miners' union in Scotland | Accept perspective | Union established 1929 |
| 1928 | Agitate to set up "red" seamen's union | Initial resistance | Perspective adopted |
| 1929 | <i>Oppose Labour candidates in General election, abstain if no Communist candidate</i> | Acceptance | 25 CP candidates; small minority of CC opposed abstention; later confessed to "serious Right mistake." |
| 1929 | <i>Russian delegation to ECCI demands changes to CPGB leadership</i> | Acceptance | Implemented |
| 1930 | RILU demand perspective of "red" miners union for Britain | Acceptance | Perspective adopted |
| 1930 | CI demand withdrawal of red miners' union slogan | Acceptance | Slogan withdrawn |

Note: Major changes of political line and party organization, as well as issues perceived as significant by the Comintern, are italicized.

Sources: RGASPI, CA, 495/100/23, 103; 104; 113; 135; 141; 148; 235; 299; 305; 349; 493; 494; 598; 604; 648; Leslie J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party* (London 1966); Andrew Thorpe, *The British Communist Party and Moscow, 1920-43* (Manchester 2000).

discussion over how the United Front should work, but, the CPGB accepted the Comintern's corrections and did their best to implement them.⁹⁰

There was similar orchestration in the trade union field. The Fourth Comintern Congress in November 1922 emphasized the need to construct United Front organizations in workplaces and unions. The push towards the establishment of the MM from mid-1923 came from Moscow and the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU). After reports from Borodin and the RILU Secretary, Lozovsky, a Moscow meeting in June 1923 criticized the party's union work and prescribed extensive re-organization to get the new movement off the ground. The RILU had to keep the pressure on: it was "repeatedly forced to note that the work of the British Bureau

⁹⁰Macfarlane, *Communist Party*, 103-5, 109; and Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 81-2.

does not keep pace with the requirements and possibilities of the labour movement of Great Britain." But by 1925, the MM had belatedly emerged as a significant actor in the industrial field.⁹¹

In the run up to 1926, the CPGB was to the right of the Comintern in what Moscow saw as its failure to adequately criticize left-wing leaders or to emphasize that a general strike would pose the question of power. The Comintern encouraged the CPGB to take a harder line towards Labour Party leaders and trade union leftists, an approach confirmed by the Presidium in July. The CPGB's reservations about a left turn and the danger of overestimating the problems of British capitalism opened a gap between Moscow and King Street, which widened when the Soviet trade unions' manifesto on the general strike condemned the role of the TUC, left and right. Despite the party's protests, the Comintern successfully insisted they publish the offending document, and thwarted an attempt to recall Murphy as CPGB representative in Moscow on the grounds of his criticism (orchestrated by the Comintern) of the CPGB's rightist tendencies. By 1927, a limited but discernible move to the left by the CPGB, with its origins in the Comintern, was underway.⁹²

The archives put flesh on the earlier literature's acknowledgement of Comintern hegemony. There are exceptions, but the dominant tone of correspondence between Moscow and London is highly suggestive of transactions between principle and agent, master and pupil, savant and ingénue. The language of "directives" and "instructions" is evocative of the quality and texture of this relationship. In early 1923, Tom Bell was writing to Moscow after the Party Council: "I am instructed to direct your attention to the specific resolutions passed upon the United Front and the Workers' Government and [for you] to convey to us your opinion as to whether these resolutions conform to the mind of the Central Executive of the CI." He added: "I am directed by the Central Committee to enquire from you specific directions with regard to the question of a programme. This matter was raised at the Party Council meeting and there is some confusion in our minds as to what the Communist International exactly requires of the national parties. We should like a clear direction"

The strategy the CPGB should adopt in relation to the Labour Party was one central issue over which the flow of requests for guidance and Comintern directives was marked through this period. Again Bell's language is redolent of the authority of the Comintern and the subaltern position of its British affiliate. For example, having informed Moscow of his party's need for guidance on the Labour Party — "We would welcome some direction for the Central Committee" — Bell replied dutifully to the Kremlin: "Your answer to my enquiry regarding the policy of sharpening the criticism of the Labour Party has been noted and we shall seek to

⁹¹Martin, *Communism*, 30; and Hinton and Hyman, *Trade Unions*, 23-32.

⁹²Hinton and Hyman, *Trade Unions*, 32-8; Macfarlane, *Communist Party*, 166-9, 192-203; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/304, ECCI to CPGB, 17 April 1926; and RGASPI, CA, 495/100/349, PB, 18, 22 June, 14 September, 4 October 1926.

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carry out the decision of the Executive."⁹³ The Comintern's instructions on electoral work were detailed and peremptory:

The Executive sends the following instructions: a sharp principled criticism of the activity of the MacDonald government ... Sharp agitation against the Independent Labour Party. On the whole, Labour candidates should be supported ... Slogans of election campaign ... How campaign should be conducted: — Every candidate circulates Campbell's appeal and signs it; Campbell issues another appeal to soldiers and sailors; Roy to be put up as candidate; to draw him into the election campaign if possible; send him a telegram; immediately turn 'Workers Weekly' into a daily. Further instructions will follow⁹⁴

Visitors to Russia brought back detailed instructions. On returning from Moscow in February 1924, Pollitt reported on his discussions with the Comintern, and indicated the:

general line of instructions to the Party regarding:

- (a) Parliamentary policy and attitude towards the Labour Government;
- (b) a daily or bi-weekly paper;
- (c) agitation amongst the unemployed;
- (d) intensified work in the trade unions;
- (e) representative of Comintern in Britain;
- (f) the issue of pamphlets explaining party policy.

Also discussions with Profintern regarding work of the RILU Bureau.⁹⁵

There was supervision of the implementation of policy. The Comintern received detailed information on CPGB fractional work in the Labour Party and the unions. It exhorted the party to greater control of its members and specified lines of action, for example: "the tactics to be pursued by J. Jagger, President of NUDAW [National Union of Distributive and Allied Workers], shall be determined by the executive members in London after consultation with Comrade Jagger ... In the event of conference deciding that delegates who are members of the CP are ineligible to be present at the conference, our members are instructed to refuse to leave the conference in order to make the attached declaration."⁹⁶ In 1925, E.H. Brown brought similar detailed instructions: "the Minority Movement must conduct a

⁹³RGASPI, CA, 495/100/113, Bell to Secretariat, Comintern, 16 Feb 1923; and RGASPI, CA, 495/100/113, Bell to Secretariat, Comintern, 13 April 1923.

⁹⁴RGASPI, CA, 495/100/135, Telegram of the ECCI to the CC CPGB on the Political situation in Great Britain.

⁹⁵RGASPI, CA, 495/100/159, PB, 13 February 1924. Pollitt visited Moscow 27 times between 1921 and 1930, Pelling, *Communist Party*, 55.

⁹⁶RGASPI, CA, 495/100/97, Minutes of Meeting of British Delegation, Moscow, 11 June 1923.

special campaign in the trade unions and call District Conferences in January, to be followed by a National Conference in February.”⁹⁷

In the face of such evidence Thorpe continues to tilt at windmills. The only examples of dissension produced are 31 votes against Labour Party affiliation at the Fourth Congress in 1922, which he deems “important,” and the alleged expulsions over the Trotsky controversy. The first is inflation and the second an error. Of the Comintern correction of the CPGB over the Labour Party in 1924, he states, “The implication in much of the literature that this was a Comintern diktat is a little misleading. It is clear, for example, that Radek ... had been briefed to this effect by Rothstein. Both Stewart in Moscow and, to a lesser extent, Pollitt in Britain had also seen there was a danger of the party moving too far to the right ... There is also no evidence that the Comintern’s attitude was repulsive to the party leaders ...”⁹⁸

Again this is an exercise in splitting straws. Nobody has argued that the Comintern’s position was “repulsive” to the CPGB. The statement that “much of the literature” has suggested a “Comintern diktat” is similarly spurious. Of the two texts cited, Macfarlane refers to a joint declaration based on compromise between left and right positions, while Callaghan talks of the need to move left being “drummed into” the party representatives.⁹⁹ What Thorpe sees as the surprising fact that members of the CPGB supported Comintern positions in no way compromises the authoritative origin of formal, binding policy in Moscow. Rothstein and Pollitt were studious Comintern watchers and Stewart was stationed there. Fundamentally, it is mistaken to assume that the views of many members and leaders would not coincide with those of the Comintern.

Thorpe goes on to suggest that the CPGB’s climbdown over its criticism of the Soviet trade union manifesto was a special case, for Stalin was directly involved. Stalin was involved, as he would be on any issue he deemed significant, but, by this stage, nobody would be likely to challenge his devotees in the apparatus. Finally, Thorpe characterizes the Murphy affair — where the CPGB was not even permitted to recall its representative in Moscow — as demonstrating “how party-international relations were a matter of negotiation and conciliation rather than of dictation and submission.”¹⁰⁰ The basis for the surprising conclusion that, on the cusp of Stalinization, the CPGB’s entire relations with the Comintern were based upon negotiation, is the less than devastating argument that the CPGB were allowed to send Gallacher as an additional representative. Surely this was more of a “fig leaf” and “face-saver” than Thorpe’s “hard bargain.”

Thorpe and Worley’s analysis of the Third Period provides further exemplification of revisionist methods. Conventionally regarded as emanating from Stalin’s

⁹⁷RGASPI, CA, 495/100/231, CC, 19 December 1925.

⁹⁸Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 48, 63, 76-7.

⁹⁹Macfarlane, *Communist Party*, 104-5; and Callaghan, *Palme Dutt*, 57.

¹⁰⁰Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 102.

factional needs, imposed on the Comintern's affiliates, and disastrous in its consequences, it has been scoured by the revisionists for indigenous roots and benign effects. Thorpe argues deterministically that, given the party's failures in the 1920s, it "had no option but to switch to class against class." More judicious, if slippery, statements: it "would be rash to discount the importance of Moscow's stance ... there were also native influences within the CPGB pushing the party in the same direction," alternate with the rasher verdict that the new line would have been adopted "regardless of 'orders from Moscow.'" He concludes that the policy "was not as unsuccessful as has usually been claimed; and it probably made little difference to future CPGB-Labour relations."¹⁰¹ Worley, too, identifies national factors that "served to radicalize the communist perspective prior to the adoption of its 'class against class' policy in 1928." These included the defeat of the general strike and hostility towards the TUC and Labour Party leaders, reciprocated by growing anti-Communism and "communist expectations of working-class radicalization." He, also, confuses support for the Comintern line from leading CPGB members with national provenance.¹⁰²

Leaving aside the imprecision of such formulations, the evidence is irrefutable on two fundamental points. First, that in March 1928, the majority on the CPGB Central Committee, following the British commission at the ECCI Ninth Plenum in Moscow, was forced to accept a new resolution "as meaning a complete change of policy, withdrawing the Central Committee thesis on the grounds of its inadequacy and not covering the ground and its being mistaken in certain respects; this is to be replaced by the more definitive resolution of the CI. Carried Unanimously." Second, the CPGB acquiesced in the installation of a new party leadership at the behest of the Russian delegation to the ECCI Tenth Plenum in July 1929.¹⁰³ Comintern influence was the primary force in the adoption of the new policy and in the selection of the party leadership to carry it out.

Moreover, a number of the "indigenous" elements itemized by Worley and Thorpe possessed strong Comintern components. The CPGB's shift left from 1926 originated in the Kremlin, as already indicated. That a number of leading British Communists supported the Comintern is hardly surprising — those identified by

¹⁰¹Thorpe, "Stalinism," 613-14, 626; and Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 16, 117. For new Russian research see Kevin McDermott, "Stalin and the Comintern during the 'Third Period', 1928-33," *European History Quarterly*, 25 (July 1995), 409-29. For negative evaluations, see Macfarlane, *Communist Party*, 279-80; Pelling, *Communist Party*, 65-72; Thompson, *Good Old Cause*, 42-6; Branson, *History, 1927-41*, 28-30; and Martin, *Communism*, 181.

¹⁰²Worley, "Communist International," 190-3. For the centrality of Stalinism, social fascism and ultra-leftism to the Third Period, see McIlroy, "Rehabilitating Communist History," 214-25. John McIlroy and Alan Campbell, "The Heresy of Arthur Horner," *Llafur*, 8 (2001), 105-18.

¹⁰³RGASPI, CA, 495/100/493, CEC, 17-18 March 1928; and RGASPI, CA, 495/100/604, PB, 2, 6 August 1929.

Thorpe and Worley: Pollitt, Dutt, Rust and Murphy — were politically passionate Muscovites who enjoyed Comintern patronage. Others, such as Campbell, who initially opposed the new line, denied it had any indigenous support: “while at the present moment we are faced from the ECCI with suggestions which in my opinion means that we ought to change the Party in a left direction, it is significant that that demand does not come from the Party itself.”¹⁰⁴ Through 1928, the Comintern and its supporters campaigned among party activists and Campbell withdrew his opposition. A CPGB member at the ILS recalled how the students were used to brief the British delegation to the Comintern’s Sixth World Congress: “Often that vast hall was pretty empty, the real congress was taking place wherever Stalin’s supporters could lobby the delegates.”¹⁰⁵

That unemployment might generate support among CPGB activists for greater militancy — Mary McCarthy, a young cotton worker recalled the new line as according “completely with our mood of frustration and despair” — was of secondary importance; part of a mood which was fanned by the Comintern instead of restrained in the interests of politics that reflected British realities.¹⁰⁶ For there was a compelling alternative: the United Front. To what extent CPGB-Labour Party relations might have improved without the new line is an unfathomable counterfactual. It is straining credulity to argue that the ultra-left call “for a revolutionary workers’ government” in the 1929 general election and the sustained vilification of labour movement leaders as “social fascists,” matters played down in sanitized, revisionist accounts, had no negative impact.

Both Thorpe and Worley exaggerate British moderation and resistance. Pollitt, claims Worley, “was able to limit the excesses of the ‘new line’ and eventually adapt the line in accordance with indigenous circumstances.” Thorpe similarly asserts that under Pollitt, and apparently unknown to the Comintern, the CPGB’s trade union strategy “had drifted surreptitiously to the right.”¹⁰⁷ The evidence suggests Pollitt, in reality a pioneer champion of ultra-leftism, was less consistent than they believe, seeking to adhere to Comintern direction but erring to right and left of conflicting signals emanating from Moscow. In 1928, Pollitt resisted demands to establish a new seamen’s union: “we shall have to fight the International on this question if necessary”; and Thorpe suggests “no real efforts were made to establish the new body.”¹⁰⁸ Yet in the face of insistent, if supple, demands the CPGB adopted precisely such a perspective: “That the line of the MM must be to develop MM groups amongst the seamen ... promoting unofficial strikes against the shipowners and bureaucracy in the TGWU [Transport and General Workers’ Union]

¹⁰⁴RGASPI, CA, 495/100/493, CEC, 7-9 January 1928.

¹⁰⁵Harry Wicks, *Keeping My Head: The Memoirs of a British Bolshevik* (London 1992), 101-2.

¹⁰⁶Margaret McCarthy, *Generation in Revolt* (London 1953), 138.

¹⁰⁷Worley, “Communist International,” 199; and Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 194, 197.

¹⁰⁸RGASPI, CA, 495/100/494, CC, 24-26 September 1928; Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 135.

and NUS [National Union of Seamen] — all the time bearing in mind that this is laying the basis for a revolutionary union for the seamen.”¹⁰⁹

In 1930, Pollitt supported the extraordinary perspective of a breakaway United Mineworkers of Great Britain in accordance with RILU instructions, only to be forced to withdraw when the Comintern condemned the adventure as “premature.” The CPGB representative in Moscow cautioned Pollitt against “raising perspectives of new unions without permission ... In all cases therefore it is better for the PB [Political Bureau] and the CC [Central Committee] to get the opinion here before raising the question publicly.”¹¹⁰ Following criticism of this sectarian stratagem in Moscow, and indubitably aware of the Comintern’s imminent insistence on “a real turn towards systematic work in the reformist trade unions,” Pollitt then urged the need “to make a sharp turn in another direction ... in our trade union work,” concluding: “One last word, no beating the breast when you return to the Districts saying that the Party has been put right by Moscow.”¹¹¹ Thereafter, Pollitt and the CPGB openly, rather than surreptitiously, sought to implement the Comintern’s growing emphasis on work within the reformist unions.

What of the benefits Thorpe and Worley ascribe to the Third Period? The former suggests that “the impact of the introduction of the ‘new line’ on party membership was by no means as disastrous as has often been alleged.”¹¹² There is no way of knowing how membership might have increased without the Third Period; what we do know is that CPGB membership stood at 7,377 in August 1927, and with the exception of two rogue months, did not rise above this total until July 1935, by which time the Comintern had consigned the Third Period to history. For Worley, positive outcomes were located in the CPGB’s cultural initiatives and work among the unemployed. His analysis, heavily indebted to Alun Howkins, inadequately addresses the latter’s acknowledgement that the CPGB’s cultural institutions “at most involved a few thousand people and their sectarianism automatically

¹⁰⁹RGASPI, CA, 495/100/539, RILU Directives, 5 July, 1 November 1928; and RGASPI, CA, 495/100/604, PB, 15 August 1929.

¹¹⁰NMLH, CPGBA, CI11, PB 27 March, 3 April, 12 June, 3, 17, 18 July 1930; NMLH, CPGBA, CI1, CC, 5-6 April, 19-20 July 1930; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/709, Memorandum on Minority Movement by Nat Watkins, Profintern, 16 May 1930; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/648, Polit-Secretariat of the ECCI to CC, CPGB, 24 May 1930; and RGASPI, CA, 495/100/648, Unsigned letter to “Dear Harry,” 23 May 1930.

¹¹¹NMLH, CPGBA, CI 32, Anglo-American Secretariat, 11 August 1930, NMLH, CPGBA, CI1, CC, 13 September 1930; and CI29, Resolution of the Polit-Secretariat of the ECCI, 30 September 1930.

¹¹²Thorpe, “Membership,” 782. Thorpe follows Mike Squires, “The CPGB and ‘Class Against Class,’” *Socialist History*, 3 (Winter 1993), 4-13.

excluded many.”¹¹³ All in all, this revisionism fails to dent traditional estimations of the Third Period.

When it comes to organizational matters, Thorpe and Worley are again at pains to emphasize Britishness. All previous writers have seen the CPGB’s democratic centralist structure as a direct translation from Russian experience, implanted in Britain by the Comintern. Revisionists, in contrast, locate it in a general tendency of British parties to adopt bureaucratic, centralized structures. Thorpe draws comparison with the Conservative and Labour parties and castigates “the narrow vision of many historians of British communism” who have overlooked this point.¹¹⁴ This ignores the specific nature, the Leninist uniqueness of the early CPGB: no other British party adopted a democratic centralist form, located in a theory of insurgency faithfully modelled on a foreign party, right down to the 1921 ban on factions in the Russian party. No other British party organised units in industry. The relevant comparison is not with Conservatives or Labour — ignoring the quite significant distinctions between them — but the comparison the CPGB constantly made between itself as “a party of a new type” and earlier Marxist organizations. The impetus was not, as Thorpe suggests, changing conditions in the British labour movement, but the Russian revolution. If there were “sound British reasons” for adopting democratic centralism, they were identical with the sound French, North American, or Argentinian reasons found in other parties, namely Condition 12 of membership of the Comintern that affiliated parties “must be organized on the basis of democratic *centralism* (Emphasis in original).”¹¹⁵

Thorpe takes Britishness further, ruminating on the basis of a resolution passed at the CPGB’s foundation subordinating members “to the general will” of the party: “it is all the more impressive that the convention came to a broadly democratic centralist view without the Comintern’s direct intervention.”¹¹⁶ As Comintern representatives and Lenin personally affirmed, the delegates had only the faintest inkling of what democratic centralism meant; when the CPGB proceeded to develop it, many of them quit the party. Pursuing this line, Thorpe asserts that in establishing the Dutt-Pollitt-Inkpin committee in 1922 that recommended a move to democratic centralism, “the CPGB here ran ahead of the Communist International.”¹¹⁷ This is quite remarkable. Contemporary Communists would have put it down to British

¹¹³Worley, “Proletarian Culture”; and Alun Howkins, “Class Against Class: The Political Culture of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1930-35,” in Frank Gloversmith, ed., *Class, Culture and Social Change* (Brighton 1980), 254.

¹¹⁴Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 15-16; Thorpe, “Communist International,” 72. Cf., “the process of ‘Bolshevisation’ or ‘Stalinisation’ undertaken by the CPGB from the 1920s onwards, can be seen to contain particularly British characteristics” (Worley, “Reflections,” 245).

¹¹⁵McDermott and Agnew, *Comintern*, 228.

¹¹⁶Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 31.

¹¹⁷Thorpe, “Communist International,” 71. Allen Hutt, *The Post-war History of the British Working Class* (London 1937), 125.

arrogance. It is certainly historically mistaken. In autumn 1921, we find Bell stressing the need for the party to transform itself in line with the Thesis on Organization and Construction of Communist Parties adopted at the Third Congress of the Comintern in July. The committee was established as a consequence of that decision: "To review the organisation of the Party in the light of the Theses, and to make detailed recommendations ... for the application of the Theses." A 1923 report records: "The 1922 conference adopted a plan of organization based on the thesis of the Third Congress."¹¹⁸ As Dutt himself recalled in 1930: "Under the stimulus and guidance of the decisions of the International, and especially of the Third Congress, a group of enthusiastic comrades ... got to work."¹¹⁹

Thorpe resorts to a familiar mixture of the blindingly obvious and the ubiquitous straw man: "The commission," he discerns, "appears to have been native based," while the report "was not a Comintern-dictated document." "If," he avers, "it was a Comintern-inspired document from start to finish, then it is a little difficult to explain why the CI's official representative in Britain, Borodin, was essentially marginal to the commission's work and report."¹²⁰ First, it is not difficult at all to see why, in the interests of commitment, authenticity, and division of labour, the Comintern should leave the drafting of a report to flesh out its prescriptions to its partisans in a foreign party, rather than have it written by their representative. Second, Thorpe's statement that the commission members "clashed seriously and repeatedly with Michael Borodin" is exaggerated in relation to the evidence.¹²¹ The key point remains: the Comintern sought "to achieve a uniformity of organization on the basis of the equality of the conditions of the class struggle," that organization was based on the Russian model, and the commission's report recommended a transformation of the CPGB on that basis. The report represented, in its own words, not "the ingenious scheme of a few individuals but the deliberately chosen policy of the whole International."¹²²

The major decisions, on democratic centralism, on factory groups, on the leadership re-organization of 1923, and on the MM, were determined by the Comintern. These issues dwarf the eight items Thorpe lists in pursuit of his claim

¹¹⁸ *Workers' Weekly*, 17 September, and see 8 October, 1921; *Report on Organization Presented by the Party Commission to the Annual Conference of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 7 October 1922; and RGASPI, CA, 495/100/119, Report of 26 April 1923.

¹¹⁹ RGASPI, CA, 495/100/688, Dutt to 'Dear Comrade', n.d., 1930.

¹²⁰ Thorpe, "Communist International," 71; Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 52.

¹²¹ Thorpe, "Communist International," 71. Thorpe's authority is Callaghan's *Palme Dutt*, 50, 79, which asserts Borodin's opposition on the basis of a handwritten comment by Dutt on a Trotskyist journal in 1964; and Kevin Morgan, *Harry Pollitt* (Manchester 1993), 26, 31-2, where it is simply stated, without more, that Dutt and Pollitt were hostile to Borodin and marginalized him. In *Communist Party*, 53 and n.122, Thorpe relies on Dutt's comments in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1966 when he was engaged in polemic and at pains to minimize the influence of the Comintern. Cf his 1930 comments, n.119 above.

¹²² *Workers' Weekly*, 17 September 1921; and *Report on Organization*, October 1922.

that “the party could often resist the Comintern in many of these areas.” All of these — the failure to contribute £50 to *Inprecorr*, failure to establish the International Class War Prisoners’ Aid organization on an individual membership basis, and so on, are relatively minor matters.¹²³ In some cases they involve administrative disagreements, financial indigence, or tactical manoeuvring over who should pay, all inherent in this kind of organization. It is possible to make a similar list where Comintern insistence won the day: the transfer of the *Worker* from Scotland to London, the establishment of a central school, the abolition of probationary membership, the withdrawal of the 1928 censure on Dutt, the Comintern’s veto on the recall of J.T. Murphy as CPGB representative in Moscow, or even the pantomime over the proposal and withdrawal of Saklatvala’s expulsion.¹²⁴

Mostly, compliance was constrained by resources. When Thorpe highlights the CPGB’s “stalwart and successful refusal” to consider a daily paper, he is confusing the resource problems of a tiny organization incapable of responding to Moscow’s incessant, sometimes unrealistic demands, with the quite different problem of political reluctance. The former was predominant: “we are absolutely overwhelmed with work and it is just impossible to fulfil every request made,” Pollitt remarked to the British representative in Moscow in 1925.¹²⁵ That same year, the leadership resolved: “The time has come to state definitely to the CI that they are imposing too many obligations on our party.”¹²⁶ Thorpe fails to distinguish lack of understanding as to what the Comintern wanted on organizational issues — a problem which Lenin himself noted in criticizing the opaque resolutions of the International — from active, informed refusal of directives.¹²⁷ He fails to differentiate opposition to instructions from inability to realize them. These factors can be illustrated from the example of CPGB factory organization. Little progress was made, partly through conservatism and lack of understanding, more significantly because of the immense problem of intimidation and victimization in a situation of mass unemployment and general union weakness. Galvanized by the new stress placed on the issue by Zinoviev, the CPGB made tremendous efforts from 1924, but by 1926 only seventeen per cent of members were in factory groups: “Objective conditions defeated the party. Despite its own efforts and the Comintern’s concern, it was simply not possible in British conditions in the mid-1920s to build the type

¹²³Thorpe, “Communist International,” 72; and Thorpe, *Communist Party*, 62-3, 71.

¹²⁴RGASPI, CA, 495/100/349, PB, 25 June 1926; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/253, Meeting of Gallacher, Brown and Comintern Agitprop, n.d., 1925; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/235, OB, 22 July 1925; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/507, Inkpin to ECCI, 30 November 1928; RGASPI, CA, 495/100/497, PB 1 June 1928; and RGASPI, CA, 495/100/498, PB, 18 September 1928, Report of World Congress.

¹²⁵RGASPI, CA, 495/100/276, Pollitt to E.H. Brown, 24 September 1925.

¹²⁶RGASPI, CA, 495/100/231, CC, 3-4 October 1925.

¹²⁷V.I. Lenin, “Five Years of the Russian Revolution: Report to the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 13 November 1922” in *Collected Works*, vol. 33 (Moscow 1966), 430-1.

of party ... the Fifth Congress had rightly seen as the precondition of serious revolutionary politics."¹²⁸

Conclusion

Over this period, the evidence contradicts Thorpe's estimation that "the Comintern's influence over the development of British Communist politics has been exaggerated." That influence is difficult to exaggerate. The Comintern formed and guided the CPGB's strategy and continually assessed and re-assessed its tactics. What was primary and axiomatic in the CPGB's politics came from Russia. What was British — it could not have been otherwise — was the attempt to apply the programmatic line. This involved questions such as the tactical balance between excoriating the betrayal of Labour Party and union leaders, and working with them. Should the bourgeois or the workers' side of the contradictory Labour Party, or the simultaneous susceptibility of union leaders to pressure from proletariat and bourgeoisie, or the secondary differences between left and right leaders but their ultimate unity in reformism, be emphasized? What was Russian was the creation, exposition and explanation of policy, critical scrutiny of strategy, and examination and reformulation of CPGB tactics. What was British was the recalcitrance of the objective conditions. What was Russian was factory cells. What was British was intimidation and victimization from employers and lack of enthusiasm from workers which precluded their realization.

It is likely that similar interrogations of revisionism would reinstate traditional interpretations of other national parties. It has been convincingly suggested that "our overall conception of Comintern history has *not* been radically altered by freer access to the archives. In most cases, I would say, archival discoveries have tended to confirm existing interpretations(Emphasis in original)"¹²⁹ The sirens of novelty and revisionism are always singing to us: we should not succumb too easily. For historians, conservatism, in the sense of preserving the best of past work and doing full justice to past interpretations, has immense value. Past work illuminated differences inside the CPGB and between the CPGB and the Comintern. They arose and unfolded within a common politics and a common acceptance of the Comintern as the agent of conflict resolution. Our survey, based on our work in the archives, confirms this. The Russians were the masters, the British the pupils.

This is not to say that the pupils did not have a rich life of their own or to underestimate the importance of exploring it if we want a more complete picture of British Communism. It is simply to insist that compared with the Labour Party or the ILP, the CPGB was distinctive and possessed a peculiarly restricted political autonomy. To affirm this is, it goes without saying, important for the historical record. Moreover it may possess significance for current and future proponents of

¹²⁸Hinton and Hyman, *Trade Unions*, 41.

¹²⁹Kevin McDermott, "The History of the Comintern in Light of New Documents," in Rees and Thorpe, *International Communism*, 38.

international solidarity in the same way as a proper estimation of the disastrous ultra-leftism unleashed by Stalin in the Third Period may hold lessons for contemporary radicals. The conspicuous lesson, that we can never cede our critical faculties to power holders with other antagonistic and despotic vested interests, cannot be properly appreciated if we abjure Soviet hegemony and its consequences. For the conscientious historian and the committed scholar, the dominance of the Russians cannot be denied. Unless, that is, we want to magnify matters not all that far removed from Nina Ponomareva's hats.

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