

Agents of the Revolution

New Biographical Approaches to the History of International Communism in the Age of Lenin and Stalin

von

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Introduction

Though the comparative study of communist history is as yet in its relative infancy, one of the most promising features of the communist historiography of the 1990s was the increasing development of a dialogue and cross-fertilisation between the historians of communist parties in different countries. International conferences in Moscow, Exeter, Dijon and Helsinki were among those which resulted in significant additions to the published literature.¹ New efforts were made at synoptic histories of the Comintern, drawing upon advances in scholarship internationally.² At a regional level, collaborative initiatives include the establishment of a network of historians of Nordic communism, while collaborative enterprises in the French-speaking European countries led to the publication both of a major biographical dictionary and important collections developing the rich French tradition in prosopographical research.³ The commitment to the exchange of ideas and information can also be seen in the appearance of an *International Newsletter of Historical Studies on Comintern, Communism and Stalinism*, and to some extent in the *Communist History Network Newsletter* edited from Manchester. At the same time, work is proceeding towards a new biographical dictionary of the Comintern, assisted by the co-operation of both custodians and users of the Comintern archives in Moscow. Though actual comparative studies are still quite rare, abundant research now exists on which to come to a broader understanding of what was arguably the most significant international movement of the twentieth century.

Such an endeavour can only be facilitated by the increasing range and maturity of this scholarship. The partial opening of the Comintern archives has for the first time permitted more rigorous and fully documented descriptions of the central agencies and processes which to varying degrees determined the general experience of communist party politics. It is therefore natural that such concerns should have figured prominently in the first wave of post-*glasnost* literature, and will continue to do so. However, in addition to this necessary filling in

of the 'blank spots' of conventional communist history, analyses have also been enriched by a range of different methodological approaches deriving, *inter alia*, from social anthropology, social history, social movements theory, the study of communist mentalities, Goffman's conception of the total institution and a variety of models derived from political science. Providing archival encouragement for such investigations was not only the central archive of the Comintern but the increased or unlimited levels of access allowed to the rich seams of documentation that never found their way to Moscow. Amidst the welter of possible methodologies and lines of interpretation, it was not to be expected that an academic consensus would or should necessarily emerge. On the other hand, what was almost universally accepted was that the sterile polarities characterising much earlier communist historiography were wholly inadequate to the issues now being addressed. Increasingly, this scholarship has therefore been marked by what two of the contributors to the present volume have described as a 'double refusal': the refusal both of sanctified party narratives, whether orthodox or 'heretical', and the refusal of those demonological accounts which have very largely rested upon the same texts and the same historical moments.⁴ It is the common ground of this double refusal that permits the development of fruitful scholarly exchanges in which differences of emphasis and interpretation can be properly assessed on their merits.

Beyond this double refusal, what stands out in the best of the recent literature is the genuine historicisation of the subject, so that increasingly concerns with agency, specificity, relativisation and the critical use of a variety of sources help to inform and temper more generalised lines of analysis. Rather than the simple dichotomies of revisionism and counter-revisionism, as if advancing rival claims to a single essential truth of communism, the multidimensionality of the subject is, or should be, reflected both in methodological pluralism and in the multiple points of access – either national, or reflecting different areas or levels of the communist experience – that so vast a movement demands. Nevertheless, what in any other field would be a somewhat banal reminder of the need for historical differentiation has still to be insisted upon as the precondition for the serious study of international communism. After the publication in France in 1997 of

the ultimate ‘demonology’, the ‘Black Book’ of communism, a number of leading Francophone scholars produced what seems to be an implicit rejoinder, whose very title – the century of *communisms* – drew attention to the protean character of the phenomenon.⁵

The present volume is intended as a contribution to this growing literature exploring one particular line of approach to these communisms, namely that of biography or prosopography. Its origins lie in a weekend conference held at the University of Manchester in April 2001, as one of the fruits of a two-year prosopographical study of the British Communist Party (CPGB). The aims of the project were to go beyond the concerns with party elites or functionaries of some existing studies, and to mix oral, literary and documentary sources and both qualitative and quantitative forms of analysis.⁶ In the same spirit, no rigid definitions of a biographical or prosopographical approach were established for the conference, which, on the contrary, it was hoped would give an impression of the tremendous range of possible approaches to the subject and the different types of insight which they allow. In this, we feel the conference very largely succeeded. Nearly sixty papers were presented, as well as two seminars involving mainly British veterans discussing the impact of 1956 and the international dimension of communism. In having to select just a quarter of the papers for the present volume, we were governed by the several objectives of presenting research which was not generally known or accessible in English, which provided an adequate representation of the international character of the phenomenon and which was broadly focused on the period to the onset of the Cold War. Beyond that, we were keen to feature a range of different approaches, and the volume’s contents range from studies of key national or international functionaries and the use of party biographies as a form of cadre control, to the subcultural or genealogical aspects of communist history in Austria, Britain, the Netherlands and New Zealand. While some of the papers overlap with the study of institutions, such as the general secretariat or the International Lenin School (ILS), others provide less anonymous versions of the sort of social-historical or ‘ethnographical’ approaches widely developed since the 1960s; and while the section on ‘leaders’ comprises individual studies of a more straightforwardly ‘bio-graphical’ character, these range from recon-

structions of individual political trajectories to attempts to unravel the personal complexities and hidden continuities of these lives which communists themselves typically sought to deny. However varied the approaches, in each case the intricacies of agency, and its constructions in the form of biography, help bring a new dimension to our understanding of communist politics.

The range of different perspectives offered here need not therefore necessarily be regarded as alternatives, but as different perspectives on a movement aspiring to a degree of monolithicity that it never could have attained in practice. Similarly with regard to sources, the accent in this volume is on diversity. A number of the papers are based primarily on materials from the Moscow archives, and the studies of figures like William Gallacher and Jozsef Pogány, and of the Finnish students at the ILS, would hardly have been possible to undertake except on such a basis. However, like any institutional archive, the Comintern archive inevitably gives a partial view of its subject, and other accounts make extensive use of oral sources, the communist press and party autobiographies, both as a source of information and as an insight into the construction of communist lives. Particularly illuminating from this perspective are the studies of William Z. Foster, author of one of the first official communist memoirs, and of the character and function of institutional communist biographies in France. At the same time, the potential of these autobiographies as a source of data for the analysis of the social and political character of different communist parties is convincingly demonstrated with respect to the post-war Finnish party.

The present collection provides only a selection of the papers presented at the conference, and attention should be drawn to arrangements which have been made to have several of the others published in other forms. Six of them, dealing with social or cultural aspects of communist history in Western Europe, have already appeared in a special issue of the British journal *Socialist History*.⁷ A number of others have been published independently and readers are referred to the relevant journals.⁸

A number of brief acknowledgements must be made. First, our thanks are due to all those who gave papers or otherwise participated in the original conference. The project from which this arose was

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Notes

- 1 M. Narinsky and J. Rojahn (eds), *Centre and Periphery. The history of the Comintern in the light of new documents* (Amsterdam, 1995); T. Rees and A. Thorpe (eds), *International Communism and the Communist International, 1919–1943* (Manchester, 1998); T. Saarela and K. Rentola (eds), *Communism: national and international* (Helsinki, 1998); S. Wolikow (ed.), *Une histoire en révolution? Du bon usage des archives, de Moscou et d'ailleurs* (Dijon, 1996).
- 2 Notably K. McDermott and J. Agnew, *The Comintern. A history of international communism from Lenin to Stalin* (Basingstoke, 1996); see also P. Broué, *Histoire de l'Internationale communiste (1919–1943)* (Paris, 1997).
- 3 J. Gotovitch and M. Narinsky (eds), *Komintern. L'histoire et les hommes. Dictionnaire biographique de l'Internationale communiste* (Paris, 2001); J. Gotovitch and A. Morelli (eds), *Militantise et militants* (Brussels, 1997); C. Pennetier and B. Pudal (eds), *Autobiographies, autocritiques, aveux dans le monde communiste* (Paris, 2002).
- 4 C. Pennetier and B. Pudal, 'Du parti bolchevik au parti stalinien', in M. Dreyfus et al. (eds), *Le siècle des communismes* (Paris, 2000), pp. 333–5.
- 5 Dreyfus et al. (eds), *Le siècle des communismes*; also S. Courtois et al. (eds), *Le livre noir du communisme* (Paris, 1997).
- 6 See for example K. Morgan, A. Flinn and G. Cohen, *People of a Special Mould? Communists and British society 1920–1991* (London, forthcoming 2004); G. Cohen and K. Morgan, 'Stalin's sausage machine. British students at the International Lenin School, 1927–37', *Twentieth Century British History*, 13: 4 (2002), pp. 327–55.
- 7 See *Socialist History* 21 (2002) which features the contributions 'A Dutch mix of scouts and pioneers. The *Uilenspiegelclub* children,

1953–64’ by Margreet Schrevel; ‘Oppressed worker or communist hero? Characters in Finnish communist magazines of the 1920s’ by Tauno Saarela; ‘A party blocked. West German communists between Weimar legacy and East German policy, 1945–1956’ by Till Kössler; ‘Cypriot, Indian and West Indian branches of the CPGB, 1945–1970. An experiment in self-organisation?’ by Andrew Flinn; ‘Communists are not born, they are made. The political education system of the French Communist Party’ by Marja Kivisaari; and ‘The *Mot Dag* association. “Leftist academics preaching radical ideas”’ by Geir Bentzen.

- 8 These include Allison Drew, ‘Will the real Sidney Bunting please stand up? Constructing and contesting the identity of a South African Communist’, *English Historical Review* (forthcoming 2004); Karen Hunt, ‘Dora Montefiore: a different communist’, and Andy Croft, ‘The young men are moving together: the case of Randall Swingler’, both in J. McIlroy, K. Morgan and A. Campbell (eds), *Party People, Communist Lives. Explorations in biography* (2001); Sifiso Ndlovu, ‘Johannes Nkosi and the Communist Party of South Africa: Images of “Blood River” and King Dingane in the Late 1920s–1930’, *History and Theory*, 39: 4 (2000); Irina Filatova, ‘Indoctrination or Scholarship? Education of Africans at the Communist University of the Toilers of the East in the Soviet Union, 1923–1938’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 35: 1 (1999); Daniela Spenser, ‘Stanislav Pestkovsky: A Soldier of the World Revolution in Mexico’, *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 8: 1 (2002); J. Manley, “‘Audacity, Audacity, still more audacity’: Tim Buck, the party and the people, 1932–1939”, *Labour / Le Travail*, 49 (2002).