

Ivan Avakumovic, *The Communist Party in Canada. A History*, McClelland and Stewart Ltd., Toronto 1975, X, 309 S., kart., \$ 5.95.

The Communist Party of Canada (CPC) attained few successes but suffered many failures. To explain this dominant trend in CPC history, as well as the uniqueness ascribed to it by its opponents and supporters, Avakumovic reviews its sixty year existence. He finds two elements in which the CPC differed from other Canadian political parties and movements. For a long time its leadership and members were comprised of emigrants from Eastern Europe, its main languages were Ukrainian and Finnish. Second, throughout its history the CPC has been influenced by events, trends and interests from outside Canada (first American socialism and communism, then the Soviet Union). The second element – outside influence – might however be applied to all Canadian politics and termed the ›Canadian condition‹ since either Great Britain or the United States has dominated Canada's past and present. Therefore, the East European emigrant factor did set the CPC outside the Canadian norm and decisively molded Canadian communism. Unfortunately, the author has not probed very deeply to explain the impact of either element. In particular, he cannot come to terms with the main issue he raises: »Who the Communists were, what views they held and why they were not more successful in making converts [...]«. Though we receive a notion as to how many members, roughly where they were located at what times, few except four or five leaders crystalize as people with problems, ideas, motives and hopes. Though the propaganda, the shifts in tactics and policy are summarized, the views held by individuals and groups within the CPC remain hazy and undifferentiated. As to why the CPC failed to gain more members (the term ›converts‹ is certainly a Freudian and not a Marxist slip), the study remains vague, general and unsubstantiated.

The development of the CPC is presented in the following chronological fashion: origins including the impact of the Russian Revolution, the struggle for members and existence in the 1920s, growth and increased influence during the depression, the united front effort of the mid-1930s, the outlawing and rehabilitation during the second world war, the post-war spy scare, the Cold War's destructive effects, the leadership crisis of the late 1950s and regrouping of an aged, small sect in the 1960s. The criteria by which this schema appears to have been organized are Canadian political trends or internal party events. In this overview the main men and events are reviewed in a straightforward, readable manner. The author illustrates the predominance of the East Europeans who in 1929 amounted to »95 per cent of the total party membership« (p. 35). He tabulates the growth of party membership during the 1930s, especially among youth, intellectuals, trade unions and the electorate (p. 114 ff.). He illustrates the rise and decline of its periodicals and newspapers. But these aspects of the party's struggles and development remain isolated bits of solid information floating in a sea of unfounded opinions and highly questionable evidence.

The study is a semi-scholarly publication. In its documentation, its vocabulary and its sweeping opinions it approaches popularization. The following examples are taken at random and could be multiplied but a few should illustrate the author's semischolarly approach. Without citing one specific instance of a Comintern directive or one example Avakumovic asserts: »The reasoning behind the Comintern decisions on the CPC was seldom explained in detail to party activists in Canada«. Indeed, the whole section in which he presents the Comintern's influence remains without footnotes or references to sources, except to maintain that »the available evidence indicates [...]« (p. 22 ff.; quotation p. 23, 24). Avakumovic allows himself the following conclusion regarding the significance of the CPC's ethnic composition: »First and foremost, it strengthened the impression of those Anglo-Saxons who came into contact with Communists that the CPC was an alien growth on Canadian soil, a foreign outpost of a great power, an organization with little or nothing to offer in a North American setting. This belief was and is still widely

held, in spite of repeated attempts to identify the CPC with Canadian interests, traditions and aspirations. To a native Canadian a Communist was someone who spoke English with an accent, used jargon incomprehensible to most Canadians, read newspapers in what seemed to be exotic languages, and who lived in parts of the town that goahead Canadians were only too eager to leave« (p. 36). The author gives not one piece of evidence for this ›public opinion«. Or, the reader is offered without proof or evidence: »there is plenty of evidence that some of the top leaders of the CPC were involved in extra-marital affairs« and since such statements are not even tied to the issue of the party's development, the overriding question remains about such gossip – so what? Or, in discussing the disciplining of ›factionalists« Avakumovic writes about this response to Cold War pressures: »The party leadership was on the lookout for any sign that their authority might be questioned. As soon as grounds for suspicion existed, a thorough investigation would be made to ferret out the guilty and unmask their accomplices inside and outside the [party]. A special party commission would be established to deal with the case. Party members would be invited to submit evidence and the suspect would be ordered to appear before the commission. The zealots who manned these commissions created such a Star Chamber atmosphere that many suspects declined to take part in the proceedings, which comprised indictment, detailed interrogation and sentence« (p. 217). Surely, one of the many cases could have been detailed or one example of the zealous commissions' work presented in evidence. Or, in discussing the exodus of party members after the internal crisis over ›de-Stalinization« during 1956, Avakumovic remarks: »Some, after a period of political hibernation, emerged as spokesmen of the New Left, or of those sections of the peace movement that were not directly controlled by the CPC in the 1960s. Several of them devoted their undeniable talents to business affairs, where they were so successful that before long they joined the ranks of Canadian millionaires« (p. 233). Again, not one name is offered to make specific such grandiose assertions. The remark about the communists becoming millionaires is also in contrast to another unsubstantiated claim in the book's conclusion about life in the movement: »They were also kept busy on humdrum tasks which often produced mediocre results and provided few opportunities for self-aggrandizement outside the Communist Party« (p. 272). If the author had explained in his preface that the publishers forced him for economic reasons not to expand his documentation, then some of the assertions might be taken in good faith. But, since footnotes document some pieces of information while leaving others unsubstantiated the reader can only conclude that the method employed is either sloppy or inept. The sociology of life in the CPC lacks the rudimentary empirical evidence which studies of political parties have had to have since Robert Michels and Max Weber made their insightful investigations in this field. A rare personal statement of what the movement meant to individual participants – »the thought that I am expelled from the Party has paralysed me to such an extent that I don't know where I am at, and what I am doing« (p. 63) – is left unexplored and unanalyzed. Likewise, the greatest documentary collection, the CPC archives which the police seized in August 1931 and which the author cites for some of his information and views, do not seem to have been utilized very systematically. (Indeed, many items are cited, like the above quotation, without reference to who stated it, when or where). A critical review could also analyze the vocabulary (›zealots«, ›line«) or the lack of comparisons and case studies for assertions such as the regional distribution of the party or its trade union gains and losses (p. 67, 132 ff., for example). Some local studies, such as of the mine and mill unions' politics in Northern Ontario by John Laing, have been overlooked yet they could have provided the specificity the study lacks.

More significant than the methods are the contents. To examine the questions posed the author would have had to consider the relationship between the Communist Party of Ca-

nada and the Canadian state and society. The preface even raises this problem directly in two ways. First, it maintains: »Liberal and Conservative administrations in Ottawa and the Government of Quebec found it necessary to keep [the Communists] under surveillance, restrict their radius of action, and support those individuals and organizations that were prepared to fight the CPC and its subsidiaries«. Second, it maintains: »The history of the CPC is the story of a small number of men and women who operated mostly on the fringe rather than in the mainstream of Canadian politics«. The first issue, the relationship of the government(s) to the CPC is only haphazardly examined. Mostly it takes the form of reemphasizing those issues which memoir writers and other historians have already emphasized. The cross-Canada trek of 1935 which the police infiltrated and then forcefully disrupted, the Quebec government's Padlock Act which copied Hitler's Enabling Act including many of the methods employed under it, and the witch-hunting of the Cold War era are included. But, they are colored by further examples of semi-scholarly or simply plain prejudiced remarks. On the Cold War, for instance, he reviews some of the police spying infringements on civil rights and destruction of careers, including the suicide death of a diplomat who had been accused by an American committee(!) of being a communist. Then Avakumovic concludes: »All in all, such incidents were infrequent, and members of the [Communist Party] enjoyed a degree of privacy and freedom which their comrades in the United States, not to mention Stalin's victims in the USSR and East Europe, would have envied« (p. 207). The question is how does he know? The Canadian government has no thirty year rule for its archives and its secret police (RCMP) files are not open at all. As with so much of this book, the author could in this instance be right, but he could just as well be wrong; in any case the basis for evaluating his judgements is not supplied to the reader. On the larger issue of the relationship between the CPC and Canadian society, Avakumovic concludes: »The established order did its best to ensure that the Communists would never become a major force in Canadian politics, nor [...] a leading force among Canadian labor. Anti-Communist propaganda, the harrying of activists, the victimization or threat of victimization of militants in some walks of life, and legal action, helped minimize the Communist movement« (p. 278). First, this seems in contradiction to the already-quoted conclusion that the state, at least, did not have to resort very much to such trickery. Second, the book provides very little material which illustrates how the CPC was seen by a broader public, how the press presented its image, or how public opinion was molded on it (did the government and industry merely respond or did they initiate anti-Communist attitudes?). Since no definition of Canadian political norms and little information on what the author terms »the mainstream of Canadian politics« are presented, the numerous assertions that this party varied from the Canadian pattern can hardly be tested. There are no comparisons with other political parties – how they operated, what changes of »line« and tactics they followed (say, the Liberal Party with regard to Hitler's Germany), the numbers enrolled (to give perspective to the threefold increase of the CPC during the depression, for example), or the personalities and length of leadership (say, Buck compared to King or Manning or Smallwood). It must be added, that certainly this party varied from *some* Canadian norms, but the issue is specifically in what ways did it vary that the newspaper editorials and the party's own proclamations have not already told us? Only if differentiated answers were attempted to that kind of question would it be clear whether statements such as the following have any meaning: »Many of the day to day activities of these East European Marxists followed the pattern of Russian rather than Canadian politics« (p. 8).

The history of communist parties and movements is particularly difficult to write. Just as with all political parties and movements information is difficult to obtain on the inner councils. As with other parties the propaganda-publicity must be sifted carefully from the

programmatic statements of intent and the actual action carried out. And as is the case for many parties or movements which challenge or purport to challenge a state or society, information frequently comes from their opponents, police spies or provocateurs. But the special problem of dealing with communist parties and movements is ideological. The ideological barriers which need to be surmounted reflect the continued existence of Cold War attitudes. Frequently when a communist writes about an aspect of communist history as much explanation emerges as when a Catholic writes about St. Francis of Assisi's miracles. If a non-communist writes about a communist party, the ›leap of faith‹ is often replaced by a ›heap of criticism‹. The ideological barriers involved in writing communist history frequently result in omitting standards of judgement, critical awareness and documentation which are prerequisites elsewhere. Avakumovic, while not offering a highly critical account, has not overcome those ideological barriers. He has brought together much information but his form and method do not match the publisher's claim that his is »an objective, scholarly description«.

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