

The Communist International, The Communist Party of Great Britain, and the ‘Third Period’, 1928–1932

For much of the past century, the history of the international communist movement has been shrouded in mystery, supposition and assumption. The unavailability of relevant source material, and the cold-war paradigm in which such history was written, prompted a narrative based upon official announcements, memoirs, defections and outcome: a process that forged a very determinist history that was all too often written to suit a prevailing orthodoxy — be it western or eastern, ‘Stalinist’ or ‘Trotskyist’. With the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and the opening of archives such as those housed in the Russian Centre for the Preservation and Study of Contemporary Historical Documents, however, historians have been able to reassess the communist experience. As such, the past decade has seen a widening debate unfold, as issues relating to both the Communist International (Comintern) and the various national communist parties come to the fore.¹ In particular, the relationship between the Comintern and Moscow, and between the Comintern and its national sections, has led historians to revise such ‘classic’ studies as those by Claudin, Weber, Fauvet and Spriano.²

With regard to specific countries, new archival material is continuing to disclose much about the objectives, concerns and mechanizations of the various national communist parties. The following article is based on the present writer’s research into the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) during the so-called Third Period of 1928–32, and delineates factors that it is hoped will contribute to the re-evaluation of both the party and the period.

I

The theoretical basis of the Third Period was essentially one of intensifying class struggle and impending capitalist collapse. Very broadly, the years 1917–23 had been recognized by the Comintern as a period of revolutionary upheaval, followed in 1923–7 by a second ‘period’ of ‘relative capitalist stabilization’. The Third Period, therefore, was to herald a fresh round of crises, as the ‘inherent contradictions of capitalism’ induced unemployment, industrial rationalization, working-class militancy and imperialist war.³ Concurrently, such new conditions necessitated new political strategies, and the Comintern called for an offensive against both capitalism and the social-democratic ‘lackeys of the bourgeoisie’, whose commitment to reformism obstructed the workers’ march to revolution. Infamously too, the ‘shift to the left’ prompted a hunt for ‘right deviationists’ inside the Comintern’s own ranks, during which notable Bolsheviks such as Bukharin, Rykov, Humbert-Droz and Ewert were accused of harbouring social-democratic tendencies and thus offering the ‘most serious danger’ to the workers’ movement.

Traditional accounts of the Comintern’s ‘left turn’ focus on the fact that revolutions did not in fact break out between 1928 and 1935, and that fascism, and in particular Nazism, emerged in their place. Moreover, the advent of Stalin as the undisputed leader of the USSR, and the simultaneous onset of rapid industrialization and collectivization in the Soviet Union, has led historians to explain the Third Period as a ‘Stalinist’ manoeuvre designed to assume full control of the international communist movement. A rigid equation of Stalin=USSR=Comintern was established as the paradigm within which all communist activity was subsequently judged, and the Comintern was thereby reduced to a monolithic organization through which Stalin imposed his will on the various national parties.⁴ In Claudin’s words, ‘[the] grave economic situation in the USSR compelled Stalin to make a sharp turn . . . He then came into conflict with Bukharin, who . . . stood at the head of the Comintern . . . [and] the new struggle . . . [had] profound repercussions [throughout] the Comintern.’⁵ And yet, a closer analysis of Comintern policy during the Third Period fails to correspond to such assumptions. International policy was under constant review between 1926 and 1932, and was adapted in accordance with developments

around the world. As we shall see, the period was neither constant nor wholly sectarian, but encompassed a shifting political and strategic basis.

In relation to the CPGB, historians have tended to conclude that 'Soviet considerations . . . determined the turn which occurred in 1928' and that the ensuing policy of 'class against class' 'ran wholly against the grain of British realities'.⁶ Subsequently, the party leadership's initial resistance to this 'new line', and the simultaneous collapse of party membership and influence between 1927 and 1930, led historians to depict the Third Period as one in which a submissive CPGB yielded to 'Stalinist' pressure, and suffered as a consequence.⁷ Superficially, such an equation appears quite neat. Not only did CPGB membership fall to a record low of 2555 in November 1930, but communist influence in the trade unions and the Labour Party also noticeably diminished. Moreover, the majority of the party leadership did initially resist the implementation of the 'new line', only then to accept the policy and enter into two years of bitter recrimination. However, it would be erroneous and historically naive to accept such a hypothesis in total. While historical continuity seemed to complement the teleological approach of both the Comintern and later historians, a closer analysis of the period again reveals a far more complex picture. In particular, a 'traditional' reading ignores the *multiple* experience of the CPGB in the Third Period, during which the party was also overhauled and revived between 1930 and 1934; stood at the forefront of the period's unemployment demonstrations in the form of the communist-led National Unemployed Workers' Movement; and successfully forged a lively and distinctive culture centred around the party. Similarly, an examination of the socio-economic and political context in which the party functioned reveals that the communist experience was influenced by far more than the dictates of Moscow.

II

The theoretical basis of the Third Period was formulated by Nikolai Bukharin at the Seventh Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International (ECCI) in November 1926. Bukharin outlined three phases of post-war development,

the third of which was one of ever sharper class struggle stemming from the 'internal contradictions of the process of . . . [capitalist] stabilisation . . . coming out in ever sharper form'.⁸ The basis for such an observation was detailed at the Fifteenth Conference of the Soviet Communist Party in October 1926, where Bukharin noted that while certain capitalist countries were expanding, others, such as Britain, were in obvious decline. He reasoned this with a 'differentiated' analysis, whereby the world was divided into six 'types' wherein the 'revolutionary situation' differed in each. This acknowledged a perceived swing to the left by workers in certain countries, while recognizing also the (temporary) continuation of 'capitalist stabilization' in others. However, such an equilibrium was, Bukharin suggested dialectically, characterized by 'internal contradictions' that actually intensified class antagonisms and thus engendered conditions ripe for communist parties to exploit. 'We may come to the conclusion,' Bukharin reasoned, 'that capitalism is now approaching the conclusion of its period of reconstruction.'⁹

Recent research, by historians such as N.N. Kozlov, E.D. Weitz, Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, has convincingly presented Bukharin's analysis as a cogent response to the events and conditions of the mid-late 1920s.¹⁰ Kozlov and Weitz have outlined the German precedents for Bukharin's theory, as technological advancements and economic growth were accompanied by deteriorating labour relations. Moreover, Weitz has demonstrated how divisions within the German labour movement intensified throughout the Weimar period, thus precipitating the communists' 'left turn' of 1927-9. For example,

The SPD's leading role in the Weimar system . . . meant that the police forces with which the communists came into conflict were often under the command of social democrats, making coalitions even with labour parties almost unthinkable. The intense communist hostility towards social democracy had its origins therefore . . . in the hard experience of physical conflict in politicised spaces.¹¹

We may note also that Bukharin was influenced by events in Britain, where the General Strike of May 1926 convinced the Comintern theoretician that 'the English proletariat must now pass on to the next stage of progress . . . English capitalism, more than any other capitalism, is faced with its imminent collapse.'¹² As such, Bukharin called on the CPGGB to expose 'ruthlessly' the

reformism of the trade union and Labour Party leadership in order for the British workers to become 'the vanguard of the European working class'.¹³ While space does not allow a comprehensive summary of Bukharin's analytical 'world tour', we may conclude that the Third Period was not simply a Machiavellian figment of Stalin's imagination.

Recent studies have similarly established that the 'left turn' of 1926–9 had widespread support throughout the communist movement, and was influenced, seized upon and extended by non-Soviet communists within both the Comintern hierarchy and the national parties. Weitz has persuasively suggested that 'these tendencies predated the onset of the depression and the Comintern's Third Period', and events in Germany certainly provoked agitation for a more offensive policy within sections of the German party.¹⁴ As early as January 1927, Ernst Thälmann denounced the left inside the SPD as an 'obstacle to the leftward development of the social democratic workers', while the shooting down of May Day marchers in 1929, on the orders of the SPD police chief Zörgiebel, effectively augmented the more radical perspective within the KPD.¹⁵

Elsewhere, younger comrades, bolstered and driven by the radical rectitudes of the 1917 revolution, had consistently balked at the 'soft' policies of the mid-1920s. Militant communists such as Longo in the PCI and Barbé in the PCF, assiduously agitated for more revolutionary policies in a way similar to, for example, the RAPP in the USSR.¹⁶ In Britain, young communists organized in the Young Communist League (YCL) regularly demonstrated an over-eager militancy, and it was from the ranks of the YCL that the most vociferous support for the 'left turn' emerged.¹⁷ From its formation in 1921, the YCL was renowned for its sectarianism, and this was clearly demonstrated at the Fourth YCL Congress in 1926, where non-party youth organizations were denounced as 'reformist lackeys' who constituted the 'most dangerous' influence on young workers.¹⁸ As such, the international events of 1927–9 only served to compound such militant perspectives; as international relations between the USSR and the West deteriorated, fascist or neo-fascist regimes emerged throughout much of Europe, and rationalization, unemployment and the Wall Street Crash identified the onset of a periodic capitalist 'crisis'.

With regard to Britain, a number of factors served to radicalize

the communist perspective prior to the party's adoption of its 'class against class' policy in 1928. First, the disappointing climax to the General Strike, and the continued suffering of the miners, facilitated communist hostility towards the existing leadership of the TUC and Labour Party. Second, such hostility was reciprocated, as Labour and union leaders turned their attention towards 'disruptive elements' inside the labour movement. In 1926, the TUC general council denounced affiliation to the National Minority Movement (NMM), a communist-organized pressure group inside the trade unions, while individual union bureaucracies took varied measures to expel or limit communist influence within their ranks throughout 1927-8. Similarly, TUC recognition of trades councils affiliated to the NMM was withdrawn in 1927, and the Labour Party stepped up its own campaign against communist 'infiltration' by expelling local parties associated with the CPGB. Third, the continued resistance of the miners, and the workers' initial response to the General Strike, raised communist expectations of working-class radicalization. This was bolstered by the increase in party membership that occurred during and immediately after the strike (rising from 6000 to 11,127 between April and December 1926),¹⁹ the development of the National Left Wing Movement (NLWM) inside the Labour Party, and the extension of the Minority Movement.²⁰ From such a perspective, the CPGB was able to detect a protracted militancy within the labour movement, through which an 'organised revolutionary opposition movement, centred around the communist party' could develop.²¹ Fourth, the TUC's withdrawal from the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Unity Committee, and the onset of a period of 'industrial peace' — symbolized by the Mond-Turner talks held between employers and union representatives from January 1928 — convinced many communists of the 'rapprochement' of social democracy and capitalism.

Finally, communist attitudes were shaped by events 'on the ground'. The changing economic structure of Britain during the inter-war years affected those areas in which the CPGB had built up a basis of support, as technological modernization, industrial rationalization and the extension of 'new industries' dramatically altered Britain's industrial base. An obvious example was South Wales where, between 1921 and 1936, 241 mines closed down and a workforce of 271,161 fell to 126,233.²² Consequently,

unemployment, migration and victimization all impinged upon areas of 'traditional' communist support, particularly in the aftermath of the General Strike. As such, the decline in CPGB membership and influence that characterized the onset of the Third Period must be considered in the context of Britain's socio-economic development — a development that similarly affected the wider British labour movement. Trade union membership for instance, was falling in both size and density during the late 1920s.²³

By late 1927 therefore, the CPGB recognized many of the central components that would eventually constitute the Third Period. Reference to the intensifying class struggle, capitalist decay and social democratic/reformist treachery had a resonance for many British communists. At the Eighth Party Congress in August 1926, the party concluded that the workers were 'moving to the left', that the class struggle had entered a 'new phase' and that 'left wing phrase mongers' were directly responsible for the General Strike's defeat.²⁴ Similarly, within the party press, Rajani Palme Dutt continually proclaimed the emergence of a 'new era' of struggle following the strike's 'exposure' of 'reformist treachery', trade union legalism and parliamentary democracy.²⁵ Moreover, within the CPGB executive, discussion regularly centred upon the implications of such a hardened perspective on party practice, although only once was a fundamental 'modification of our policy' debated prior to the Comintern's intervention of October 1927.²⁶

Indeed, it was this failure to translate an increasingly militant communist perspective into a coherent political strategy that prompted Bukharin's direct intervention into CPGB affairs. As Harry Pollitt commented, the reason Bukharin initiated the debate over CPGB policy was because 'we damped it down at home'.²⁷ It is also true that the party leadership resisted the Comintern's initial proposal that the CPGB should stand communist candidates against Labour Party candidates at any forthcoming election. However, it would be wrong therefore to conclude that the 'new line' was without support within the CPGB, or that it was alien to its members.

As outlined above, many of the concepts that constituted the 'new line' were already engrained within the doctrine of the Comintern by late 1927, and these were further endorsed by the CPGB at its Ninth Congress in October.²⁸ Similarly, the changes

recommended by the Comintern were not antithetical to British communists, many of whom (including leading members such as Pollitt, Gallacher and Murphy) had only grudgingly accepted the parliamentary policy adopted by the CPGB at its formation. Furthermore, a more 'independent line' not dissimilar to 'class against class' had previously been proposed by Shapurji Saklatvala in 1925 following the collapse of the first Labour government, and at least a section of the party had discussed formulating a more independent line with a Comintern representative in Britain, Mikhail Borodin, 'some years' earlier.²⁹

More immediately, the line proposed by the Comintern — which, in practical terms, initially amounted to no more than an electoral tactic — soon found significant support within the party executive, and widespread endorsement within the lower sections of the party. Such leading comrades as Harry Pollitt, Rajani Palme Dutt, Robin Page Arnot and Jack Murphy all endorsed the 'left turn', while the 'new line' was unanimously accepted in Manchester and Birmingham, and overwhelmingly in all other party districts.³⁰ Furthermore, many British communists sought to take the line *beyond* the parameters established by the ECCI. Harry Pollitt's initial response to the party executive's thesis against the 'new line' was necessarily tempered by Dutt, who checked Pollitt's desire to liquidate the NLWM and to drop immediately the party's policy of seeking affiliation to the Labour Party. Similarly, both the London and Tyneside district parties questioned the *limitations*, rather than the excesses, of the 'new line'.³¹ As we shall see, at a more practical level, such militancy engendered by a more 'independent' communist line often led to a sectarian or formulaic interpretation of party policy, to the consternation of both the party leadership and the Comintern.

Overall, therefore, the introduction of the Third Period necessitated a fundamental realignment of the CPGB's political objectives. As the formulations established by the Comintern were extended to all areas of communist practice — and as Bukharin's theoretical analysis became entwined with disagreements inside the USSR — a variety of interpretations and potential policies relating to the 'new line' were put forward at all levels of communist discussion. At no point, therefore, should we see the 'new line' as having become fixed, or communist practice as a mere mechanism of 'Stalinist' will. The particular development of the 'new line' in Britain, as elsewhere, was

forged by a combination of Comintern directive and indigenous interpretation.

III

If the emergence of the Third Period was far more complex than standard interpretations suggest, then so too was the period itself. The new course established by Bukharin *continually evolved* throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, and any attempt to perceive these years as a homogenous block risks over-simplification. While key components of the Third Period were apparent in Comintern resolutions well before its official affirmation in 1928,³² the debate surrounding the connotations of Bukharin's analysis meant the transition from one policy to another was protracted and characterized by varying opinion. Thus, between 1927 and 1930, the Comintern and the various national parties were ravaged with internal deliberation, as comrades debated such questions as: To what extent was there a capitalist crisis? How far had the working class radicalized? How acute had the class struggle become? To what extent were trade unions and social democratic parties an instrument of the bourgeoisie? How were the theoretical summations of the Comintern to be transformed into policy?

Throughout the Comintern, therefore, the 'left turn' gained a momentum that, at its most extreme, engendered the traditional conception of the Third Period as one of sectarian excess. By as early as April 1928, the British delegate to the Fourth Congress of the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU), Arthur Horner, alarmingly reported 'the tendency to treat all reformist unions as having become units of capitalist production'.³³ At a more practical level too, the aggressive nature of the 'new line' often found a sectarian response. In Britain, communist involvement in disputes at the Dawdon colliery in 1929, at Austins Motors (Birmingham) in the same year, and in the Yorkshire woollen industry in 1930, all suffered as a consequence of sectarianism. At Dawdon, the district organizer, Maurice Ferguson, undermined the party's influence with his insistence that official union representatives be excluded from the workers' strike committee. In Yorkshire, a sparse communist presence was compounded by the party's insistence on revolutionary

slogans, such as 'Hands off India', that meant little to workers in Shipley or Huddersfield fighting to maintain their pay packet. And in Birmingham, the local party's portrayal of 'official' union officials as 'weak kneed . . . and treacherous' did little to endear the party to the strikers.³⁴ Indeed, such an approach was also evident *within* the party. William Allan gave a 'classic' example to an ECCI 'British Commission' in December 1931.

[I was at a party] local where five new members had recently been brought into the party and these new members were talking about what was taking place inside the place where they work. Quite a useful thing to talk about I should think. And because they were talking without knowing any of the usual jargon, the local comrades there snubbed them and told them they should talk like Bolsheviks . . . and that they should bring forward questions relating to Bolshevism.³⁵

However, we should be wary of forging too uniform or essentialist a conclusion from such turmoil. With regard to theory, a more militant prognosis of the Third Period was finally revealed at the Tenth ECCI Plenum in July 1929 following a sustained offensive against the supposed limitations of Bukharin's analysis. Even so, the plenum was not the revolutionary call to arms so often portrayed, and a mixture of revolutionary impetuosity and political caution characterized the proceedings. While speeches were often strident and infused with revolutionary vigour, and the plenum resolutions outlined a world poised for revolution, the directives of the ECCI were *not* overtly sectarian. The formation of 'red' trade unions to counter existing 'reformist' unions, for example, was *not* unconditionally sanctioned, and the projected 'united front from below' did *not* discount work within reformist organizations or co-operation with workers on the non-communist left.³⁶

The misinterpretation of the ECCI's 'new line' by contemporary communists (and subsequent historians) stemmed from attention being focused on the speeches and agitational propaganda of those such as Losovsky in the RILU, or young communists mobilized in the battle against the 'right danger', rather than the actual directives of the plenum itself. This was due, in part, to the fact that Manuilsky, Kuusinen, Piatnitsky and others associated with the usurpation of Bukharin, had not gained total control of the Comintern by mid-1929 and needed to accommodate more radical perspectives in order to secure domination.

Even so, the resolutions of the Tenth Plenum reveal that the more pragmatic members of the ECCI had influence enough to check the extreme policies many in the International wished to enforce.

At its basis, the policy detailed at the Tenth ECCI Plenum placed the world in a period of 'general crisis', where 'an upward swing of the revolutionary movement in the principal capitalist countries' was evident. By accentuating and supplementing Bukharin's preliminary theories, a period of revolutionary struggle was declared necessary to combat the capitalist offensive launched against the working class and the USSR. In particular, the more extreme interpretation of social democracy was endorsed.

In the ECCI's analysis, the bourgeoisie, in alliance with the representatives of social democracy, had embarked on a policy of 'unashamed robbery, enslavement and barbarous oppression'. Unemployment was increasing, wages were being cut, and the 'economic strangulation of the working class' was accompanied by a 'political reaction' that entailed 'the fascist transformation of the state apparatus of the bourgeoisie, the intensification of repression and white terror, fascist coup d'état aided by world capitalism (Yugoslavia), mass arrests of workers (France, Poland, etc.), [and] suppression of revolutionary organisations (. . . in Germany) . . .'.³⁷ Capitalism was perceived to be transforming into fascism, while in countries where there were strong social democratic parties, the guise of 'social fascism' was assumed. Thus, the leaders of social democracy were 'social fascists' who served the bourgeoisie by 'paralysing the activity of the masses'.³⁸

While such pronouncements appear to highlight the sectarian nature of the plenum, a closer look at the plenum resolutions reveals a more flexible approach. The resolutions emphasized work *inside* the 'reformist unions'; united-front campaigns among women and young workers were encouraged; communists were to become 'revolutionary delegates *elected* by the workers'; and 'the survival of sectarianism' was explicitly denounced.³⁹ Thus,

[there should be] no relaxation in our efforts for the winning over of the trade union rank and file . . . On the contrary, this work must be increased . . . The struggle for ousting all the bureaucrats and capitalist agents from the unions,

the fight for each elected position in the unions, especially the struggle for the positions of the lower trade union delegates, must serve in our hands as a powerful instrument for exposing the role of social fascist trade union bureaucracy, and for combating it.⁴⁰

Moreover, with regard to actual trade union policy, a militant theoretical analysis was similarly juxtaposed with a differentiated political method. Although general strikes in Poland and Columbia, 'major disputes' in Germany, France and Austria, and 'small strikes' in Great Britain were all presented as evidence of working-class radicalization and intensifying class struggle, Comintern policy did not match the militant aspirations of Losovsky in the RILU, or communists such as Paul Merker from the KPD and William Rust from the CPGB.

As for 'red' trade unions, the plenum accepted the principle of working-class organization opposed to the reformist bureaucracy, but simultaneously imposed a series of conditions to restrict their formation, thus acknowledging the potential dangers of such a policy. Hence, only 'at the high tide of strikes, only when the political struggle is very acute, when considerable sections of the proletariat have already grasped the social-fascist character of the reformist trade union bureaucracy, and when these masses are actively supporting the formation of a new trade union', should a 'red' union be established.⁴¹ Indeed, the ECCI was explicit in warning communists 'not to withdraw from [reformist] unions, but to contribute in every way to the acceleration of the process of revolutionisation' of the working class.⁴² Subsequently, although communist strategy inside the 'reformist' unions was revised at the Tenth Plenum — 'legalism' was denounced and the task of organizing the workers against the existing union leadership emphasized — the 'new line' did not necessitate the indiscriminate formation of communist trade unions. As with other sections of the ECCI programme, the practicalities of communist policy remained flexible.

Quite clearly therefore, a disparity existed between the 'new line' in theory and in practice. From 1928 to 1930, the Comintern was primarily concerned with the former, with the *reasons for* the 'new line'. Thus, Comintern intervention in the affairs of the CPGB revolved principally around the political formulations of the party. The Ninth Plenum of February 1928, for example, endorsed the theoretical line of the CPGB 'minority' (Dutt, Pollitt, Page Arnot) rather than their policy

recommendations, which were initially refuted. Similarly, the ECCI representative to the Tenth Congress of the CPGB (January 1929), Josef Lenz, was primarily concerned with theoretical, as opposed to practical, issues. Lenz insisted on a more acute depiction of the 'disintegration' of British capitalism, for example, along with an explicit reference to the labour movement's fusion with the capitalist state.⁴³ Subsequently, the 'closed letter' dispatched to the CPGB following Lenz's report and an ECCI presidium, declared that 'the chief difference between the general line of the [CPGB] central committee and the [CPGB] congress is to be found in the attitude towards capitalist stabilisation and the prospects of revolutionary struggle in Great Britain'.⁴⁴ Where practical (or strategic) matters were discussed, they generally referred to the CPGB overstepping the policy of the ECCI. As such, the decision of the Tenth Congress to liquidate the NLWM was condemned by the ECCI; Maurice Ferguson's conduct in the Dawdon colliery dispute was decried as 'sectarian'; and the Comintern consistently endorsed the more pragmatic approach of Harry Pollitt, as opposed to that of militant harbingers of the 'new line' such as William Rust and Walter Tapsell.⁴⁵ For the Comintern, ideological unity did not preclude a practical flexibility.

IV

By 1930, the disparities outlined above were very apparent. Although aspects of the ECCI's prognosis appeared to have been verified — as economies crashed and class antagonisms were heightened by the social effects of unemployment, rationalization and poverty — a number of parties, including the French and the British, were in obvious decline. Moreover, the pursual of a militant or hard-line policy was proving to be ineffective. Thus, even in Germany, where the 'new line' was arguably best received and had seemingly prompted an increase in party membership, the 'complacent and combative' mood of the KPD was soon dampened by an ECCI that objected to the optimistic 'revolutionary phrases' of sections of the party.⁴⁶ Consequently, the strategies and emphases of the ECCI were refined continually throughout our period, with the stress on the danger of 'left sectarianism' being perhaps the most obvious example.

A notable realignment occurred at the Enlarged Presidium of the ECCI, held between 8 and 18 February 1930. Manuilsky, the highest authority in the ECCI Political Secretariat following Bukharin's removal, called on Comintern sections to focus attention on the 'partial demands' of the workers.⁴⁷ Work within the reformist trade unions was further emphasized, and parties were requested to concentrate on the workers' response to the immediate 'economic struggle'. Several other congress speeches echoed Manuilsky's concerns, and these were documented in a series of articles published in the communist press.⁴⁸ 'Swaggering over the smallest advances and successes' and labelling all non-communists 'social fascists' was condemned, while comrades were implored to fight 'opportunism both open (right) and concealed in revolutionary phrases (left)'. Both the KPD and the Communist Youth League were condemned for 'sectarianism and left deviation' in mid-1930, and even the Profintern (at its Fifth Congress in August) was forced to warn against the 'schematic formation of new unions' and the danger of 'left sectarianism'.⁴⁹ As Harry Pollitt later revealed, the RILU was even 'questioning whether it [was] worth carrying on with "red" unions' by August 1930.⁵⁰

Aspects of the ECCI's theoretical line were also subtly realigned from 1930. The revolutionary crises of the Third Period were clearly described as *emerging*, so checking the more fanciful illusion that such a crisis was already apparent.⁵¹ Similarly, the Comintern's estimate of fascism was redressed. Although any conception that social democracy represented a 'lesser evil' was denounced, the ECCI condemned those in the international communist movement who saw fascism as either a 'historical necessity', or a prerequisite to revolution. Different stages of 'fascisization' were distinguished, and the tendency evident in the KPD to label the Brüning Government of 1930 as fascist was pointedly rebuked.⁵²

By the Eleventh ECCI Plenum of March 1931 therefore, the fight against 'exaggerations' and 'adventurism' was an integral part of the Comintern line.⁵³ 'Left opportunism' was accused of 'fostering' the right danger, of leading to the 'neglect of the exceptionally important work in the reformist unions', and of completely identifying 'social fascism with fascism and the social fascist upper stratum with the rank and file social democratic masses of the workers'.⁵⁴ Consequently, the ideological rigour of

the late 1920s had been eclipsed by more practical concerns by the early 1930s.

Within the national sections, steps were taken by all parties to combat the 'new type of leftism' and thereby redress the deficiencies of the 'new line'. At the Sixteenth Conference of the Soviet party, a struggle against both 'right' and 'left' deviations was initiated. The KPD meanwhile, removed Losovsky's prodigy Paul Merker from his position at the head of the Revolutionary Trade Union Opposition (RGO), and resolved to pursue a 'united front from below' that distinguished between the workers and the leaders of the social democratic trade unions. In France, too, the PCF denounced the 'left danger', and following a Comintern commission in May 1930, determined to 'battle for every worker', to 'struggle on two fronts', and to concentrate on 'day to day' issues relevant to the French working class. As for the CPGB, the Comintern gave its full support to the more pragmatic approach of Harry Pollitt, resolutely endorsing his leadership at the 'August Commission' of 1930, and supporting his attempts to curtail the excesses of sections within the British party.

The ECCI had already referred to the 'ultra-left' danger inside the CPGB in January 1929, rebuking those who sought to 'abandon the struggle in the existing organisations and create new red unions without taking into consideration the concrete state of affairs and the correlation of forces'.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, such caution had been eclipsed temporarily by the supposedly more urgent offensive against the 'right danger' throughout the Comintern in 1928–9. Between 1930 and 1932, however, the ECCI consistently encouraged a more pragmatic and/or flexible communist approach to the workers' struggle in Britain.

This was clearly evident in relation to the party's industrial policy. While the ECCI insisted on the notion of 'red' trade unions being adopted by the CPGB, it did so in the context of the various 'conditions' outlined above. As such, Harry Pollitt — who was openly opposed to the militant policy endorsed by the RILU and such native comrades as John Mahon — was able to limit the excesses of the 'new line', and eventually adapt the line in accordance with indigenous circumstances. Thus, Pollitt's opposition to the proposed formation of a national 'red' miners union in the spring of 1930 was endorsed by the ECCI, despite the pro-union position of the RILU representative in Britain

at the time, J.W. Mills. Subsequently, Pollitt was allowed to 'strangle' the 'new union psychology', and, following a protracted inter-party debate in 1932, realign the 'united front from below' sufficiently to encompass communist support for 'rank and file committees' established by non-party workers inside existing trade unions.⁵⁶

Concurrently, the ECCI ratified Pollitt's persistent request for comrades to resume their work inside established labour organizations and to concentrate on the 'day to day' demands of the working class. Both the 'August Commission' of 1930 and the 'December Presidium' of 1931 endorsed the British General Secretary's broader interpretation of the 'united front from below', and both instigated initiatives designed to break the sectarian isolation that had ensnared the CPGB. As Pollitt reported to the party executive in September 1930:

We have always been talking about the united front tactic, and yet it has been misinterpreted throughout the Party. It is translated as working with one or two workers who, if they do not swallow everything we want them to, become social fascists . . . who must be mercilessly exposed . . . [In] organisations under Party control, there is no attempt to bring workers to the front . . . If there is in any factory 20 or 30 workers who are prepared to work with us on the basis of two or three simple issues, but who have no use for our belief in armed insurrection or on the question of religion . . . we should not reject these workers. We should work with them.⁵⁷

Subsequently, a Workers' Charter was established by the CPGB, and while the campaign proved to be a failure, its 'broad united front programme of action' based upon a 'series of demands that are immediately practicable' (increased unemployment benefit, the seven-hour day and specific demands relating to specific industries) at least recognized the party's isolation and endeavoured to reintegrate the party amongst the British working class.⁵⁸ As such, the 'December Presidium' sought to extend the party's 'turn towards the masses'; sectarianism was again denounced, and the party apparatus was radically overhauled in an attempt to focus party members' attention on the 'day to day struggle'. The party centre was reduced, executive members were dispatched to the district organizations to form working bureaux that 'targeted' local factories, and work within the trade unions was again ratified.⁵⁹

These changes, coupled with the heightened political atmo-

sphere engendered by rising unemployment and the collapse of the Labour government in 1931, noticeably revived the party. CPGB membership rose from 2756 to 7478 between June and December 1931, and while the majority of these new recruits were unemployed workers, the party could also claim an increase in factory cells by November 1932 (from forty to eighty-nine) and, in certain localities, an increase in the percentage of its trade-union members.⁶⁰ More importantly, the broader interpretation of the 'united front from below' promoted by Pollitt enabled the party to reintegrate itself into the forefront of 'the struggle'. By aligning themselves with 'rank and file committees' instigated by non-party workers inside the trade unions, and by re-prioritizing communist trade-union activity, communists played an increasingly significant role in both national and regional industrial disputes between 1932 and 1935.⁶¹

Such realignments negate the 'traditional' interpretation of the Third Period as a homogenous whole. Theoretical and political refinements led to the continual modification of CPGB activity, and yielded a far more variegated history than is traditionally recognized. At each level of communist activity varying interpretations of the Comintern's broad political directives led to varying practical consequences. Moreover, such realignments were, in part, designed to enable communists such as Harry Pollitt to correspond the theoretical analysis of the Comintern with the 'concrete realities' of life itself. Overall, therefore, the ECCI constructed a theoretical paradigm within which international communist sections were obliged to function, and the CPGB — as Andrew Thorpe has recognized — became largely the master of its own fate.⁶²

V

From such a reading of the Third Period, it is evident that previously held assumptions must be revised, or at least reassessed. Very clearly, the international communist movement, at this time, was more than a mere extension of Stalin's Soviet bureaucracy, and throughout the period, initiatives were taken by communists at all levels of activity. Thus, it was Losovsky who successfully placed the issue of 'red' trade unions on the ECCI's agenda in 1928, following at least a year of discussion.⁶³

It was the German communist, Josef Lenz, who successfully relaunched the formula of 'social fascism' — though it did not receive the ECCI's sanction until the Tenth Plenum.⁶⁴ Similarly, the more balanced analysis that distinguished Comintern policy from 1930 was driven primarily by Kuusinen and Manuilsky, and prompted by the pragmatism of national leaders such as Harry Pollitt and Milan Gorkic.⁶⁵ Indeed, when Losovsky accused Pollitt of 'negating the policy of independent leadership' at the Eighth RILU Plenum in December 1931, he was pointedly rebuked by Kuusinen, the ECCI representative.⁶⁶

Furthermore, if we accept that the history of the CPGB was not merely a reflection of the history of the Comintern, it is necessary to focus attention on the communist experience at a national and regional level. With regard to the Third Period, this emphasizes the role of communists such as Wal Hannington, whose leadership of the NUWM was regularly at odds with Comintern directives; Tom Thomas and Jimmy Miller, who developed the revolutionary agit-prop street theatre of the Workers' Theatre Movement through a fusion of 'class against class' and the correlation of theatre to 'the struggle'; and the Leeds 'Red Wheelers', who utilized their cycling club to rally support for victims of eviction and the means test. Thus, while the CPGB adhered to the 'iron discipline' of democratic centralism, the transition from theory to practice subjected communist activity to 'the material limitations, presuppositions, and conditions independent of . . . will' delineated by Marx himself.⁶⁷

As such, the question of Comintern 'control' over its various sections must also be reassessed. Indeed, the limits of the Comintern's practical influence over the CPGB have recently been explored by Andrew Thorpe. Most obviously, Britain's geographical position and its political system placed the party beyond the immediate reach of Moscow. Not only were CPGB members protected by their British passports, but the party's legality gave it a flexibility and an independence that contrasted with, for example, the Polish Communist Party. Moreover, the CPGB leadership was not required to flee to Moscow, and the overworked Anglo-American Secretariat that counselled the British comrades' work was unable to construct a completely omnipotent 'advisory' apparatus. While the Comintern and the USSR undoubtedly had a defining influence on the CPGB, therefore, a number of other influences (pressure from the

rank and file, inter-party differences, indigenous conditions and political structures) were similarly significant.⁶⁸

Most importantly, any assessment of Comintern policy must consider national, as well as Soviet, determinants. As is clearly evident with regard to the CPGB, the party's perspective was shaped by both British and international considerations, and although policies were constructed to comply with the prevailing theoretical position of the Comintern, they were consistently adapted to conform to indigenous developments. Similarly, the Comintern's theoretical and practical position was realigned to conform with *perceived* changes in the 'international situation'. Even so, it is indisputable that events centred within the USSR impinged upon the communist experience at a national level, and it is not the intention of this article to deny the importance of either the USSR or the Comintern. The extent of the offensive against the 'right danger' in 1928–9 for example, was undoubtedly due to the struggle at the heart of the Soviet Party. However, it is important to recognize that the struggle between Stalin and Bukharin emerged, in part, as a consequence of the transition from one 'period' to another, and not as a cause of it. Moreover, the eighteen months of chaos and militant excess that accompanied the offensive only accounted for part of the Third Period. For the majority of the period, the Comintern line was relatively flexible, sensitive to national circumstances and expressed in such a way as to allow parties to adapt them to indigenous conditions *for so long as the theoretical formulations of the Comintern were adhered to*.

Notes

I would like to thank Dick Geary for his helpful comments in relation to the first draft of this article and the staff at the National Museum of Labour History (NMLH) in Manchester for access to the communist archive.

1. Some important new studies include, K. McDermott and J. Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (London 1996), M. Narinsky and J. Rojahn, eds, *Centre and Periphery: The History of the Comintern in the Light of New Documents* (Amsterdam 1996), T. Saarela and K. Rentola, eds, *Communism: National and International* (Helsinki 1998), T. Rees and A. Thorpe, eds, *International Communism and the Communist International 1919–43* (Manchester 1998). Books not in English include, A. Vatlin, *Komintern: Pyervii Dyesyak Lujet* (Moscow 1993), P. Huber, *Stalin's Schatten in die Schweiz: Schweizer Kommunisten in Moskau* (Zurich 1994) and A. Agosti, *Palmiro Togliatti*

(Turin 1995).

2. F. Claudin, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform* (London 1975), H. Weber, *Die Wandlung des Deutschen Kommunismus: Die Stalinisierung der KPD in der Weimar Republic*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt 1969), J. Fauvet, *Historie du Parti Communiste Français* (Paris 1977), P. Spriano, *Storia del Partito Comunista Italiano*, 5 vols (Turin 1967–75).

3. While the Comintern found it politically and historically appropriate to designate precise 'periods', it should be noted that each period merged into the other as new theories concerning the 'objective situation' and the 'balance of class forces' were considered and debated within the communist movement.

4. For example, see F. Borkenau, *The Communist International* (London 1938), Claudin, *The Communist Movement*, and D. Hallas, *The Comintern* (London 1985).

5. Claudin, *The Communist Movement*, 155

6. W. Thompson, *The Good Old Cause: British Communism 1920–1991* (London 1992), 43–4. See also N. Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927–1941* (London 1985), F. Beckett, *The Enemy Within: The Rise and Fall of the British Communist Party* (London 1995). More recent studies have begun to challenge this view. See K. Morgan, *Against Fascism and War: Ruptures and Continuities in British Communist Politics, 1935–41* (Manchester 1989), N. Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933–45* (Aldershot 1995), A. Thorpe, 'The Communist International and the British Communist Party', in Rees and Thorpe, eds, *International Communism*, 67–86.

7. For a recent account, see R. Darlington, *The Political Trajectory of J.T. Murphy* (Liverpool 1998), 140. '[The CPGB] effectively became a completely loyal devotee to the Russian Stalinist leadership before any other.'

8. *International Press Correspondence (Inprecorr)* 20 December 1926.

9. *Inprecorr*, 4 November 1926.

10. This does not, of course, mean that either Bukharin's theory or the Comintern's policy was necessarily 'correct'.

11. E. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1880–1990* (New Jersey 1997), 187. Also, N.N. Kozlov and E.D. Weitz, 'Reflections on the Origins of the "Third Period": Bukharin, the Comintern, and the Political Economy of Weimar Germany', in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 24, No. 3 (1989), 387–410.

12. *Inprecorr*, 4 November 1926.

13. *Inprecorr*, 3 December 1926.

14. Weitz, *Creating German Communism*, 187.

15. Quoted in B. Fowkes, *Communism in Germany under the Weimar Republic* (London 1984), 142.

16. For Longo, see J. B. Urban, *Moscow and the Italian Communist Party: From Togliatti to Berlinguer* (London 1986), 43–4. Barbé's agitation for more radical communist policy soon led to his being accused of 'left sectarianism' in 1929–30. The RAPP was the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers.

17. For an example of the YCL's militant impetuosity, see *Report of the Fifth National Congress of the Young Communist League of Britain* (London 1928), and M. McCarthy, *Generation in Revolt* (London 1953), 121–2. Advocates of a more militant policy included Ernest Woolley, Walter Tapsell, Lily Webb and John Mahon.

18. J. Klugmann, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain: The General*

Strike, 1925–1926 (London 1969), 358. See also M. Waite, *Young People and Formal Political Activity* (Unpublished MPhil thesis 1992, held in the NMLH).

19. *Party Membership Figures, June 1925–September 1927* (Communist Archive).

20. The National Left Wing Movement was formed in September 1926 by left-wing Labour Party members (including communists) with the intention of campaigning for a more 'socialist' Labour Party policy. The Second Annual Conference in September 1927 included representatives from 54 local Labour Parties representing 150,000 members. The Minority Movement claimed to represent some 956,000 workers in August 1926, while the number of delegates attending the 1928 Annual Congress rose to 844 compared to 802 in 1926. L.J. Macfarlane, *The British Communist Party: Its Origin and Development until 1929* (London, 1966), 189–91 and 323.

21. R.P. Dutt, 'Notes of the Month', *Labour Monthly* (February 1927). See also R.W. Robson's recognition of a 'sharpening class struggle' in his report to the Party Executive, in *Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 14–15 May 1927 (Communist Archive).

22. H. Francis and D. Smith, *The Fed: A History of the South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London 1980), 33.

23. C.J. Wrigley, 'The Trade Unions Between the Wars', in C.J. Wrigley, ed., *A History of British Industrial Relations. Volume II: 1914–1939* (Brighton 1987), 72–111. Thus, the percentage of Yorkshire miners belonging to a union, for example, fell from 82.5% in 1925 to just 63% in 1927.

24. See *The Communist International*, 15 October 1926. Also *The Eighth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain: Reports, Theses and Resolutions* (London 1926).

25. For one example, see *The Communist International*, 15 June 1926.

26. CPGB policy vacillated between the optimistically militant (calling for a General Strike in response to the government's Trade Union Bill) and the overly cautious (advising those trades councils affiliated to the NMM to comply with the TUC's ultimatum to disaffiliate) throughout 1927. Indeed, the apparent ambiguity of the party's position was recognized by William Gallacher at an executive meeting in April, where Gallacher suggested that a 'modification of our policy' was perhaps necessary in response to the Labour Party's successful offensive against communists within its ranks, in *Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 2–3 April and 15–16 April 1927 (Communist Archive).

27. *Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 7–9 January 1928 (Communist Archive).

28. *The Ninth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain* (London 1927). For example, the 'intensifying class struggle' and the need to 'sharpen' the attack on reformism were consistently referred to.

29. This was revealed by Helen Crawford in a meeting of the party executive in early 1928: See *Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 7–9 January 1928 (Communist Archive).

30. For support in the party leadership see *Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 7–9 January 1928 (Communist Archive). Other leading members who supported the 'left turn' were Saklatvala, Sam Elsbury, William Joss, Helen Crawford and William Allan. For the districts, see *Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 17–18 March 1928 (Communist Archive).

31. *Workers' Life*, 23 March and 6 April 1928.
32. For example, the resolutions of the Eighth Plenum of the ECCI, held in May 1927, included reference to the 'sharpening class struggle', the 'fascist methods' of capitalism, and the 'rapprochement' of capitalism and social democracy. See *Inprecorr*, 18 August 1927. Also 'Resolution of the Eighth Plenum of the ECCI on the Situation in Great Britain', in *The Ninth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain* (London 1927).
33. *Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 28–30 April 1928 (Communist Archive).
34. *National Minority Movement Executive Bureau Preliminary Statement on Minority Movement Work in the Austins Dispute 16 April 1929* (Jack Tanner Papers, Nuffield College Oxford).
35. *Report of the British Commission of the ECCI 2–29 December 1931* (Communist Archive).
36. See *The World Situation and Economic Struggles: Theses of the Tenth Plenum of the ECCI* (London 1929).
37. *Ibid.*, 1–12.
38. *Ibid.*, 8.
39. *Ibid.*, 20–1.
40. *Ibid.*, 41–2.
41. *Ibid.*, 45.
42. *Ibid.*, 30–42.
43. *Instructions for the Comintern Delegate to the Conference of the CPGB* (Communist Archive).
44. *Closed Letter of the Political Secretariat ECCI to the Central Committee CPGB 27 February 1929* (Communist Archive).
45. *Ibid.* For Ferguson, see *Communist Review*, August 1929.
46. See E.H. Carr, *The Twilight of the Comintern, 1930–1935* (London 1982), 8–11.
47. *Inprecorr*, 28 March 1930.
48. For examples, see *The Communist International*, nos. 13–14 (1930), and *Inprecorr*, 28 March 1930.
49. Carr, *Twilight*, 11–21.
50. See *Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 13–14 September 1930 (Communist Archive).
51. See Manuilsky's speech in *Inprecorr*, 8 May 1930.
52. See *Theses, Resolutions, Decisions: The Eleventh Plenum of the Executive Committee of the Communist International* (Moscow 1931). Also Carr, *Twilight*, 26–7 and 29–37. Thälmann's synopsis of a 'ripening fascist dictatorship' was endorsed by the ECCI and the KPD.
53. *Theses, Resolutions, Decisions*, 2–20.
54. Carr, *Twilight*, 12–19.
55. *Instructions for the Comintern Delegate to the Conference of the CPGB* (Communist Archive).
56. See *Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 19–20 July 1930, *Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 13–14 September 1930, *Report of the British Commission of the ECCI 2–29 December 1931*, *Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 9 January 1932 (Communist Archive).

57. *Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 13–14 September 1930 (Communist Archive).

58. R. Page Arnot, *Twenty Years 1920–1940: The Policy of the Communist Party of Great Britain From its Foundation July 31, 1920* (London 1940), 42.

59. *Report of the British Commission of the ECCI 2–29 December 1931. Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 9 January 1932 (Communist Archive).

60. *Minutes of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 9 November 1931. Also, *Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 18–20 May 1932 (Communist Archive).

61. For example the party championed the Rank and File Delegate Committee in the London bus depots, and helped form the Railway Vigilance Movement. For more details, see Fishman, *The British Communist Party*, chs 1 and 2.

62. A. Thorpe, 'Comintern "Control" of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1920–43', *English Historical Review* (June 1998), 637–62.

63. T. Draper, 'The Strange Case of the Comintern', *Survey* (Summer 1972), 91–137. 131. Draper quotes from a letter written by Humbert Droz to Togliatti in April 1927, bemoaning Losovsky who was 'everywhere pushing his policy of splitting'. However, it was also Losovsky, so often portrayed as a classic example of the Stalinist automaton, who was consistently out of step with the Comintern 'line' from 1930 onwards.

64. For the sources of the term 'social fascism', see Draper, 'The Strange Case', 119–37. The term was first officially reused by Lenz, the Chairman of the German Party Programming Commission, in June 1928. Social fascism was used to denote situations where the bourgeois state was 'aided and abetted' by social democrats to block the advance of the working class. This became increasingly important at a time of imminent revolution. However, as late as January 1929, Lenz himself attended the Tenth Congress of the CPGB, but did not insist on the British party's use of the term. See *Instructions for the Comintern Delegate to the Conference of the CPGB*, (Communist Archive).

65. Gorkic was a Yugoslavian communist who consistently put forward the need for 'mass work' within the party and was given Comintern support against his more hard-line comrades. Later, however, in the mid-1930s, Gorkic's enthusiasm for the united front led to his downfall.

66. *Minutes of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of Great Britain*, 9 January 1932 (Communist Archive). The disagreements within the ECCI and the RILU over the question of trade-union policy came to a climax in late 1931. The more moderate line of Manuilsky and Kuusinen eventually prevailed, as evidenced by the Resolutions of the RILU Plenum. See *Breaking Through* (RILU pamphlet, London 1932).

67. From K. Marx, 'The German Ideology', in D. McLellan ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford 1977).

68. Thorpe, 'Comintern "Control"', 637–62.

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