

In Search of Revolution: International Communist Parties in the Third Period

Review Number:

423

Publish date:

Monday, 1 November, 2004

Editor:

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ISBN:

1850434077

Date of Publication:

2004

Price:

£45.00

Pages:

400pp.

Publisher:

I. B. Tauris

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Ben Fowkes

Opinions have long been divided about the subject under review, the Comintern's Third Period, which lasted roughly from 1928 to 1935. One cannot be more precise about these dates, because, as Matthew Worley points out, the transitions at both ends of the period were gradual in nature. I think it is fair to say that the view most often taken by historians and commentators is that the Third Period was a disaster from start to finish. The conventional view, held by both the non-communist Right and the Trotskyist Left, sees the communist parties of the time as employing a tactic of 'class against class' and a theory of 'social fascism' which was imposed on them by Moscow and was completely out of tune with the real circumstances prevailing in the world, or at least in Europe, where the rise of (genuine) fascism required the working-class parties to join together in defence of democracy.

This is not the view taken by Matthew Worley. His perspective is more nuanced. As he explains in his introductory essay, the Third Period was partially (but only partially) redeemed by five things: the communists' ability to mobilise demonstrations of the unemployed, the increase in communist membership and voting strength in the latter part of the period (roughly from 1930 onwards), the anti-fascist potential realised in the street battles fought in Germany against the Nazis at this time, some successful work in the reformist trade unions (again, from 1930 onwards), and finally the establishment of Soviet areas in China by the Chinese Communist Party (p. 4). He adds that these successes were rooted in the flexibility of the communist approach. The communist parties were not blind executants of Comintern orders; they applied their instructions in a subtle way, and in any case the Comintern was not entirely inflexible: it was capable of changing its line in response to changes in the overall situation. Thus, to take one example, the initial

decision to withdraw from the reformist trade unions and set up independent communist unions was only carried through incompletely, and finally abandoned.

Most, but not all, of the contributors to this collection take a similar view to Matthew Worley in their analyses of specific communist parties, applying the thesis of communist flexibility by looking at the local details. The editor sets the tone by dividing the Third Period into two sections. In the first two or three years rigidity was the watchword; after March 1930 'the Comintern moved to rein in ultra-leftism' (p. 11) and this allowed national communist parties more scope to tailor their strategy to local requirements. Most of the subsequent essays adopt this division of the period into two parts. They also have a tendency to accentuate whatever positive aspects they can find in what was, on the face of it, not a very promising policy. In Australia, says Stuart Macintyre, 'formidable qualities of organization' were forged by the communist party during the Third Period (p. 267). In Canada, 'something positive happened to the CPC between 1931 and 1934' (p. 221). In Spain the Third Period was 'a roller-coaster rather than a straightforward plunge to the depths' and the communist party 'became an organised and disciplined party for the first time' (p. 198). For the CPUSA, says James Ryan, 'these years were not a total loss' (p. 216). Meanwhile the Brazilian CP, according to Marco Santana, 'intensified its influence among the workers' at this time, and party life, far from being paralysed, 'continued apace and paved the way for several organisational conquests' (p.371).

The contributors' views are naturally not entirely uniform. Most of them seek to counter what Kerry Taylor (in the New Zealand context) describes as the 'dominant international paradigm' of a Comintern line imposed on unwilling parties during the Third Period (p. 271). On the contrary, he says, the explanation for the CPNZ's 'left turn' after 1928 lies 'more in the contours of the New Zealand political scene than in the corridors of the Comintern' (p. 294). Other contributors do not go quite so far, but still tend to stress the role of a groundswell of local communist leftism. To put the point very simply: by 1928 rank and file communists were utterly fed up with the policy of cooperation with the Social Democrats carried on under the United Front slogan. They felt it had achieved nothing except to mislead workers about the true nature of Social Democracy. As Allison Drew remarks, the communists' exclusion after 1928 'from united fronts with labour and social democratic organisations ... gave the New Line (of class against class) a certain credibility amongst many communist activists' (p. 341).

This sounds convincing. But it is only a partial explanation. When dealing with the issue of Comintern control of national communist parties it is useful to distinguish between countries that were seen as vitally important to the Soviet Union and the international proletariat and therefore subject to constant intervention, and more peripheral lands where it was sufficient to set the overall strategic direction and leave local leaderships to make whatever tactical decisions seemed right. Thus in Germany, which is covered by Norman Laporte in a lucid discussion well supported by the primary sources (pp. 34–68), the KPD's participation in the Nazi-led Prussian Referendum Campaign of September 1931 was imposed on an unwilling leadership by the Comintern's Political Secretariat (p. 48). The KPD had less room for manoeuvre, and 'flexibility' here meant abandoning confrontation with the Nazis in the factories and instead 'winning them over by engaging in joint struggle' (p. 55). Meanwhile the Social Democrats continued to be denounced as social fascists and isolated local attempts to cooperate with them against the Nazi danger were ended by intervention from the leadership (p. 53). New Zealand was at the opposite end of the scale. According to Kerry Taylor, that country was not a priority for the Comintern, much to the chagrin of the local party, which complained at one point to Moscow: 'Your silence gives the impression that no one is the least interested in us' (p.273). The New Zealand party was thus left to decide its own tactics, which it did 'within the broad parameters of the Comintern analysis' (p.275).

A full account of the origins and development of the Third Period would require some consideration of the earlier stages of Comintern history, but the book was already long and there was much to discuss. The contributors have chosen to solve this problem in various different ways. John Callaghan, who deals with colonial policy in an essay entitled 'Storm over Asia' (pp. 18–37), expounds the pre-1928 background in great detail, with the result that he leaves himself insufficient space to examine the actual topic (it is compressed into eight pages). Carlos Cunha, dealing with the Portuguese Communist Party, does the opposite. Here the reader is plunged into the thick of things immediately. The essential background of

military coup and counter-coup is assumed as a given, and the PCP's 1927 turn to putschism is simply mentioned in passing without further explanation (p. 154).

There are inevitably gaps and omissions, given the space constraints. I would have liked to see more attention paid to the communist parties of Eastern Europe and Latin America. Eastern Europe was always of vital interest to the Soviet Union, and it was precisely in the Third Period (at the Sixth Congress) that the Comintern started to show an interest in Latin America. Marco Santana's essay on Brazil, excellent though it is, does not really fill this gap. In terms of themes, two major absences come to mind: cultural policy and the national question. For instance, Geoff Swain's interesting comparative piece on Yugoslavia and Latvia focuses on trade union and personnel questions, and contains nothing on the Yugoslav party's policy of breaking up the country into its national components. This policy, adumbrated earlier in the 1920s, was given a sharper, unambiguous edge within the context of the Third Period. The same is true of Czechoslovakia, another multinational state. There the 1929 Party Congress adopted the slogan of 'self-determination even to the point of secession' and denounced Czechoslovakia as an imperialist state, and in 1931 the party called for the 'reunification of German, Hungarian and Polish populations under Soviet power', and a 'Soviet Slovakia'. Communist cultural policy is occasionally mentioned, but never occupies the foreground. The 'proletarian culture' movement was after all quite an important aspect of the Third Period. More generally, radical approaches to both life and art found (or thought they found) a home more easily in the communist parties of the Third Period than before.

One thing that has changed since E. H. Carr and his contemporaries were writing on the Comintern is the amount of primary source material available, and some of the essays in *In Search of Revolution* stand out for the way that they have succeeded in combining a knowledge of the secondary literature (itself immense) with both the national and international sources. Other contributors, on the other hand, have taken a largely historiographical approach, limiting themselves to comparing the existing secondary works. This is also valuable, of course.

The collection is very well edited, and I rarely found any reason to take issue with the details of Comintern history presented therein. I will, however, mention one or two small points. Maurice Thorez, of the PCF, did not 'lose his seat in the May 1932 elections' (p. 120). And I don't think the PCF, with 30,000 members, can have been 'the third largest communist party' in 1933 (with the Bolshevik Party largest and the Chinese party second largest), as Steven Hopkins claims (p. 121), because the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia had a membership of 75,000 at that time.

This is an excellent collection of essays by fifteen young specialists who have all already won their spurs by writing books and articles on some aspect of communist history in the twentieth century. The fact that this book appears now, in the twenty-first century, is a testimony to the continued survival, and indeed health, of the academic field of communist studies despite the loss of power by most ruling communist parties at the start of the 1990s, and the resultant general shift in public interest away from the subject of communism.

The editor found Dr Fowkes's comments extremely insightful, and welcomes the generally positive review of *In Search of Revolution*.

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[2]

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