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Against the Cold War. The History and Political Traditions of Pro-Sovietism in the British Labour Party, 1945?89

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Histories of the Cold War have often, for obvious reasons, concentrated on the grand struggle between 'East and West', 'Communism and Capitalism', the 'USSR and the United States'. The focus has tended to be on the high politics and political dramas that led to the Korean and Vietnam wars, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Second Cold War and the collapse of Soviet Socialism. However, since the end of the Cold War, historians have turned their attention away from the big story and looked more closely at the smaller, but certainly no less important, details of the period. For the Cold War, this has produced books focusing, for example, on the politics of James Bond (Jeremy Black), the struggle for cultural supremacy (David Caute) and the untold story of Canada's nuclear weapons (John Clearwater).(1)

Histories of the Labour party have not followed the 'grand narrative' path quite so rigidly. There is a mixture of general histories of the party's development, accounts of specific Labour governments and biographies of individual members on offer. Darren G. Lilleker's work on pro-Soviet elements in the Labour party during the Cold War is an important contribution to the 'non-grand narrative' approach of both Cold War studies

and the Labour party.

As it is one of these 'smaller details' that is the real topic of *Against the Cold War*, the East-West conflict provides the all-important backdrop for Lilleker's specific history of the British Labour party. As such, it is a book that will not necessarily be the first port of call for those seeking details about Soviet, American or British policies during the Cold War. Instead, Lilleker's work offers an insight into the political history of the Labour party in this crucial era of twentieth-century history. In terms of specific Labour history, it was a period that saw the party in power at the start of the Cold War and Korean War, and also when the Vietnam War reached its peak.

However, it is not a general history of Labour and the Cold War, but rather an intricate study of a particular group (though Lilleker makes it clear it was not a *movement*) in the party, as it explores pro-Soviet feeling and the traditions of pro-Sovietism in the Labour party. This is a fascinating subject that deserves more attention than it has traditionally received. Why *did* members of this social democratic party ? albeit one with socialism as its professed faith ? offer such support to an authoritarian dictatorship that exploited workers and incarcerated intellectuals in the name of socialism? After all, these are two groups that have traditionally been very close to Labour's heart.

The aim of this book is to show that those Labour MPs who adopted a less hostile approach to the USSR during the Cold War sought to create a peaceful political and cultural coexistence with the Soviet Union and also, in some cases, other countries of the Eastern bloc. It was hoped that this would aid the prospects of peace between East and West. Lilleker aims to demonstrate that these MPs were not dangerous crypto-Communists, but instead principled, though largely ineffectual, parliamentary socialists endorsing an apparently revolutionary government.

The book also highlights how the USSR made use of these pro-Soviet Labourites, as it wanted to change the negative way in which most people saw the Soviet Union. It is here that Lilleker introduces the term ?change agent? into Labour history's vocabulary. This is a very useful term that defines those MPs the Kremlin used to alter Western perceptions of the Soviet Union. This is something that I will return to, but according to Lilleker, there were ?differing gradations of pro-Soviet activity and different categorisations of utility to the Soviet Union of these individuals? (p. 16). These could range from the traditional fellow travellers (though Lilleker is quick to point out that this term fails to represent the feelings and attitudes of many in the pro-Soviet tradition), to socialists like John Platts-Mills, who sided with the USSR as part of the fight of ?good versus evil? (the Kremlin was good, the White House evil). Interestingly, the book also includes people who sought links with the USSR through business connections, like Ian Mikardo.

One of the more common traits that Lilleker picks out from the pro-Soviet bloc was that supporters were deeply preoccupied with peace in the post-World War Two world. As Lilleker puts it, these Labourites 'believed that they were acting with the best intentions and on behalf of humanity as a whole. They created a linkage between the ideals of peace and co-existence and the goal of attaining a socialist future' (p. 205). But in some cases, it becomes clear that peace may even have been the main concern, as movements like CND attracted great interest from the pro-Soviet MPs. And if this peace could bring socialism with it, then so much the better.

One of the main strengths of this book is that Lilleker counters the general acceptance from many quarters that anyone on the Left during the Cold War was pro-Soviet, and that anyone who was pro-Soviet was a spy. Lilleker deals specifically with this second allegation early on, and proves throughout the book that this was largely incorrect (though that is not to say that there were any no active spies in the party). But he is careful not to dismiss this idea out of hand, accepting that ?there is some substance to the allegations brought against pro-Soviet MPs. However, there remains little evidence to suggest that any Labour MP acted as a slavish agent of the Soviet Union? (p. 10). Lilleker correctly adds that ?there is often a more complex picture than that offered by the majority of commentators? (p. 10).

Importantly, he notes that there was a 'powerful Cold War espionage narrative, which classifie[d] all those

who were sympathetic to the Soviet Union as spies and traitors', and that it was the purpose of many writers 'to expose those who they allege were agents working on behalf of the Soviet Union' (p. 4). While this Cold War narrative was formed by people such as the former Conservative MP Rupert Allason (pen name Nigel West), the most interesting of those Lilleker refers to is the Soviet double agent and defector Oleg Gordievsky (who worked with Cambridge intelligence expert Professor Christopher Andrew to produce the revelatory works on the KGB's foreign operations).

Lilleker points out that the works of espionage writers such as West and Gordievsky helped to shape public perceptions of the USSR, 'cement[ing] the opinion that the West was constantly under attack and that there were those within the British parliament who sympathised with, and indeed worked on behalf of, that Communist enemy power? (p. 4). The Cold War writers played on the public?s fears that the Russians were not only coming, but that they were already here.

Yet, unlike the McCarthy witch hunts of 1950s America, the British press, while undoubtedly taking the threat of a Soviet invasion seriously, also offered us the ?loony leftie? caricature ? that dangerous brand of socialist who worked to simultaneously impose rule from Moscow whilst also banning ?baa baa black sheep? in schools across the land. Lilleker claims that his work ?removes the subject from the connotations associated with the Cold War narrative and offers alternative perspectives of pro-Soviet activities? (p. 10) and it is this approach that makes this book a welcome addition to the histories of the Labour party.

An interesting feature of this study is its use of new phrases to clarify the differences between different MPs? actions during the period, and also their interpretation of the Cold War. According to Lilleker, there was a ?zero-sum? interpretation of the Cold War, which saw the conflict in very black and white terms, infecting both sides to the point that both the Soviet Union and the USA became overtly paranoid about the actions of the other side.

There were also the aforementioned ?change agents?, and ?conduits of change?. MPs who were in the ?change agent / conduit of change? camp could be relatively high-profile figures associated with other progressive movements (such as peace activists). Crucially, such activists did not even need to be a part of what has traditionally been described as the Communist Left. The very fact that the USSR was involved (in one way or another) in causes such as the anti-Apartheid action in South Africa or the Troops Out campaign in Northern Ireland, meant that many members accepted that the USSR was itself a friend of peace and progressive politics. This in turn meant that people like Konni Zilliacus, Frank Allaun and Stan Newens ? some of the MPs Lilleker focuses on ? ?did not openly support the Soviet Union, only world peace. But each argued that the Soviet Union had the greater propensity for negotiating peace while the United States was characterised as a dangerous and antagonising force? (p. 38).

Such agents would be used by the KGB to do ?little jobs?, run ?errands? or pass on information directly to a KGB officer. This then, was what the USSR got out of the relationship. The KGB was able to keep a number of agents both active and permanent. A member of the Czech Secret Services noted that ?a friend could drop out of the business any day, a paid agent never, we ensured they received money from us and signed for it? (p. 9). Lilleker notes that both payment and signature were very important, as it was written proof that an MP was being paid by the USSR and this information could be used to ensure the MP?s co-operation again.

This meant that those who were not selling themselves to the Kremlin were doing it because they, rightly or wrongly, believed in what they were doing. In essence then, part of the book tells the story of conviction politicians, of people who believed that their actions would make the world a better and safer place to be, and this in itself is refreshing in a time of political spin, lies and public cynicism towards politicians. But one way or another, one of the main purposes of the ?change agents? was to alter the way that the USSR was perceived. While Lilleker is absolutely correct to point this out, he fails to note that this demonstrates one of the key changes that had affected the Soviet Union since the early days of the Communist International: in many ways the USSR had become a ?normal? nation state rather than a citadel of revolution.

During the Leninist period, foreign socialists were recruited to the Comintern for the purpose of spreading

the revolution in the West. Now, part of the purpose of the pro-Soviet tradition was to re-market the USSR in the West. It was to promote the USSR as the peace-loving nation that wanted Nikita Khrushchev's peaceful coexistence. The fact that they largely failed in this (the eventual re-packaging of the Soviet experiment was down to Mikhail Gorbachev) shows that these MPs were indeed largely ineffective in one of their main tasks.

Another of their duties was to end the party?s links with Atlanticists who favoured closer ties with Washington during the Cold War. It was argued that it was really the White House and not the Kremlin that was the expansionist, imperialist threat to world peace. It was believed that ending American influence over British policy would aid the causes of world peace and socialism, as, without American capitalism dictating world affairs, social democratic politics and socialist economics would create a fairer, more peaceful future. Again, as with the above point, their failure to end Labour?s Atlanticism also highlights the pro-Soviet bloc?s failure and inefficiency.

Lilleker does well to show what the broad traditions of pro-Sovietism in the party were, and also how they developed throughout the Cold War period. However, the book could have offered more on *why* they existed. There is the obvious ideological linkage through socialism, which is discussed here. But this discussion is disjointed, taking place in both the early and late sections of the book. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with the history of pro-Sovietism in the party, but do not look at ideology in any real depth. The book accepts too readily that Labourites like the Webbs agreed with the Soviet experiment, while Walter Citrine did not. The exploration of the ideological strands that allowed certain party members to find solace in both the Labour party *and* the idea of the USSR, while mentioned throughout, is not dealt with in detail until chapter 7 (?Perspectives of pro-Sovietism?). The overall study may have been better served had this discussion been included in the earlier chapters, thereby making the points raised in chapter 7 act as a basis for our understanding of pro-Sovietism before we look at what happened. Instead it half rolls into the conclusion, but does not act as the conclusion, thus making the structure and explanation a little confusing.

The book also considers the pursuit of peaceful coexistence through the business connections of people like Ian Mikardo. Ramsay MacDonald placed great importance on this, making 'Trading with the Enemy' (p. 150) a cornerstone of his foreign policy during the short-lived 1924 and 1929?31 governments. He believed that this would help the prospects of peace in Europe and full employment in Britain. Lilleker does not refer to this, but it would have been interesting to see what he made of it, as this was a different strand of the pro-Soviet tradition, albeit a more pragmatic one. MacDonald did not have the ideological sentiments of the later pro-Soviet MPs, but he did see the USSR as a crucially important country that had to be included in international politics.

Another reason given for the pro-Soviet tradition is that these MPs acted as they did because of the political context. The USA was seen as too powerful and controlling, and a counterweight was needed to bring balance to international politics. This is a good assessment, but more is needed on the context. While this book is about one aspect of the Cold War rather than the Cold War as a whole, there are areas where more background information is needed to explain why certain things were important in Labour circles.

For example, the 1956 invasion of Hungary and the 1968 Prague Spring caused significant problems for many on the Left, not least members of the Communist party of Great Britain. But these events are not covered in depth. How did Labour?s pro-Soviet bloc deal with tanks rolling through Prague? How did these same socialists feel as the USSR collapsed in 1991 (and not in 1989 as is often stated here)? In his interviews (which offer some very interesting insights), Lilleker learns that some of his subjects still believed that they were right, in spite of evidence that would be expected to make them reconsider. It would have been fascinating to learn *why* they still thought this.

Something must be said about the poor grammar, spelling and numerous mistakes in the book. The study would have benefited from some stricter editing. Examples of factual inaccuracies include attributing actions to the KGB before it existed, using Budapest instead of Bucharest and repeatedly referring to the continuing actions of the Cominform (Communist Information Bureau) long after it had been disbanded by Khrushchev.

Against the Cold War does successfully fulfil its overall objective ? to show that those Labour MPs who served Moscow in one way or another were not as dangerous to the state as has traditionally been thought, and were, on the whole, harmless. It makes an important contribution to studies of this subject, as it breaks with the conventional view that these MPs were dangerous traitors who wanted to end British democracy and British ways of life. And perhaps the fact that we are still here, British ways and all, while the Soviet Union disappeared in 1991, also proves that they were not quite as effective or dangerous as the Cold War spy writers told us they were.

Notes

1. J. Black, *The Politics of James Bond: from Fleming's Novels to the Big Screen* (Westport, Conn., 2000); D. Caute, *The Dancer Defects: the Struggle for Cultural Supremacy during the Cold War* (Oxford, 2003); and J. Clearwater, *Canadian Nuclear Weapons: the Untold Story of Canada's Cold War Arsenal* (Toronto and Oxford, 1988).Back to (1)

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[2]

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